

A Rapid Review of Wellbeing, Offending & Successful Matching in mentoring for ‘at-risk’ young people

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ABSTRACT

Youth mentoring literature evidences a wide range of positive outcomes, including enhancing psychosocial, behavioural, and academic outcomes among young people. This paper critically examines the evidence for the positive outcomes of mentoring programs in the contemporary literature, focusing on successful matching, offending outcomes, and wellbeing, while also interrogating contextual intricacies. Utilising a Rapid Review methodology, we surveyed contemporary peer-reviewed research in February 2023 using the key terms ‘mentor’, ‘mentee’, ‘at-risk’, and “youth” or “young people” or “young person””. The literature search returned findings indicating that mentoring programs foster certainty through predictability, emotional support, and enduring relationships, leading to successful matching, reduced delinquency, and improved wellbeing. Service design, social and economic context, and young people’s agency appear to significantly influence interventions’ effectiveness. In our analysis, we challenge the continued use of the ‘at-risk’ label and highlight the implications of these findings for policy and practice. We conclude by arguing that while mentoring offers predictability, emotional support, and enduring relationships for young people, there is continued need to recognise the multifaceted factors influencing mentoring outcomes, rather than allowing the interpersonal service design to individualise social problems.

1. Introduction

Mentoring programs targeting young people have long been heralded as providing relational support and guidance, offering hope in navigating the uncertain waters of young adulthood. Youth mentoring has a large evidence base demonstrating improved psychosocial, behavioural, and academic outcomes as well as engagement in social, civil opportunities, and education (DuBois & Karcher, 2013; Thompson et al., 2016; Tolan et al., 2014; Wood & Mayo-Wilson, 2012). However, beneath the surface of this seemingly straightforward narrative, lies a complex web of factors influencing these prosocial mentoring outcomes. The literature reviewed in the paper shows mentoring that offers predictability, emotional support, and enduring relationships for young people has meaningful short-term impacts on young people’s lives, however, once the intervention ceases, these outcomes diminish. In this paper, we examine this evidence and argue that while discussions often revolve around the purported benefits of mentoring, particularly for ‘at-risk’ young people, there is a tendency to oversimplify, and ultimately obscure, the complexity of the mentee’s context.

Youth mentoring serves as a popular method of service delivery, offering an ongoing pattern of support and guidance for young people through enduring and emotionally salient ties with an important adult (DuBois & Karcher, 2013). In Australia, youth mentoring is prevalent in education and out-of-home-care settings, targeting low socio-economic status schools, Indigenous young people, and those transitioning out of state-provided care (Curtis et al., 2012; DuBois & Karcher, 2013; Lohmeyer et al., 2024; Willis et al., 2012). Yet, despite the prevalence of youth mentoring programs and the wide range of claims about their benefits, a critical examination of their outcomes in context of the lives of young people is needed. In considering mentoring outcomes, we point out the depth and breadth of contributing factors and recognise how the prevailing discourses of youth can help or hinder how well these complexities are considered and thus incorporated into mentoring service design and methodology.

In this paper, we use a Rapid Review methodology to investigate and provide a narrative synthesis of several primary outcomes that mentoring programs often identify as key for young people, including (1) successful matching, or the successful establishment of a relationship

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between mentee and mentor, (2) offending outcomes, or the reduction in delinquency, and (3) wellbeing outcomes, or the improvements across wellbeing domains, including mental, physical, social, and spiritual wellbeing. Recognising the inherent interconnectedness of these domains, we investigate peer-reviewed literature concerning outcomes from mentoring programs to shed light on the mentee contexts that shape these outcomes.

The outcomes – (1) matching, (2) offending, and (3) wellbeing as well as the focus on ‘at-risk’ young people – were specified as the focus of the review by an industry partner and funder: Sammy D Foundation. The review was funded as part of an evaluation of the industry partner’s mentoring program which had to be completed within 18 months. The impact of a partnership with industry on the development of a Rapid Review is a key consideration in the development of this review methodology. One important impact of the industry partnership is the inclusion of “at-risk” in the key search terms as a result of the term’s place in the framing of Sammy D’s work and, subsequently, the program evaluation. As a result of these parameters, the literature review results reflect an individualising framing of the underlying social issues, employing terms such as empowering, resilience, self-efficacy, and single-parent homes, which obscure the underlying structural and systemic conditions. In this paper, we have utilised the vocabulary employed in the reviewed literature in the narrative synthesis of the results and reserved our critique of these terms for the latter discussion section.

Following the narrative summary, we offer a discussion highlighting the value of predictability, emotional support, and enduring relationships for young people, whilst also considering the contested nature of the ‘at-risk’ label the problems of short-term mentoring. We advocate for a more contextualised understanding of young people’s experiences that moves beyond the generic labelling that oversimplifies their lives and contributes to the individualisation of social problems. Furthermore, we argue that recognising the limitations and contextual complexities is crucial for the design of sustainable mentoring interventions.

1.1. Informing youth mentoring program design

Youth mentoring is a very popular method of service delivery (DuBois & Karcher, 2013, p. 7). Simply defined, youth mentoring offers ‘an ongoing pattern of support and guidance’ for a young person through ‘an enduring and emotionally salient tie with an important adult’ (DuBois & Karcher, 2013, p. 5). Yet, important variations in mentoring program design exist; Lohmeyer et al. (2024), for example, propose a typology of mentoring relationships that includes formal mentoring arrangements driven by organisations (Hatzikiriakidis et al., 2021), informal mentoring utilising an existing relationship with a significant adult (Mendes, 2011), peer (Mantovani et al., 2020) and near-age (Snow, 2013) mentoring, and therapeutic mentoring that typically involves higher levels of structure and training for the mentor (Johnson et al., 2011).

In Australia, youth mentoring is prevalent in education and out-of-home care settings and aims to increase student aspiration in low socio-economic status schools (Curtis et al., 2012) and among Indigenous young people (Harwood et al., 2015), as well as improve literacy (Knight & Rossi, 2018) and support the transition out of state provided care (Mendes, 2011). Across the significant body of literature theorising and evaluating youth mentoring programs, claims of its benefits include that it improves education, social and civic participation, and promotes ‘psychosocial, behavioural, and academic outcomes’ (DuBois & Karcher, 2013; Thompson et al., 2016; Tolan et al., 2014; Wood & Mayo-Wilson, 2012).

Mentoring has an important mythic origin story that is routinely employed to promote its intuitive value. In Homer’s *Odyssey*, the Greek God Athene takes on a human form named Mentor (Colley, 2007). Odysseus appoints Mentor as the guardian of his son when he goes off to war, to guide him into adulthood. This origin story appeals to the

popular notion of youth as a linear transitional period (France et al., 2020; White & Wyn, 2011; Wyn & White, 1997). Recent scholarship, in relation to peer and near-age mentoring models in particular, has begun to critically question the usefulness of this narrative to youth mentoring (Lohmeyer et al., 2024). Instead, pointing to the mutuality of the mentoring relationship, emphasising the potential benefits for mentee and mentor (Burton et al., 2021; Kirk & Day, 2011, p. 1179), and examining the importance of agency and the impact on mentee experiences such as promoting hope in their future (Sulimani-Aidan et al., 2024). Drawing on the latest research and insights into new mentoring models, the goal of this review was initially to inform the evaluation of the Sammy D Northern Youth Mentoring program, and the design of future mentoring services broadly. The subsequent research goal was to investigate the impact of the continued use of the deficit term ‘at-risk’ on mentoring program design.

1.2. Rapid Reviews

A Rapid Review methodology was employed for this project. Rapid Reviews are a method of literature review developed in allied health sciences (i.e. nursing) (O’Leary et al., 2017). They employ the process and methods of a Systematic Review but are adapted to meet the timeliness of industry programs and policy development. Systematic Reviews can take up to 2 years to complete and are designed to ensure removal of bias and inconsistencies (Grant & Booth, 2009). By comparison, a Rapid Review can take between two to six months, depending on its scope (Grant & Booth, 2009). The focus of a Rapid Review on policy and practice recommendations also distinguishes it from a Scoping Review which aims to assess the size and potential gaps in the literature (Lau & Kuziemsky, 2016).

Rapid Reviews necessarily compromise on components of the Systematic Review process to meet the project requirements and time constraints (Grant & Booth, 2009; Hartling et al., 2015). Although there are mixed reports on the value of Rapid Reviews, evidence suggests that they can be effective in returning similar conclusions to systematic reviews (O’Leary et al., 2017). Watt et al. (2008) compared the results of systematic and Rapid Reviews and concluded that, while Rapid Reviews are a useful tool in time-sensitive environments, it is essential that search methodologies are clearly reported. In light of the relatively short (18-month) timeframe for this project, a Rapid Review methodology was thus adopted to inform the evaluation and future development of the funding organisation’s youth mentoring service.

2. Method

Khangura et al. (2012) recommend developing a Rapid Review using the following stages; (1) Needs Assessments, (2) Question development & refinement, (3) Proposal development and approval, (4) Screening and selection of studies, (5) Narrative synthesis of included studies, (6) Report production, and finally (7) Ongoing follow-up and dialogue with knowledge users. The stages Khangura et al. present are sequential and were developed over 12 iterations. O’Leary et al. (2017) argue that there is “no single ‘best’ approach to undertaking Rapid Reviews” (p. 18), however, several principles are important and distinguish them from systematic reviews, including “close engagement with the end user” (p. 4) and streamlining of systematic review processes to meet policy and practice deadlines. The defining purpose of a Rapid Review is to inform policy and practice, hence, engagement with industry is a significant component. While this promotes important impact outcomes for research, it can also present challenges for researchers in refining research questions and processes. O’Leary et al. (2017) also note that transparency of review processes is essential but is often overlooked in the reporting of Rapid Reviews in the literature. In this Rapid Review, while we employ the stages identified by Khangura et al. (2012), we take a more dynamic or fluid, rather than sequential, approach to these, as exemplified, in particular, in the first three stages.

Table 1
Included Literature.

Author	Year	Title	Location	Methods
Andris et al.	2021	Threads across the urban fabric: Youth mentorship relationships as neighbourhood bridges.	USA	Quantitative
Aschenbrenner & Johnson	2017	Educationally-Based, Culturally-Sensitive, Theory-Driven Mentorship Intervention with At-risk Native American Youth in South Dakota: A Narrative Review	USA	Narrative literature review.
Barrett-Wallis & Goodwill	2020	Enhanced Critical Incident Technique Investigation of Girls' Perceptions of Prosocial Connectedness in a Wraparound Program	Canada	Critical Incident Technique Investigation
Boat et al.	2019	Mentor's Self-Efficacy Trajectories During a Mentoring Program for At-Risk Adolescents	USA	Quantitative
Bonella et al.	2020	Mixed Methods Evaluation of Formal Mentoring: Journey UP for Aging out of Foster Care.	USA	Mixed Methods
Brett et al.	2017	ROCKETS: Soar to Success	USA	N/A
Chan et al.	2019	School-Based Group Mentoring and Academic Outcomes in Vulnerable High-School Students	USA	Quantitative
Culpepper et al.	2015	Determining the Quality and Impact of an E-Mentoring Program on At-Risk Youth	USA	Quantitative
Dallos & Carder-Gilbert	2019	Taking the stone from my heart: An exploration of the benefits of a mentoring programme (PROMISE) for children at risk of significant harm.	UK	Mixed Methods
Douglas et al.	2019	Rewriting stories of trauma through peer-to-peer mentoring for and by at-risk young people.	Australia	Qualitative
Feldhaus & Brentem	2015	STEM mentoring and the use of the principles of Adult Mentoring Inventory	USA	Mixed Methods
Gilham et al.	2020	Improving Girls' Developmental Assets Using a Mentor-Led Approach in Atlantic Canada	Canada	Quantitative
Gunay & Bacon	2019	Experiences of Youth Mentoring Through Street Dance	UK	Qualitative
Kelley & Lee	2018	When natural mentors matter: Unravelling the relationship with delinquency.	USA	Quantitative
Lakind et al.	2015	Youth mentoring relationships in context: Mentor perceptions of youth, environment, and the mentor role.	USA	Qualitative
Leidl & Lewis	2015	Physical Literacy: Building a Connection to At-Risk and Underserved Youth	USA	N/A
Moore et al.	2022	Nurse Mentorship to Support Healthy Growth of Adolescent Girls	USA	Mixed Methods
Park et al.	2017	The impact of Big Brothers Big Sisters programs on youth development: An application of the model of homogeneity/diversity relationships	USA	Quantitative
Rahja et al.	2016	Fostering transition to adulthood for young Australian males: an exploratory study of Men's Sheds' intergenerational mentoring programmes	Australia	Qualitative
Raposa et al.	2016	The Impact of Youth Risk on Mentoring Relationship Quality: Do Mentor Characteristics Matter?	USA	Quantitative
Schwartz & Rhodes	2016	From Treatment to Empowerment: New Approaches to Youth Mentoring	USA	Narrative literature review
Smith et al.	2015	Long-Term Mentors' Perceptions of Building Mentoring Relationships with At-Risk Youth.	USA	Qualitative
Smith et al.	2016	'It's good but it's not enough': the relational geographies of social policy and youth mentoring interventions.	Scotland	Mixed Methods
Stump et al.	2018	Mentoring program enhancements supporting effective mentoring of children of incarcerated parents.	USA	Mixed Methods
Van Dam et al.	2019	An Exploration of Youth-Parent-Mentor Relationship Dynamics in a Youth-Initiated Mentoring Intervention to Prevent Out-of-Home Placement.	Netherlands	Qualitative
Weiss et al.	2017	Youth Perceptions of a School-Based Mentoring Program	USA	Qualitative

2.1. Question & Proposal development

This Rapid Review came about as the first stage of a funded project to evaluate a youth mentoring project. The project was publicly advertised as an expression of interest, funding was provided by the agency offering the youth mentoring service, and the project timeline was 18 months; this was reduced to 14 months after delays due to contract negotiations. The Rapid Review was proposed as the first stage of the project to inform the evaluation and future service design. [Khangura et al. \(2012\)](#) describe the Needs Assessment stage, as a process of 'probing consultation with the knowledge user' to elicit insights into the specific needs and direction of the study. During the drafting of the expression of interest, the research team met with the service to further discuss the project purpose and desired outcomes.

Following the early consultation, a project proposal was developed and submitted reflecting many components of [Khangura et al. \(2012\)](#)'s stage 3 (*Proposal Development and Approval*), including research questions, proposed methods, deliverables and timelines. After the project was finalised, the project team engaged with the service provider in a collaborative dialogue reflective of stage two ([Khangura et al., 2012](#)), wherein the research question for the Rapid Review, and the project more broadly, was further refined to ensure it addressed the needs of the knowledge users. Through this process, the aim of the Rapid Review was developed to explore models of mentoring that exist for at-risk young people, with a specific focus on the impacts of mentoring models on (1) mentee wellbeing, (2) the success of the mentoring match, and (3) the mentee's offending behaviour. After this initial investment in collaborative project design, regular communication with the service provider facilitated iterative changes based on the early review findings.

This focus reflected, both, the funding agency's program focus on young people 'at-risk' ([Sammy D Foundation, 2023](#)) of engaging in the juvenile justice system, and their desire to evaluate their program design

in terms of wellbeing outcomes and mentee-mentor matching process. This focus on 'at risk' young people, however, while important for the agency's funding, presented a discursive challenge for the review in light of long-standing debates concerning the construct of risk and its deficit connotations across youth studies and criminology ([White et al., 2017a,b](#); [Wyn & White, 1997](#)).

2.2. Systematic literature search

The systematic literature search for this Rapid Review followed a structured approach to ensure comprehensive coverage of the relevant literature, within the limited scope of the Rapid Review. [Khangura et al. \(2012\)](#) recommends prioritising existing systematic literature reviews to minimise potential bias and use of resources to screen and summarise primary level evidence. However, due to the absence of relevant literature reviews in our search scope, primary evidence was predominantly selected. Searches were conducted in three databases (ProQuest, InfoRMIT and Scopus) targeting studies published within the past 10 years in English-speaking countries such as the US, UK, Canada, and Australia. The search terms included "mentor*" and "mentee" in the abstract, as well as "youth," "young people," or "young person" in the title, abstract, or keywords. To align with the funding remit the search was further refined to include the term "at-risk." Results were then manually screened based for relevance in accordance with the principles of systematic literature searches outlined by [Khangura et al. \(2012\)](#).

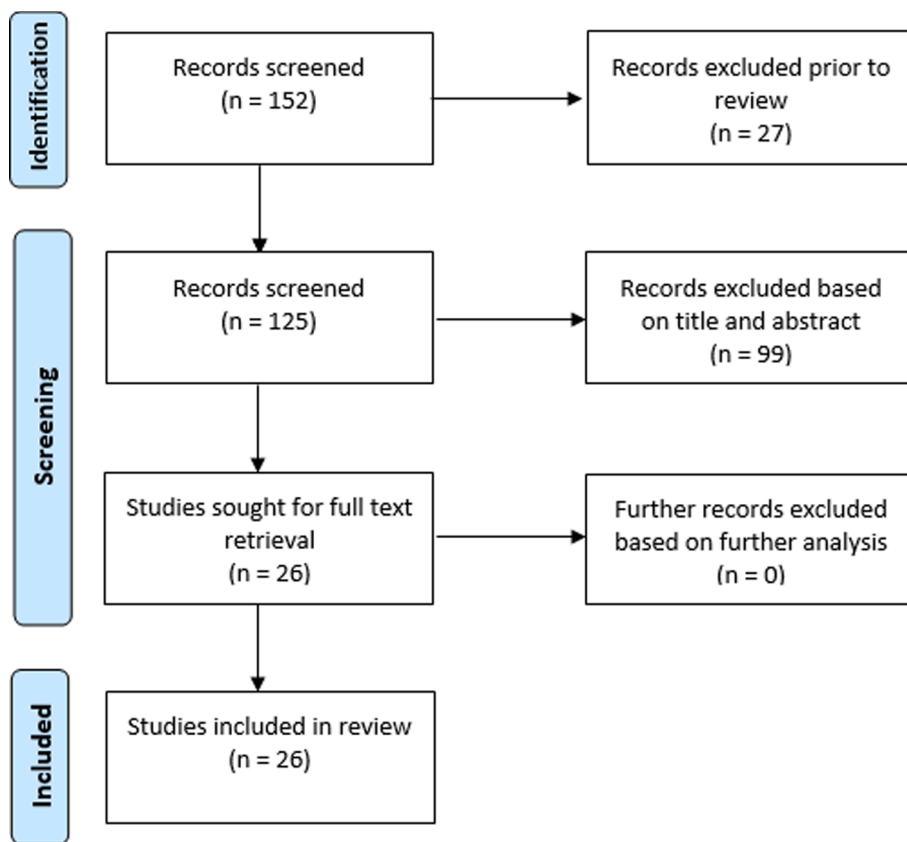
2.3. Search Results, screening and selection of studies

The searches, undertaken on February 3, 2023, produced 49 results for Proquest, 3 results for InfoRMIT and 100 results for Scopus. After screening for duplicates 125 results remained. A final round of manual screening was conducted by the authors for relevance. The screening

process involved all three authors independently assessing the search results based on predetermined inclusion criteria (Khangura et al., 2012). The reviewers appraised articles by looking at key terms or content related to youth mentoring, well-being, impact on offending, and successful matching of mentee-mentor pairs. Data extraction was performed by the first author. Any discrepancies in the screening and data extraction process were resolved through discussion and consensus among the reviewers. The resulting literature, after manual screening, consisted of 26 studies (see Table 1).

2.5. Cycles of feedback and report production

The project funder was provided with drafts of the literature review for comment and feedback at regular intervals throughout the project. Critical feedback was incorporated into the final review and a final copy provided to the project funders upon completion. These regular feedback loops ensured the funder’s aims were being met while also providing the opportunity to flag potential areas of critical scholarship for further consideration. The following section provides a narrative synthesis of the review findings across the three themes of successful matching, offending outcomes, and wellbeing.



2.4. Narrative synthesis of included studies

In this paper, we first offer a narrative synthesis of the results of the review, and subsequently, a critical discussion of these findings. To produce the synthesis of included studies, we followed a rapid data extraction, annotation, and coding process (Khangura et al., 2012). During the extraction and annotation process, the first author recorded essential information including aims, research questions, methodology, classifications, findings, and core arguments from each included article. The first Author used NVivo to code the extracted data for persistent themes. The coding process was driven by the primary themes of interest, including wellbeing, successful matching, and impact on offending, and additional codes were introduced to capture new or sub-themes that emerged which developed into a ‘thematic network’ (Attride-Stirling, 2001). Following this, the first and second Author reviewed the three primary themes central to our research question and consolidated subthemes under each category. To ensure robust insights and mitigate biases, the first Author conducted two rounds of coding, enabling a comprehensive exploration of the literature, and narrowing themes accordingly.

3. Successful matching

In the literature reviewed, a systematic process for examining the quality or success of a match was not common. However, the literature recognised, generally, that ‘success’ for mentoring programs is heavily impacted by the process of establishing mentor–mentee pairings with the aim of achieving positive outcomes for the young person. In this light, we discerned elements associated with successful matching through interpretation of the factors relating to the achievement of positive outcomes. Success in the literature was described as contingent on three primary factors, as discussed below, including (1) the sustainability of the service provided, (2) the context in which the relationship occurs, and (3) the control, or agency, the young person has within both the relationship and the service.

3.1. Service design and sustainability

Several important limitations of mentoring service design were highlighted in the literature. Stump et al (2018) identified the impacts of funding on the quality of matching, observing that programs receiving

additional funding achieved matches that were ‘longer and stronger’ than those that without extra funding (p. 170). In [Schwartz and Rhodes \(2016\)](#) study, they found longer mentor–mentee relationships are associated with greater benefits including improved academic and career performance, and a reduction in delinquent outcomes ([Schwartz & Rhodes, 2016](#)). Yet, despite this evidence of the benefit of longer mentoring, they found that the effects of mentoring erode ‘almost entirely’ (p. 152) after conclusion of the service. The connection between funding and successful outcomes puts into question the validity of short term and formal mentoring services.

Reflecting the concerns for the longevity of mentoring relationships, [Smith et al. \(2015\)](#) discuss the positive feedback loop associated with feelings and beliefs on the part of the mentor. Where the mentor believes in the long-term benefits of the intervention, regardless of the current situation, the relationship is more likely to be consistent, and resilient against a premature end. [Boat et al. \(2019\)](#) argues that strong relationships between young people and non-parental adults are vital for successful mentoring programs. However, they also underscore the importance of mentor self-efficacy – or self-perception of capability – in fostering positive mentoring relationships and improving outcomes for at-risk young people. On the basis of their study of mentor self-efficacy, Boat et al. argue that higher levels of mentor self-efficacy are associated with, both, positive changes in resilience, and reductions in risk behaviours among at-risk young people (as mentees). [Raposa et al. \(2016\)](#) likewise suggest that specific mentor characteristics, such as self-efficacy and prior engagement with young people in their communities, can mitigate the adverse effects of stressors and behavioural issues on relationship outcomes. Furthermore, [Lakind et al. \(2015\)](#) highlight the influence of mentor perceptions regarding mentoring interventions, whether positive or negative, on the success of the match. In light of the importance of the length of the mentoring relationship and the mentors’ beliefs and perceptions, it appears the success of mentor–mentee matching is connected to the sustainability of the match.

3.2. Social and community context

The reviewed literature suggests that positive mentoring matches for young people can be promoted when family and community are emphasised/leveraged in service design and delivery. [Rahja et al. \(2016\)](#) emphasise the importance of engaging with community members outside of the mentoring dyad in ways that promote positive connections and, in turn, more sustainable outcomes. Further demonstrating the importance of contextual factors in mentor matching success, [Raposa et al \(2016\)](#) found that mentees’ stressful home and school environments impact negatively on the development of a ‘high quality and lasting mentoring relationships’ (p. 327) and are predictive of shorter match length. [Schwartz and Rhodes \(2016\)](#) emphasise that models that ‘fail to consider the broader context of poverty, discrimination, and powerless from which many social, academic, and behavioural difficulties arise’, risk ‘inefficiency at best and victim blaming at worst’ (p. 152).

[Schwartz and Rhodes \(2016\)](#) also discuss the tendency for families and communities, when considered in mentoring program design, to be seen as a ‘risky backdrop’ (p. 152) to the mentor mentee dyad. However, according to [Van Dam et al. \(2019a\)](#) and [Lakind et al. \(2015\)](#), parental involvement in mentoring interventions, particularly in the selection of mentors, can positively influence the overall success of the program. Their studies suggest that parents’ level of trust for (natural or youth-chosen) mentors can impact the narratives and interaction patterns (i.e. matches) that either support or undermine the intervention’s effectiveness. [Parnes et al. \(2023\)](#) more recent study corroborates these findings who found caregiver involvement resulted in higher-quality and longer-lasting relationships. It appears clear that a partnership between caregiver and mentor has direct, multi-faceted benefits for the mentoring dyad, and its outcomes.

3.3. Control and agency

The importance of a multifaceted, adaptive, and, ultimately, young-person led approach for meeting the varied and unique needs of each individual was evident in the reviewed literature. [Raposa et al. \(2016\)](#) emphasised the importance of young people’s agency for maximizing positive outcomes in the matching process and overall mentoring experience. Similarly, [Rahja et al. \(2016\)](#) and [Stump et al. \(2018\)](#) highlight the importance of mentees and mentors’ mutual involvement in goal setting – before and during service provision – for supporting a successful and long-lasting match ([Raposa et al., 2016](#)). [Raposa et al \(2016\)](#) concluded that a mentor’s own ‘expectations and goals’ are less significant than the extent to which they are willing to collaborate with the young person in ‘discussing and refining goals’. In other words, when it comes to the success of the mentoring match, the specific content of goals for the mentoring relationship are secondary to the overarching aim of young people having ownership over them.

Numerous articles consider the merits of young person-initiated, ‘natural’, mentoring as an alternative to formal services and matching processes ([Schwartz & Rhodes, 2016](#); [Spencer et al., 2016](#); [Van Dam et al., 2019a](#)). Youth-Initiated Mentoring (YIM) programs intend to encourage the agency of mentees by supporting them to initiate and shape their mentoring relationships. [Schwartz and Rhodes \(2016\)](#) found that the YIM approach produced longer relationships with less erosion of program impact at three-year follow up. These impacts were especially pronounced when young people were involved in the selecting their own mentor.

The strength of YIM programs appears to relate to the identification, use and strengthening of a young person’s pre-existing supports within their immediate community, resulting in a more sustainable match ([Schwartz & Rhodes, 2016](#)). [Spencer et al. \(2016\)](#) and [Van Dam et al. \(2019a\)](#)’s studies of natural mentoring pairs showed that these relationships endured beyond the program and were significant sources of support. Finally, [Douglas et al. \(2019\)](#) discussed the positive matching outcomes of a successful formal peer-mentoring program in which young people were encouraged to share their experiences of trauma and support chosen peers, enabling them to process and repair ‘broken threads’ (p. 748), and thus ‘rewriting’ (p. 748) their stories of trauma. Like YIM programs, peer-mentoring typically affords young people more agency in the mentoring relationship as a result of the similarity in age and experience. Agency, as evidenced throughout the literature, ensures that services are appropriately adapted to the individual, and that the young person has ownership over the goals and desired outcomes, maximising the impact and sustainability of the matches.

4. Offending outcomes

Youth is often described as a period of uncertainty ([Hall, 1904](#); [White et al., 2017a,b](#)) in which a young person’s future is undetermined and, if under supported to navigate this, may be considered ‘at-risk.’ The literature reviewed discussed several factors contributing to uncertainty during youth including particular populations typically described as vulnerable to negative outcomes and in need of interventions to ‘reroute delinquency trajectories’ ([Kelley & Lee, 2018, p. 320](#)). A common theme across much of the reviewed literature was the description of young people as ‘at-risk’ during the transition to adulthood. ‘At-Risk’ is a contested term that has received heavy criticism in youth studies literature ([White et al., 2017a,b](#); [Te Riele, 2006](#)). We engage these criticisms in the discussion section below. Whilst some articles identify the ‘risk’ facing young people as delinquency or offending ([Gunay & Bacon, 2020](#)), others denote undesirable behaviour through the use of terms such as ‘adjustment problems’ ([Boat et al., 2019, p. 576](#)), ‘delinquent behaviour’ ([Kelley & Lee, 2018, p. 319](#)) or ‘anti-social’ ([Barrett-Wallis & Goodwill, 2020, p. 758](#)). While the promotion of positive outcomes is a common goal of mentoring programs, programs might also aim to reduce negative behaviours; it is in this context that references to

engagement in 'delinquency' (Park et al., 2017, p. 63) or 'offending' (Gunay & Bacon, 2020, p. 236) are found, whether explicit or implied.

In the following section we outline findings related to the value of mentoring in addressing the uncertainty in youth, the importance of considering economic, ethnic and historical contexts, and the implications for mentoring program design. The three key themes discussed in this section include (1) uncertainty in transitions, (2) economic, ethnic and historical context, and (3) mentoring relationship design.

4.1. Uncertainty in transitions

Life transitions are often associated with uncertainty. While some young people navigate life transition with little disruption, others find these challenging, working to establish their sense of identity (Kelley & Lee, 2018). Furthermore, factors outside of a young person's control, including environmental stressors such as moving house, changing schools, family disruption, illness or death of a loved one (Raposa et al., 2016), which may occur simultaneously, increasingly compound the difficulties.

From a biological perspective, Moore and Stephens (2022) outline the risks of offending for developing 'adolescents', arguing that nurses, due to their expertise in health, and societal positioning as care provider, are 'uniquely positioned' (p. 15) to provide mentorship in this area. From a similar perspective, Boat et al. (2019) focus on challenges to the biological developmental of young people, highlighting their vulnerability to 'adjustment problems' and 'environmental risk' (p. 576). Building on the risk argument, Boat et al (2019) uses examples such as experiences with drugs and alcohol as important indicators of a young person's 'level of risk' (p. 580). They continue stating that relationships with non-parental adults, i.e. mentors, can provide an important mitigative intervention.

Kelley and Lee (2018) open their study with the question 'how do young people manage to navigate the turbulent waters of adolescence without getting into too much trouble [...]?' (pg. 319). They argue that natural mentors, due to their existing relationship with the young person, are uniquely placed to mitigate 'poor social support networks' (pg. 319) and the inevitability of 'trouble' – or delinquency – during the transition to adulthood. Rahja et al. (2016) also discuss the difficulties of transitioning to adulthood, describing the experience of those at the social margins as 'fractured' (p. 183). Key characteristics of 'fractured' transitions experienced by young people, as outlined by Rahja et al. (2016), include 'delinquent or problem behaviour, academic underperformance, lack of positive role models, and lack of societal supports' (p. 176). Offering formal, structured mentoring with comprehensive training and matching, they argue, is an effective solution to these challenges.

In the context of offending, several articles discussed transitory challenges for young people that place them at greater risk of offending when exposed to specific societal contexts such as gang involvement or government care. Barrett-Wallis and Goodwill (2020) discuss the unique risks posed by gang-involvement, especially for young women, including forced drug trafficking and sexual exploitation. Additionally, Bonella et al. (2020) discuss the challenges of young people in care, stating '[they] are not given the opportunity to adjust to being adults gradually, but rather are launched into adult life once they turn 18,' (p. 121). They go on to argue that a caring relationship with an adult (i.e. mentors) can serve as a protective factor for young people facing these challenges (Bonella et al., 2020). In summary, in the literature reviewed, the presence of a stable relationship with an adult (i.e. a mentor) is consistently offered as an effective remedy for the uncertainties associated with the transition to adulthood experienced by young people identified as 'at-risk'.

4.2. Economic, ethnic and historical context

There was limited discussion in the literature concerning the

economic, ethnic and historical contexts for risk and offending by young people. We note, however, the significance of socio-historical factors that are, both, multi-faceted and deeply rooted in societal structures. Aschenbrenner and Johnson (2017) outlined the challenges experienced by Indigenous young people in the USA, highlighting the breadth of their struggles. These young individuals often face significant barriers, such as historical trauma, mistrust, and cultural identity confusion, which hinder their access to opportunities and perpetuate disparities in education, healthcare, and socio-economic status. It is widely recognised, for example, that young Black and Latino males are disproportionately criminalized and subject to hyper-surveillance. Kelley and Lee (2018) argue that unjust targeting, enforced by both institutional and social mechanisms, exacerbates the challenges faced by young men and restricts their ability to thrive.

Kelley and Lee (2018) argue these challenges can be mitigated by effective mentoring. Rahja et al. (2016) likewise evidence the transformative effects of mentoring programs for Indigenous Australians. Such initiatives can serve as crucial support systems, helping young people begin to overcome the hurdles created by historical and social contexts beyond their control, and enabling them to build resilience, confidence, and a sense of purpose. While not strongly represented in the Rapid Review literature, broader research has confirmed the significance of cultural identity – including 'positive affiliation and engagement with their culture' (Wexler, 2009, p. 267) – in supporting the wellbeing of Indigenous Australian young people. As a means of providing cultural support and connectedness, mentoring schemes for Indigenous young people have been associated with positive outcomes that may, in turn, contribute to reduced offending (Richards et al., 2011, p. 6). As emphasised by McMahan et al. (2023), however, the effectiveness of such programs requires that they are "culturally embedded" (p. 383), informed and led by Aboriginal people, and remain attentive to structural constraints and systemic racism (p. 390). These studies underscore the importance of addressing, rather than overlooking, the difficulties faced by young individuals in their ethnic or historical context. They advocate for the development of inclusive policies and mentoring projects, that promote equality and empower these young individuals to realize their full potential.

4.3. Mentoring relationship design

Youth mentoring programs have various and distinct design elements that contribute to positive outcomes but are also selected based on available resources. For example, natural mentoring's emphasis on pre-existing relationships is quite different to the prioritisation of mentor training by therapeutic mentoring models. Natural mentoring appears to be more popular in sectors with limited funding, resources, and mentor availability due to the utilisation of pre-existing networks and social relationships. For example, children of incarcerated parents (COIP) often come from lower-income families, amplifying their existing obstacles (Stump et al., 2018). They are more likely to reside in single-parent homes or alternative care settings, which disrupts stability and support systems (Stump et al., 2018). COIP also face disrupted relationships, as they are more prone to early termination of mentoring relationships, compared to their peers, which, when this occurs, can impede socioemotional growth (Stump et al., 2018). The reviewed literature highlights that to reduce offending outcomes for young people through mentoring, it is necessary to address the financial limitations, disrupted family dynamics, and limited access to stable support networks that they face.

In contrast to the above findings, Stump et al. (2018) reported adequately funded programs for COIP have been associated with longer and stronger matches (Stump et al., 2018). Gunay and Bacon (2020) outline the value of therapeutic approaches for children with attention and emotion disorders, noting that the focus on support rather than punishment can effectively guide young individuals towards positive development. Non-hierarchical mentor-mentee relationships are an

important design feature for COIP, promoting trust and engagement. Mentors who establish a connection as relatable role models, incorporating peer-like interactions and discussing issues in a language that resonates with the mentees, foster meaningful connections, and improve offending outcomes.

In the context of COIP, [Stump et al. \(2018\)](#) argue that mentor training enhances the quality of the mentoring relationship, resulting in longer and stronger matches. Helping young people to feel a sense of 'mattering' (p. 320) and connectedness to others is also crucial for increasing positive behaviour and development ([Kelley & Lee, 2018](#)). [Dallos and Carder-Gilbert \(2019\)](#) emphasise the importance of attachment theory for understanding the positive outcomes associated with mentoring. In their study of the use of mentoring with young people with offending histories, experiencing a sense of security and trust through a mentoring relationship resulted in a small increase in their 'perception of their prosocial behaviour' for 66% of participants (p. 422). By addressing the unique needs and challenges of at-risk and disadvantaged young people, mentoring can reduce offending by offering support and guidance, empowering them to set goals and plan for their future adult lives ([Gunay & Bacon, 2020](#)). Mentoring appears to support young people during the uncertain transition to adulthood, mitigating the risk of behaviours such as delinquency and offending. Tailored interventions and service design for young people at risk of offending that addresses factors like gang involvement and government care, as well as economic, ethnic, and historical backgrounds, were an important consideration in the literature.

5. Wellbeing

Promoting wellbeing is often a focus for mentoring services for young people. The concept of wellbeing, however, is broadly debated, particularly in the policy sphere in which it has been used in reference to relieving the extremes of poverty through to the promotion of social equality generally ([Carson & Kerr, 2020](#)). Promoting wellbeing was a feature of the reviewed literature and, as is often the case in reference to young people ([France et al., 2020](#)), reflected a dominant framing of adolescence in terms of biological development. Wellbeing interventions for young people in developed countries typically focus on mental health, risky behaviour and the transition to employment or further education ([Cabill, 2015](#)). Yet, in the first of its five principles, the Geneva Charter for Well-Being describes wellbeing as a "positive vision of health that integrates physical, mental, spiritual and social wellbeing" (p. 2). As such, in this review, we focus on the four categories of wellbeing outcomes discussed in the literature, namely, (1) physical, (2) mental, (3) spiritual and (4) social wellbeing.

5.1. Physical wellbeing

The reviewed literature commonly framed the wellbeing benefits of mentoring programs in terms of physical and mental health, rather than social and spiritual, outcomes. For example, [Bonella et al. \(2020\)](#) found that mentoring for young people transitioning into independent living led to better overall health outcomes while also supporting improved academic and psychosocial performance, and reduced delinquency. Drawing on insights from a high school sports coach and physical education consultant, [Leidl and Lewis \(2015\)](#) offer a different approach, arguing that a focus on 'physical literacy,' rather than solely physical activity, is important for facilitating improved confidence, competence, and motivation (p. 20). This innovation demonstrates the need for further research and reimagining of mentoring methods and evaluation. [Moore et al. \(2022\)](#), in their study of nurses mentoring at-risk adolescent girls, focus on empowerment in six areas: 'creativity, confidence/self-esteem, leadership, health, mentoring, and education' (p. 16), resulting in significant improvements across seven of eight domains of a Self-Perception Profile assessment. In concluding that mentoring by nurses is an effective approach for supporting the 'healthy

growth' of 'adolescent girls' (p. 17), [Moore et al \(2022\)](#) emphasise the value of the health and communication training undertaken by nurses. Thus, study nonetheless exemplified a clear emphasis on physical development, albeit that associated with competence and caring, educational performance, and puberty. This association between young people, youth and biological development is a consistent theme in this literature, and youth studies more broadly, reflects the dominance of the bio-medical paradigm in justifying the value of mentoring.

5.2. Mental wellbeing

As noted above, a focus on mental wellbeing was also common in the reviewed literature on the evaluation of mentoring programs. Mentoring was presented as an effective strategy for promoting 'emotional wellbeing' ([Gunay & Bacon, 2019, p. 246](#)) and mental health, particularly for young people with traumatic childhood experiences ([Dallos & Carder-Gilbert, 2019; Douglas et al., 2019](#)). [Gunay and Bacon \(2019\)](#) found that participants in a danced-based mentoring program reported improvements in wellbeing in terms of increased self-confidence and 'a stronger faith in their future' (p. 246). [Douglas et al. \(2019\)](#) argue that peer-mentoring is an opportunity to address the reluctance by young people with experiences of trauma to seek mental health support.

Furthermore, [Douglas et al. \(2019\)](#) argue that despite their 'at-risk' label, young people developed 'narratives of optimism' (p. 748) through a process of rewriting and sharing their experiences of trauma through peer-mentoring. [Dallos and Carder-Gilbert \(2019\)](#) evaluated the 'PROMISE' mentoring project for young people who were also considered at risk of poor outcomes in terms of education, employment, and overall well-being. Reporting a positive longitudinal shift in mentees' self-rated attachment style and positive views of their mentor, they concluded that the program had a positive impact on 'emotional problems, coping with family conflicts, managing school or college, providing practical support, and raising their self-esteem' [Dallos and Carder-Gilbert \(2019, p. 429\)](#) (p. 429). Similarly, [Gilham et al. \(2020\)](#) found a statistically significant increase in developmental assets for 74% of 'vulnerable', as compared to 'not vulnerable', young women in the 'Amplify' mentoring program (p. 351). While the reviewed literature demonstrates the potential for mentoring to address significant issues such as reluctance to seek formal support and the impact of childhood trauma, the diversity of mentoring programs makes it difficult to compare outcomes.

5.3. Spiritual and social wellbeing

Social wellbeing outcomes were less prominent in the reviewed literature and spiritual wellbeing outcomes were notably lacking. Many of the findings presented in the above sections (physical and mental) could also be understood as social and spiritual outcomes. For example, improved hope and faith in the future, improved educational and recreational outcomes, and improved resilience or self-esteem, can all be interpreted in terms of social or spiritual wellbeing. [Park et al. \(2017\)](#) argue that matching female mentors to male mentees results in better developmental outcomes but emphasises the development of social aspects such as 'confidence, competence and caring' (p. 63). Some studies focus explicitly on relational outcomes such as improved relationships between parents and between parents and young people. [Van Dam et al. \(2019b\)](#), for example, discuss a unique mentoring program in which professionals collaborate with young people to support them in initiating natural mentoring relationships with existing social connections. Finally, [Aschenbrenner and Johnson \(2017\)](#) discuss the benefits of culture in mentoring for Native American young people. In their narrative review of the literature concerning effective interventions for Native American Youth, they conclude, given the complex and intersecting issues experienced by young people, more research is needed to understand the benefits of mentoring for wellbeing.

Reflecting the varied and wide claims regarding the benefits of

mentoring, a range of physical, mental, spiritual and social outcomes were discussed in the reviewed literature. While mentoring is a popular intervention for young people, it comes in a range of designs and purposes, making comparisons between programs difficult. The absence of standardised measures of wellbeing further exacerbates the challenges of navigating this diverse, voluminous and under-scrutinised area of practice and scholarship. In the subsequent section, we unpack 3 key considerations for future development in mentoring design and evaluation for matching, offending and wellbeing outcomes.

6. Discussion

Across our focus on successful matching, offending outcomes and wellbeing within mentoring programs, three interconnected elements of effective mentoring emerged; predictability (Smith et al., 2015; Spencer et al., 2016), emotional support (Dallos & Carder-Gilbert, 2019; Gunay & Bacon, 2020; Kelley & Lee, 2018; Park et al., 2017; Spencer et al., 2016), and enduring relationships (Schwartz & Rhodes, 2016; Spencer et al., 2016). These elements appear to contribute to the effectiveness of mentoring interventions in addressing the needs of young people and promoting positive outcomes across multiple domains.

Mentoring interventions foster predictability by establishing structured frameworks for interaction between mentor–mentee pairs, establishing emotional ties and support networks, and prioritising enduring, longer-term relationships (Schwartz & Rhodes, 2016; Spencer et al., 2016). Through careful and intentional service design and consideration of contextual factors, such as family and community involvement, mentoring programs can offer a stable relationship for young people navigating uncertain life transitions. By fostering predictability in the mentor–mentee relationship, mentoring contributes to a sense of stability, certainty, and security for ‘at-risk’ young people, thereby promoting positive outcomes. The literature also shows, however, that the positive benefits of mentoring significantly diminish after cessation of the relationship (Schwartz & Rhodes, 2016). While the mentoring relationship appears to offer meaningful support for young people, this lack of sustainable change raises questions about the value of individualised interventions.

The diminishing outcomes post-cessation raise important questions about what is achieved or changed during mentoring. In particular, the individualised nature of the support and the continued concerns for mentee agencies in mentoring draw attention to the importance of incorporating and working within the socio-economic contexts of young people’s lives. To maximise the possibility of success in and beyond the mentoring relationship, mentoring services need to consider the social and political spaces in which young people exist and avoid individualising social problems. This is especially important when considering the findings of Gowdy et al. (2024), who note that young people from more advantaged backgrounds are ‘likelier to have a mentor’ (p. 12). Not only does this literature emphasise the invaluable resource that local community can be, but reiterates that those who potentially need it most find it the hardest to utilise, inevitably resulting in the cycle of individualised initiatives with diminishing results.

The literature consistently highlights the importance of enduring, longer-term mentor–mentee relationships in promoting successful outcomes across various domains. Mentoring interventions that prioritise sustainability and continuity, beyond formal program durations, demonstrate greater effectiveness in addressing negative behaviour, and sustaining positive outcomes in the long term (Van Dam et al., 2019a). By facilitating longer-term relationships, particularly through strengthening pre-existing connections and building community involvement, mentoring programs offer a sense of consistency for ‘at-risk’ young people. The persistence of the term “at-risk” to describe young people in the literature on mentoring programs raises several critical points for consideration. Firstly, the term ‘at-risk’ is, itself, highly contested, with scholars highlighting its ambiguity (Kelly, 1999, 2001, 2003), and potential for stigmatisation (Te Riele, 2006). Even when

discussing purportedly ‘positive’ outcomes, such as the reduction of delinquent behaviours, such texts are underpinned by dominant discourses that perpetuate a deficit narrative. While some of the literature acknowledges the diverse range of factors contributing to a young person’s perceived ‘risk,’ including environmental stressors (Raposa et al., 2016), social contexts (Gunay & Bacon, 2020), and historical backgrounds (Aschenbrener & Johnson, 2017), the use of ‘at-risk’ as a blanket term disregards the complexity of young people’s experiences, reducing and decontextualising their circumstances and perpetuating negative stereotypes.

Moreover, the reviewed literature demonstrates the broad and often arbitrary categorisation of the ‘undesirable’ behaviours and labels associated with young people deemed ‘at-risk.’ While terms like ‘adjustment problems’ (Boat et al., 2019, p. 576), or ‘anti-social behaviour’ (Barrett-Wallis & Goodwill, 2020, p. 756) are used in some studies, explicit references to delinquency and offending appear in others. This diversity of outcomes and desirable behaviours underscores the need for a more nuanced and context-specific approach to the challenges faced by young people, while also highlighting the limitations of reliance on individualising interventions. When articulating the target group of young people for mentoring programs, it is thus critical to move away from generic labels carrying negative connotations and undermining young people’s agency and resilience.

Critiques of the ‘at-risk’ label extend to its implications for policy and practice within mentoring programs. Categorising young people as at-risk not only overlooks, but can also obscure, the intersecting factors that contribute to vulnerability and need. For example, mentoring can offer predictability, emotional support, and enduring relationships for young people navigating the complexities of home life, education, social and historical context, and contribute in important and unique ways to a young person’s behaviour, outlook and/or wellbeing. The evidence shows, however, that despite these important features of mentoring (predictability, emotional support, and enduring relationships) a single short-term mentoring relationship cannot address the structural disadvantages shaping the lives of many young people. Instead, by providing the appearance of surface-level change, mentoring may obscure the embeddedness and significance of such factors. We argue that focusing on young people’s agency and prioritising their voice is important for mentoring and likely to be effective in the short-term. Creating sustainable change, however, requires recognising both the limitations of short-term mentoring interventions and the need for ongoing and systemic change; putting to rest the term ‘at-risk’ might be a first step towards this end.

7. Conclusion

This Rapid Review identified key practices or principles that underscore the achievement of positive outcomes relating to successful matching, offending, and wellbeing outcomes. The review parameter produced 26 results enabling the identification of mentoring outcomes as well as complexities relating to the effectiveness of mentoring interventions, shedding light on the multifaceted nature of their impacts. A consistent theme in the reviewed literature was that mentoring was a source of predictability, emotional support, and enduring relationships amidst the uncertainties that often characterise early adulthood. Structured frameworks for developing successful matching offer emotional support and contribute to enduring relationships. By providing ‘at-risk’ youth with predictability, emotional support, and enduring relationships mentoring programs can enable positive outcomes across various offending and wellbeing domains.

Our emphasis on the contexts of young people’s lives contributes to long-standing critique regarding the resilience of the ‘at-risk’ label in discourses surrounding young people. This term fails to capture the complexity and individuality of young people’s experiences, often oversimplifying their circumstances and perpetuating negative stereotypes. We found ‘at-risk’ is still routinely employed in mentoring

programs, and, as such, our analysis underscores the importance of moving beyond such simplistic labels to understand the complex socioeconomic contexts in which young people live. Acknowledging the diverse range of factors that contribute to vulnerability and need is a critical first step for designing mentoring interventions that may more effectively enable young people to thrive.

Employing ‘at-risk’ to describe the young people targeted by mentoring programs not only overlooks the complexity of their lives, but obscures sociocultural contexts and individualises social issues. Used in this way, the label ‘at risk’ contributes to the dominance of individualising interventions – such as mentoring – and the enduring appeal of short-term interpersonal solutions. This review summarises the contemporary evidence regarding the transformative potential of mentoring that offers predictability, emotional support, and enduring relationships for young people, while also highlighting issues with its inherently short-term nature. Embracing a holistic understanding of the socioeconomic contexts of young people’s lives in the design and implementation of mentoring programs may enable the realisation of this transformative potential. Achieving this goal, though, will require that umbrella terms – like ‘at-risk’ – be finally discarded, allowing critical interrogation of the possibilities for mentoring to improve the complex lives of young people.

Declaration of competing interest

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Data availability

No data was used for the research described in the article.

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