

# WHO MENTORED YOU?

## A study examining the role of mentors in the lives of Americans over the last half century



As the youth mentoring field has expanded since MENTOR's founding in 1990, so have the questions about the scope of mentoring relationships, who is finding the mentoring they need, and who is being left behind.

MENTOR began its efforts to answer these questions almost a decade ago with the publication of *The Mentoring Effect*, a study that revealed not only the benefits of mentors of all types, but also the inequities in who gets mentoring — this is where we first defined the “mentoring gap” of one in three young people growing up without a mentor.

*Who Mentored You?*, a new research study by MENTOR, revisits this mentoring gap to see if the mentoring movement has succeeded in closing it, offering a fresh multigenerational look at the mentoring experiences of all Americans — from Baby Boomers to today's Gen Z young adults. Here is a snapshot of the five major themes that emerged from the responses of over 2,600 Americans about who mentored them growing up and the influence of those relationships on their lives.

### Theme 1

#### Americans report major increases in mentoring relationships over the last 30 years.

Across generations we see increasing rates of young people reporting that they had a mentor while growing up.

- While 56 percent of all adults say they had a mentor, **today's younger generations report significantly higher rates of mentoring** (66 percent for those under 40 years of age).
- **The growth in mentoring has been through program-provided mentors.** Today's young adult is three times more likely than a Baby Boomer to say they were mentored through a program.
- Mentoring programs are **increasingly reaching youth who have experienced the highest number of adverse life experiences** (e.g., running away/out-of-home placements, skipping school, caring for siblings or dependents, substance abuse issues in the home, and food insecurity were the top challenges noted by Gen Z).
- Among today's young adults, youth of color and other marginalized communities report some of the highest rates of mentoring, and **there is greater equitable access to mentors across socioeconomic lines.**

### Theme 2

#### Unfortunately, today's young people are reporting increases in the mentoring gap.

While the overall trend over the last three decades is one of increasing rates of mentoring for American youth, in recent years, and especially since COVID-19, there has been a sharp uptick in youth reporting they had no mentor at all. The mentoring “gap” appears to be growing.

- Comparing today's young people to those from the Mentoring Effect a decade ago, we find that **they are less likely to report having had a mentor.**
- Today's 18-to-21-year-olds are 4 percentage points less likely to have been mentored than their 22-to-24-year-old peers. They are **a full 10 percentage points less likely than Millennials** to have had a mentor growing up.
- While the pandemic explains some of this drop-off, trends in the data suggest **this decline in mentoring started well before the pandemic.**
- Those in the **lower income brackets are the least likely to have mentors**, although this is improving over time.

Theme  
3

## Even when mentored, most youth remember times when they wish they had mentoring.

When asked whether they could remember a time where they wanted a mentor but didn't have one, Americans paint a picture of unmet need:

- Sixty-seven percent of today's 18-to-21-year-olds can remember a time where **they needed a mentor but didn't have one**. Sixty-two percent of Millennials and 55 percent of Gen X reported the same.
- Those who had a mentor are **more likely to have had a time when they wanted more mentoring** than those who never had a mentor (57 to 50 percent, respectively).
- Youth who identify as BIPOC and those from lower income levels express **significantly higher rates of unmet mentoring need**.

Theme  
4

## Americans attribute much of their success in life to their mentors.

Our multigenerational sample shows the value of mentoring throughout the lifespan:

- American adults give their **mentors more than half (56 percent) of the credit** for the success they had in life.
- When thinking about their **"most meaningful" mentor, that rises to more than 70 percent** of the credit for all generations!
- Youth of color, youth from lower income levels, and **youth who experienced the most hardship growing up are most likely to give their mentors credit** for their success in life.
- There are strong correlations between mentoring during childhood and **increased sense of belonging and stronger mental health**.
- We also find correlations that suggest mentoring can support **upward mobility for lower income youth**.

Theme  
5

## Americans' "most meaningful" mentors supported them in a variety of ways.

We asked Americans of all ages to tell us about the most special mentoring relationship they experienced. We learned that:

- Naturally occurring mentoring relationships were about three times more likely to be cited as more meaningful than programmatic ones, but **for those who experienced both, it was an even split**.
- Youth connected with program mentors primarily through schools. **Natural mentors came from a variety of sources**, including extended family, family friends, teachers, neighbors, and religious groups.
- The most meaningful forms of support from mentors were **building a sense of belonging, having fun together, solving problems together, exposing youth to new ideas, and helping youth build identity**.

## Paths Forward

Based on these findings, MENTOR recommends several paths forward that can strengthen the mentoring movement in the years ahead:

### 1. Our movement needs all hands-on-deck to offer greater support to today's youth and young adults.

We must reverse the trend of a growing mentoring gap.

### 2. We must foster a "mentoring mindset" in as many American adults as possible.

We can only meet this challenge if American citizens and systems are increasingly oriented toward the needs of young people.

### 3. Supporting youth belonging and identity should increasingly be emphasized in mentoring relationships.

Identity and belonging are the foundations of all other youth achievements. We need to make sure mentors of all types know how to support youth on these foundational aspects of self.

### 4. We must further identify and support those who are least likely to find meaningful relationships.

We found that 1.8 million young adults have grown up with essentially no adult support. We must find these young people who are being left behind. Expanding mentoring in some key domains — in rural areas, in high-poverty regions, and for specific underserved groups, such as White and Native American youth — would be a good place to start, as would additional research to identify others expressing a paucity of adult support. These actions will help bring mentoring to those who are missing it the most.

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