

Reviewer's report

Title: Are youth mentoring programs good value-for-money? An evaluation of the Big Brothers Big Sisters Melbourne Program.

Version: 1 **Date:** 21 October 2008

Reviewer: Jean Rhodes

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This study has several strengths. It is well written, carefully conducted, and delves into a topic that is of growing interest to policy makers—the relative costs and benefits of youth mentoring. Although, the findings are interesting, I do have several concerns and questions about the study.

The authors do not base their analyses on actual evaluation data, arguing that are too few studies from which to draw data. Yet recent random assignment evaluations of other BBBS programs--in both the US and Canada, as well as the many smaller scale evaluation studies that have emerged in recent years (some of which the authors later cite) might have provided such data.

The authors rely on an analytic strategy, threshold analysis, which is built on a series of assumptions about both the risks of the participants and the potential benefits of the program. The empirical basis for the many assumptions is uneven, rendering the conclusions uncertain. For example, one could take issue the assumption that half of the youth enrolled in the program are high-risk for delinquency and later criminal behavior, particularly when the vast majority are female. Moreover, the majority of recipients are under 10 years old.

In this study, monetary benefits were only computed for a relatively crude, distal set of outcomes, 'annual rates of offending and typical length

of criminal careers and of time spent in prison. Outcomes such as academic achievement, truancy, and risk-behavior involvement--for which accepted methodologies exist for translation to monetary benefits—would have been more appropriate given the target population. Although no outcome data were available, the assumptions might have been more convincing if the researchers had drawn from agency data regarding the baseline characteristics of the 110 youth in the BBSS programs.

Contrary to the authors' assertions, several cost-benefit analyses of youth mentoring have been conducted. The nationally-recognized cost-benefit analysis for prevention and early intervention programs conducted in 2004 by the Washington State Institute

for Public Policy Institute

(<http://www.wsipp.wa.gov/topic.asp?cat=14&subcat=0&dteSlct=0>), included a cost-benefit estimate of BBBSA. Importantly, it provided estimates based on

actual evaluation data and included two sets of estimates--when a monetary value is placed on volunteer time and in-kind support and when it is not. A further resource is the recent report on social return for investment in mentoring from the Wilder Institute and University of Minnesota in which monetary benefits were estimated for hypothetical impacts of a mentoring program. Study benefits were computed from multiple perspectives: participant, non-participant as taxpayer, non-participant as non-taxpayer, and all of these combined. Similarly cost estimates and costs computed from multiple perspectives, such as programs, taxpayers, volunteer mentors (time and out-of-pocket expenditures), and all sources combined.

Even if the assumptions rest on valid data, it would be difficult to generalize from these findings to other countries. The authors note that the BBBS –M program spends an admirable \$5,837 AUD (approximately \$4,000) per match, which is, for example, four times the amount spent by BBBSA and other programs in the US.

In light of the substantial limitations in the methods, it is difficult to interpret the findings that emerged.

Level of interest: An article of limited interest

Quality of written English: Acceptable

Statistical review: No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.