

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:** 14 October 2008

Reviewer: E. Michael Foster

Reviewer's report:

1. IS THE QUESTION POSED BY THE AUTHORS WELL DEFINED?

Yes--the authors consider the magnitude of program effects that would be required to justify the costs of the BBBS program.

The analysis does completely ignore the role of gender. The likely benefits of the program are smaller for girls yet the costs of serving them presumably are the same.

2. ARE THE METHODS APPROPRIATE AND WELL DESCRIBED?

Yes--the authors appear to follow standard procedures for estimating the costs of the intervention. When they depart from the ideal (such as out-of-pocket costs for the Bigs), the impact is likely to be small.

* A significant issue, however, is that further discounting is needed -- I believe the Cohen figures discount back to age 18. The expenditures in BBBS are made when the children are age 10 (roughly). The benefit figures need to be discounted to the point when the costs are experienced.

* A smaller issue. The authors state that "In calculating the annual cost per youth mentored, deductions were made for costs unrelated to services provided for youth in current active matches. These deductions related to staff time spent managing and reviewing current waiting lists." If these costs were incurred for participating children (in the past), then those costs should be included here. The administrative costs experienced currently by staff involving future participants seem as reasonable an estimate as any.

This issue is related to their decision to exclude "costs associated with the recruitment, orientation and training of more staff." These costs look like quasi-fixed costs to me.

3. ARE THE DATA SOUND?

The main problem is that--as the authors note--the main data are missing. No information is available on the actual impact of the BBBS program.

* A point well worth making is that if the program is going to spend millions and millions of dollars a serious evaluation would be a good use of some of that

money.

4. DOES THE MANUSCRIPT ADHERE TO THE RELEVANT STANDARDS FOR REPORTING AND DATA DEPOSITION?

Yes.

5. ARE THE DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS WELL BALANCED AND ADEQUATELY SUPPORTED BY THE DATA?

* The authors make the best of an unformed situation. Still, I would note that there are plenty of well intentioned programs that have no effect at all (e.g., the DARE program in the US). Some discussion of those programs and their characteristics would give the paper more balance.

6. ARE LIMITATIONS OF THE WORK CLEARLY STATED?

Yes, there are many limitations, and generally they are identified.

* I'd like to know whether and how the costs of a life of crime vary between the US and Australia. For example, the costs depend on the frequency with which youth or adults are incarcerated and so on. The US and Australia have common approaches to social policies in many instances: is criminal justice one of them? The paper does mention that "Nevertheless, these estimates are useful in providing some indicative data on the benefits which need to be forthcoming from the BBBS-M program to make it a worthwhile investment". This treatment is rather cursory.

* the authors could push this issue further. They note that "A search of the published literature for Australian data about the costs of marginalised youth who become involved in crime identified a number of studies which report unit cost estimates per different categories of crime (Walker, 1992; Walker, 1997; Mayhew, 2003)." How do those costs compare to the comparable elements of Cohen's study?

7. DO THE AUTHORS CLEARLY ACKNOWLEDGE ANY WORK UPON WHICH THEY ARE BUILDING, BOTH PUBLISHED AND UNPUBLISHED?

Yes, though are studies that consider the cost-effectiveness of programs to prevent and treat aggression. My own research is related:

Foster, E. Michael, and Damon Jones. "The Economic Analysis of Prevention: An Illustration Involving the Fast Track Project." *Journal of Mental Health Policy and Economics* 10, no. 4 (2007): 165-75.

Foster, E. Michael, Damon Jones, and Conduct Problems Prevention Research Group. "Can a Costly Intervention Be Cost-Effective?: An Analysis of Violence Prevention." *Archives of General Psychiatry* 63 (2006): 1284-91.

Foster, E. Michael, D. E. Jones, and Conduct Problems Prevention Research Group. "The High Costs of Aggression: Public Expenditures Resulting from Conduct Disorder." *Am J Public Health* 95, no. 10 (2005): 1767-72.

Foster EM, Olchowski AE, Webster-Stratton C. Examining the differential cost-effectiveness of behavioral intervention components: An assessment of the Incredible Years Program. *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry* 2007;46(11):pp-pp.

Foster, E. Michael, Michele M. Porter, Tim S. Ayers, Debra L. Kaplan, and Irwin Sandler. "Estimating the Costs of Preventive Interventions." *Eval Rev* 31, no. 3 (2007): 261-86.

Foster, EM, Prinz, R, Sanders, MR, Shapiro, CJ. The costs of a public health infrastructure for delivering parenting and family support . *Children and Youth Services Review* 2008. 30; 493-501.

Some of this might be useful to the authors. For example, how does the cost of BBBS compare to other interventions targeting similar groups? and so on.

8. DO THE TITLE AND ABSTRACT ACCURATELY CONVEY WHAT HAS BEEN FOUND?

Yes

9. IS THE WRITING ACCEPTABLE?

Yes

Level of interest: An article whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests

Quality of written English: Acceptable

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

Declaration of competing interests:

I declare that I have no competing interests