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**P/PV**

## **Making A Difference**

An Impact Study of  
Big Brothers/Big Sisters

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## **Executive Summary**

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The past decade has seen widespread enthusiasm for mentoring as a way to address the needs and problems of youth-but no firm evidence that mentoring programs produce results. We now have that evidence.

In this report, Public/Private Ventures (P/PV) provides scientifically reliable evidence that mentoring programs can positively affect young people. This evidence derives from research conducted at local affiliates of Big Brothers/Big Sisters of America (BB/BSA), the oldest, best-known and, arguably, the most sophisticated mentoring program in the United States. Big Brothers/Big Sisters (BB/BS) programs currently maintain 75,000 active matches between a volunteer adult and a youngster. Both the programs and matches are governed by carefully established procedures and criteria.

P/PV conducted a comparative study of 959 10 to 16-year olds who applied to BB/BS programs in 1992 and 1993. Half of these youth were randomly assigned to a treatment group, for which BB/BS matches were made or attempted; the other half was assigned to BB/BS waiting lists. We compared the two groups after 18 months and found that participants in a BB/BS program:

- Were less likely to start using drugs or alcohol;
- Were less likely to hit someone;
- Improved school attendance and performance, and attitudes towards completing work; and
- Improved peer and family relationships.

This report is part of P/PV's eight-year investigation of a range of adult-youth relationship projects. In other reports, we have examined program practices; volunteer recruitment and screening in BB/BS programs; and the characteristics of adult-youth relationships in BB/BS and other mentoring programs.

### **AN EFFECTIVE APPROACH TO ONE-TO-ONE MENTORING**

The findings presented in this report reflect the workings of a carefully structured approach to mentoring. Understanding how BB/BS programs operate and the standards they adhere to is important, since many other mentoring programs are not as well-structured or carefully managed as the BB/BS programs whose matches we studied.

Local BB/BS programs are autonomously funded affiliates of BB/BSA. In addition to providing ongoing support and presentation for its affiliates, the BB/BSA national office serves as the critical function of promulgating criteria and standards that largely determine the development, maintenance and quality of local matches.

To be formally designated a Big Brothers or Big Sisters program, local agencies must adopt these standards, with minor variations allowed to accommodate local characteristics. The standards govern the screening and acceptance of both youth and adults; the training and orientation volunteers must undergo; the matching process; required meeting frequency; and the ongoing supervision of matches, which involves regular contact between the agency and the adult volunteer, the youth and the parent.

Most local programs operate in more or less the same way: they recruit and carefully screen volunteer applicants for one-to-one matches; they screen the youth, who usually come from single parent households and who must (along with their parents) desire to enter into a match; and they carefully match adult volunteers with youngsters based on backgrounds, on the stated preferences of adult volunteers, parents and youth, and on geographic proximity. On average, the adult-youth pair meets for three to four hours three times per month for at least a year.

In cooperation with the national BB/BSA office, P/PV chose eight local, accredited BB/BS agencies for this study. We used two criteria in selecting agencies. The first was a large caseload; our aim was to select from the largest BB/BS agencies so as to generate adequate numbers of youth for the research sample and to minimize the impact of research activities on agency operations. The second was geographic diversity. The selected sites represent most regions of the United States; they are located in Philadelphia; Rochester, New York; Minneapolis; Columbus, Ohio; Wichita, Kansas; Houston; San Antonio; and Phoenix.

## **STUDY DESIGN AND SAMPLE YOUTH**

The sample youth were between 10 and 16-years old (with 93% between 10 and 14) when they were found eligible for the BB/BS program. Just over 60 percent were boys, and more than half were minority group members (of those, about 70 percent were African American). Almost all lived with one parent (the mother, in most cases), the rest with a guardian or relatives. Many were from low-income households, and a significant number came from households with a prior history of either family violence or substance abuse.

Our research strategy was to compare youth who participated in BB/BS programs with those who did not. Thus, we conducted baseline interviews with all youth at the time they were found eligible for the program, then randomly assigned them either to the treatment group, who were immediately eligible to be matched with adult volunteers, or to the control group, who remained on the waiting list for 18 months—a not uncommon waiting period among BB/BS applicants.

Both groups were re-interviewed 18 months later. Of the 1,138 youth originally randomized, 959 (84.3%) completed both baseline and follow-up interviews, thus becoming the sample on which findings are based. Of the 487 youth in treatment groups, 378 were matched with a Big Brother or Big Sister, and received the agency support and supervision that would typically be provided. The matched Little Brothers and Little Sisters met with their Big Brother or Big Sister for an average of almost 12 months, with meetings about three times per month lasting about four hours each time.

The aim of the research was to determine whether a one-to-one mentoring experience made a tangible difference in the lives of these young people. We chose six broad areas in which we hypothesized that the mentoring experience might have effects, identified in large part through discussions with local program staff, and a review of the guidelines and other materials produced by the national BB/BSA office. The six areas were antisocial activities; academic performance, attitudes and behaviors; relationships with family; relationships with friends; self-concept; and social and cultural enrichment.

All findings reported here are based on self-reported data, obtained from baseline and follow-up interviews or from forms completed by agency staff. Analysis of these data involved multivariate techniques that compared the follow-up survey results for treatment and control youth, controlling for baseline characteristics.<sup>1</sup>

## **MAJOR FINDINGS**

The overall findings are positive. The following are the most noteworthy results:

- Little Brothers and Little Sisters were 46 percent less likely than controls to initiate drug use during the study period. Our results indicate that for every 100 youth in this age group who start to use drugs, only 54 similar youth who have a Big Brother or Big Sister will start using drugs. An even stronger effect was found for minority Little Brothers and Little Sisters, who were 70 percent less likely to initiate drug use than other similar minority youth.<sup>2</sup>
- Little Brothers and Little Sisters were 27 percent less likely than controls to initiate alcohol use during the study period, and minority Little Sisters were only about one-half as likely to initiate alcohol.
- Little Brothers and Little Sisters were almost one-third less likely than controls to hit someone.
- Little Brothers and Little Sisters skipped half as many days of school as did control youth, felt more competent about doing schoolwork, skipped fewer classes and showed modest gains in their grade point averages. These gains were strongest among Little Sisters, particularly minority Little Sisters.
- The quality of relationships with parents was better for Little Brothers and Little Sisters than for controls at the end of the study period, due primarily to a higher level of trust in the parent. This effect was the strongest for white Little Brothers.

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<sup>1</sup> Chapter V and Appendix A of the full report provide descriptions of the measures and analytical techniques used in the analysis.

<sup>2</sup> Chapter V of the report provides detailed findings for the full sample, and for four subgroups: white boys, white girls, minority boys and minority girls.

- Likewise, there were improvements in Little Brothers' and Little Sisters' relationships with their peers relative to their control counterparts, an effect most strongly evidenced among minority Little Brothers.

We did not find statistically significant improvements in self-concept, nor in the number of social and cultural activities in which Little Brothers and Little Sisters participated.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

Our research presents clear and encouraging evidence that caring relationships between adults and youth can be created and supported by programs, and can yield a wide range of tangible benefits.

The most notable results are the deterrent effect on initiation of drug and alcohol use, and the overall positive effects on academic performance that the mentoring experience produced. Improvement in grade point average among Little Brothers and Little Sisters, while small in percentage terms, is still very encouraging, since non-academic interventions are rarely capable of producing effects in grade performance.

These findings, however, do not mean that the benefits of mentoring occur automatically. The research, as noted previously, describes the effects of mentoring in experienced, specialized local programs that adhere to well-developed quality standards. In our judgment, the standards and supports BB/BS programs employ are critical in making the relationships work, and thus in generating the strong impacts we have reported. If such standards and supports can be duplicated, the expansion and replication of mentoring initiatives for early adolescents would appear to be a strong and sensible investment, from which at least several million youth could benefit.

Yet this raises two critical issues. First, are there a sufficient number of volunteers who would be willing to make the time and emotional commitment? The indications from prior research are inconclusive.

The second issue is that the support and supervision necessary for mentoring initiatives to produce effective matches cost money—roughly \$1,000 per match. It is extremely unlikely that significant expansion could be accomplished entirely with private funds. Public funding also seems unlikely at this time, when budgets for social programs are being drastically cut at the federal level and social policy interventions are widely viewed by the public as ineffective.

However, evidence of effectiveness like that contained in this report—especially around issues of drugs, violence and schooling—may influence the public's view of what can be accomplished, and may also stimulate policymakers to begin shaping a new and more effective social policy approach for youth—one that focuses less on specific problems after they occur, and more on meeting youth's most basic developmental needs.