**Research Overview**

This study examined the long-term effects of the My Life mentoring program on criminal offending in early adulthood for youth in foster care. The My Life model uses weekly structured individual and group mentoring activities for 16- to 18-year-old youth in foster care to improve their self-determination skills to help them meet their goals. For example, mentors help youth choose personal goals that are important to them, identify the steps to accomplish these goals, and use problem-solving strategies to manage obstacles along the way. This study extended the follow-up period of two previous randomized trials to examine whether the 12-month mentoring program had an impact on criminal offending and justice system involvement 2 years after program participation.

**Research Findings**

Overall, 15.2 percent of the youth in the study had past-year criminal justice involvement when measured at ages 19 to 21 (N=154). Criminal justice involvement was twice as high for those who did not participate in the mentoring program (19.3 percent) versus the mentored group (10.7 percent). This difference did not reach a level of statistical significance (p=.099).

However, there were statistically significant findings for subgroups within the population.

Among males, 29.3 percent of those in the control group had past-year criminal justice involvement at the 2-year follow-up versus 6.6 percent of the mentored group, a difference that was statistically significant (p=.014). Nonmented males were more likely to have been incarcerated (8.4 percent) versus the mentored males (1.4 percent) (p=.047).

Researchers also observed a program effect on criminal justice involvement among participants who were not receiving developmental disability services at the time of mentoring. Twice as many youth in the control group reported criminal justice involvement at follow-up compared to the mentored group (24.2 percent versus 10.9 percent) (p=.050). However, mentoring did not reduce criminal justice involvement among youth who were receiving developmental disability services at baseline who also had lower rates of criminal justice involvement overall.

Lastly, there was a preventive effect among youth who had no prior delinquency when they started the program—none of the mentored youth in this group reported having been incarcerated at the 2-year follow-up. In contrast, 8.5 percent of the nonmentored youth who had no prior delinquency at baseline reported having been incarcerated at follow-up (p=.027).

The cost-benefit analysis showed that it cost three times as much to incarcerate the youth in the nonmentored group who later reported having been incarcerated in young adulthood, compared to what it would have cost to mentor them using the My Life program model 2 years earlier while they were in high school.

Policy/Practice Implications

The effects of the My Life program on offending in early adulthood narrowly missed levels of statistical significance for the overall sample. However, the program did result in statistically significant reductions in levels of offending and rates of incarceration among males. Evidence of program effectiveness with males is important because males were more likely to report criminal justice involvement at follow-up, overall, compared to females in the study.

The findings of this study suggest that a structured, weekly mentoring program specifically for foster care youth may reduce and prevent offending in early adulthood. These results have implications for child welfare policy and practice because many youth in foster care are also involved in the juvenile justice system and are at risk for future offending.

Moreover, the cost analysis suggests that the intensive mentoring programming offered in the My Life model, which requires investment in both staffing resources and program infrastructure to deliver as intended, may nonetheless be a cost-effective approach to prevent justice system involvement in early adulthood.