

MENTORING & RURAL YOUTH



Introduction

Rural communities represent a significant percentage of the population of the United States, with nearly 60 million people (almost 20% of all Americans) living in rural or non-urban settings.¹ Approximately 13 million children under the age of 18 live in these rural areas.² Despite societal narratives that these parts of the country are homogenous, the truth is that rural communities can be quite diverse — for example, there are over 2,000 rural and small-town Census tracts where persons of color make up the majority of the population.³ Rural communities also often vary across other dimensions, such as their rates of poverty⁴ or the presence of LGBTQ+ individuals.⁵

But rural communities also experience unique challenges: aging and declining populations, a lack of employment opportunities, and a digital divide resulting from a lack of high-speed internet and other communications technology. Research also suggests that rural areas often experience more intense community stress — which refers to the aggregate dysfunction that is created by multiple stressors (e.g., economic, environmental) impacting a community at once — with “the unique interactions between stressors in rural areas undermining community strengths and lessening the buffering effects of protective factors.”⁶

For young people growing up in rural communities, these circumstances can result in limited educational support, less availability of community resources (e.g., mental health supports, out-of-school-time programming), and reduced opportunities for career exploration or vocational training. The community level stress can also sap young people’s resiliency and leave adults unable to respond effectively to the needs of young people. And despite the close-knit reputation of rural communities, many marginalized youth (e.g., BIPOC, LGBTQ+, immigrant youth, etc.), can experience considerable isolation and persecution in rural communities⁷ – even those not experiencing widespread stress.

The limited financial and human resources in rural communities also impacts the work of mentoring programs and the availability of mentors, generally. Research by MENTOR has found that only about 10% of the nation’s mentoring programs are operating in rural communities, and that those service providers are more likely to have much smaller budgets (only \$66,537/year on average), have smaller staffs, and spend less per youth served than their urban counterparts.⁸ This same study found that a third of rural mentoring programs indicated that their geographic isolation was a challenge in delivering their services, citing transportation challenges, a dearth of mentoring activity options, and fundraising as major obstacles in bringing mentoring to more young people.

Youth themselves report less mentoring support than their peers in more urban environments, with those living in rural communities being 35% less likely to have received mentoring through a program than their urban peers and more likely to say they had no mentor growing up than both their suburban and urban counterparts.⁹ Thus, this brief explores what we know about the mentoring experiences of rural youth, as well as opportunities for scaling the quantity and quality of mentoring in rural spaces.

Major Research Findings

Research suggests that mentoring is less common in rural communities — particularly the programmatic mentoring that provides targeted support to youth who need it the most. Low-income rural youth report some of the lowest rates of mentoring of any demographic

group in the country, with only 11% of today's low-income rural youth reporting having had a mentor through a program while growing up and only 37% indicating a naturally-formed mentoring relationship. Comparatively, 60% of their Gen Z peers report having had a mentor at some point while growing up. A staggering 70% of low-income rural youth report having times of unmet mentoring need, suggesting that there is considerable desire for mentoring in rural spaces that is currently not being addressed.¹⁰

This is unfortunate, as research suggests that mentoring can be tremendously impactful in supporting youth in rural communities. Studies on rural mentoring show many potential benefits. A 2022 review of the research on mentoring rural youth found positive impacts related to:

- **Health improvements**, with programs showing results on outcomes as varied as physical activity, healthier eating, weight loss^{11,12}, and even reductions in tobacco, alcohol, and inhalant use for mentored youth.¹³
- **Mental health gains**, such as increases in school and community belonging, sense of purpose, motivation, and sense of agency.¹⁴ Other studies have found youth with rural mentors reporting increased life satisfaction.¹⁵
- **Academic achievement**, with studies suggesting enhanced interest in pursuing higher education and a greater interest in STEM-specific education and careers, generally.^{16, 17} Other scholarship has drawn connections between informal mentoring by teachers and other school personnel and reductions in academic failure and school dropouts in rural settings.^{18, 19, 20} Another study of mentoring for rural Latinx students found that positive mentoring relationships were associated with enhanced grades and increased school connectedness.²¹
- **Externalizing negative behaviors**, with one study of youth attending a rural high school finding that naturally-formed mentoring relationships that offered emotional support were associated with reduced anger, rule-breaking behavior, and aggression for participating mentees.²²
- **Racial and ethnic identity and pride**, especially Native American youth²³ and for groups who may experience marginalization in rural communities, such as LGBTQ+ youth. One study of mentoring for LGBTQ+ youth in rural Pennsylvania found benefits related to self-awareness, self-acceptance, decreased loneliness and isolation, and more hopefulness for the future. Another study of mentored transgender youth in a rural community found increases in self-esteem, mental health, social support, and resilience in the face of bullying compared to their non-mentored peers.²⁴ These youth noted that having a mentor was a buffer against non-acceptance by others and boosted their self-acceptance.

It is worth noting that while service delivery can be hard for rural mentoring programs, research suggests they can exhibit some strengths and advantages over their urban counterparts. A study by MENTOR²⁵ indicates that rural mentoring programs:

- Are more likely to require year-long matches than urban programs (83 percent to 70 percent)
- Are more likely to expect weekly or more frequent contact between mentors and youth (72 percent to 58 percent)
- Have a longer average match length (23 months to 17 months)
- Have a higher percentage of matches last their intended duration (79 percent to 75 percent)

These findings suggest that quality rural mentoring programs with sufficient community buy-in can produce very strong mentoring relationships and meaningful experiences that support

youth in a wide variety of ways. Further, the research cited here makes it clear that the work mentors do to give rural youth a sense of mattering and a more hopeful future orientation is critical in driving other academic, career, and health outcomes.

Opportunities Ahead

Given that rural mentoring holds such promise and potential, there are several steps policymakers and investors can take to support the growth and quality of mentoring in rural communities:

- **Providing dedicated funding for rural and small-town mentoring providers.** Organizations operating in rural spaces often are volunteer-led or operating with only one or two paid staff who are responsible for all of the program's operations. Dedicated funding through mechanisms such as the federal Youth Mentoring Program (managed by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention [OJJDP]) could be a valuable way for rural programs to grow staff capacity, build needed infrastructure, and overcome logistical challenges in service delivery.
- **Expand high-speed internet to rural areas to expand e-mentoring opportunities.** There is still a tremendous digital divide between rural and urban areas in America, with both high-speed cell service and internet largely unavailable in most rural communities. Providing increased access to high-speed internet in these areas would allow rural youth to connect with mentors from a much larger and more diverse pool, giving them more equitable access to social capital that can enhance their education and career paths, as well as offset the inherent mentor recruitment challenges in rural spaces.
- **Build the skills of rural practitioners through dedicated professional development options.** Mentoring professionals working in urban areas often have access to a wealth of training and subject matter expertise that can help them improve their programming and their own knowledge. While delivering training and technical assistance in rural areas can be expensive, the payoff is tremendous, as it ensures an equitable mentoring experience for youth in rural communities compared to their suburban and urban peers.
- **Building more opportunities for naturally-occurring mentoring in rural spaces.** While growing mentoring programs in rural communities may always be limited by unique challenges, there is considerable work that can be done to mitigate it. Specifically, rural communities are filled with institutions — schools, clubs, camps, faith institutions, civic organizations, health providers, and government agencies — whose employees and volunteers can be trained to adopt a “mentoring mindset” that equips them to engage young people in more meaningful and mentor-like ways. Building the mentoring skills of all rural adults will help young people more easily find the support of mentors in the spaces they already inhabit, and may even help reduce some of the marginalization and isolation that can be experienced by youth of color, immigrants, and LGBTQ+ youth.

The mentoring movement should consider the ways it can increase the support it provides rural youth and the adults who are leading mentoring experiences in their communities. These youth face unique challenges, and delivering high-quality mentoring will take additional resources and focused effort. Youth in rural areas are clearly not getting as much mentoring as they need or deserve, and the movement must respond to these inequities that build on the considerable strengths these communities have and the resiliency and love found in their citizens.

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