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***Big Brothers Big Sisters and Garda Youth Diversion Projects:  
Perspectives on Youth Mentoring as a Preventative Intervention***  
**Summary Report**

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## **Abstract**

Current policy emphasises the need for community involvement and inter-agency co-operation in youth crime prevention, as well as approaches that seek to strengthen the protective factors in young people's lives, thus protecting them from crime. Mentoring interventions which are targeted at young people who are involved in the youth justice system are increasingly being recognised as a valuable preventative tool in the area of youth offending. Foróige, through collaboration with the Irish Youth Justice Service has adapted the Big Brothers Big Sisters youth mentoring programme for the youth justice context in Ireland in a programme known as BBBS-GYDP.

## **Study Context:**

Foróige, Ireland's leading youth organisation, has operated the Big Brother Big Sister (BBBS) programme since 2001. BBBS is an internationally renowned youth mentoring programme whereby a friendship is facilitated between a young person (Little) and an adult mentor (Big). They meet once a week and the initial commitment is for one year. Garda Youth Diversion Projects (GYDP) are 'community-based, multi-agency youth crime prevention initiatives' for young people who have been involved or are at risk of involvement in criminal activity (Community Programmes Unit, IYJS, 2011). The programme, in this context, seeks to match a young person, who has been involved in crime or who is at-risk of becoming involved in crime, with an adult mentor. The aim, in line with the objectives of the Garda Youth Diversion Programme, is to offer a positive influence which will help young people to move away from crime<sup>1</sup>.

## **Research Objectives**

In 2017, a qualitative research study was undertaken to explore the perspectives of key stakeholders regarding the value and operations of the BBBS-GYDP youth mentoring intervention for young people. It sought to do this through the assessment of the perceived benefits and challenges associated with the provision of youth mentoring in the context of youth justice systems while also making recommendations for future delivery and evaluation of this approach. The study was funded by the Irish Research Council and Foróige through the Enterprise Partnership Scheme.

## **Methodology:**

A total of 46 one-to-one semi-structured qualitative interviews were conducted with key stakeholders in the intervention including 12 young people, 15 mentors, 5 GYDP youth justice workers, 7 BBBS staff, and 2 Juvenile Liaison Officers.

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BBBS-GYDP is implemented in 32 GYDPs across 12 counties in Ireland. The programme is administered by five Project Officers who are responsible for the recruitment of young people and volunteers and forming matches. Two Senior Youth Officers are responsible for the overall implementation of the BBBS programme at a national level. As of October 2017 there were 44 matches in place as part of the BBBS-GYDP programme.

## **Key Findings: Outcomes for Young People**

### **Mentoring influenced young people's behaviours and attitudes in relation to crime.**

Young people spoke of how their relationship with their mentor had helped them to think about or change their attitudes and behaviour. For example, one young person said that his temper has calmed down since meeting his mentor and he is less prone to angry outbursts while another has given up smoking. One youth justice worker spoke of how since meeting with his mentor, a young person's behaviour had improved to the extent where he challenges the negative behaviour of his peers.

**Young people who participated in BBBS-GYDP felt supported by their mentor.** Having someone to talk to was seen as important for the young people and many felt reassured that there was someone who was there for them, if they needed it. Some young people highlighted a sense of trust as being key in their relationship. Research in the area of social support theory has shown that supportive relationships can act as a 'buffer to stress' and lead to increased coping capabilities.

**Mentoring helped young people to develop a greater sense of direction and purpose.** Many young people spoke of being encouraged by their mentor regarding their education and, in some cases, in returning to mainstream education. One young person noted how his mentor had 'been putting good thoughts' into his head regarding the importance of education and thinking about the future. Some mentors noted how, through their work, they had been able to give their mentee access to experiences, advice and contacts in the areas of work they hoped to pursue- [ss](#)uch as the ambulance service and the horse racing industry.

**Mentoring can have a positive influence on young people's mental health and well-being.** Young people reported the time that they spent with their mentor as an escape where they could get out of the house and relax, particularly in difficult or stressful times. Some young people said that they felt happier since they started BBBS. This is corroborated in recent research which has shown that the support of 'one good adult' in the life of the young person is a key predictor of positive mental health in young people (Dooley and Fitzgerald, 2012).

**Mentoring can have a positive influence on young people's confidence.** A number of stakeholders reported an increase in confidence in the young people who participated in BBBS-GYDP. Developments were also identified in young people's communication and their increased enthusiasm for trying new things. This corresponds with research in this area which notes that young people's skills and sense of 'personal competence' can be developed through the supportive social experiences involved in mentoring programmes and the mentoring relationship (Keller, 2007).

## **How can these processes impact on offending behaviour?**

According to Hirschi's (2002) social bonds theory, all humans have an inherent tendency towards deviance but that what inhibits the individual from engaging in negative behaviour is their bonds to society (Pratt et al, 2010). When a person's bonds with society are weak, they become more likely to engage in deviant or negative behaviour. The social bonds have four key components: attachment, commitment, involvement and belief (Hirschi, 2002, p. 16-26). In this study, we found evidence that the BBBS-GYDP mentoring intervention, through the placement of one good adult in the life of a young person, had an influence on the four elements that strengthen young people's bonds with society.

## **Key Findings: Programme Implementation**

**BBBS-GYDP complements the work of GYDPs.** The programme was reported by Project Officers and youth justice workers to complement the work of GYDPs by providing an extra level of one-to-one support to young people participating in GYDPs and acting as a transitional programme for those who are reducing their involvement in the GYDPs.

**BBBS-GYDP is well-received.** The programme was well-received across stakeholders. The young people and mentors spoke positively about their participation. They enjoyed meeting and spending time with each other and mentors found the programme rewarding.

**BBBS-GYDP is well-implemented.** The programme was reported as being well-implemented across stakeholders. Young people enjoyed their experience of the programme. Mentors reported feeling supported in their role and they could ask the BBBS Staff for extra guidance and support, if needed. BBBS Staff were found to adhere to the BBBS Service Delivery Manual, which outlines the processes and procedures for best practice in youth mentoring.

**Recruiting male volunteers can be challenging.** The majority of young people with whom BBBS-GYDP works are males. This large number of male mentees and a lack of adult male volunteers seeking to participate in the programme, means that often the demand outweighs the supply.

**Ensuring commitment and quality in volunteers is essential.** As the programme works with young people who are considered to have a higher level of need, ensuring the recruitment of strong, high-quality volunteers who are willing to commit to the programme can pose a challenge. To combat this, the BBBS Service Delivery Manual and best practice guidelines are strictly adhered to in terms of the recruitment and screening of volunteers, as is the case in all BBBS strands.

## **Conclusion and Recommendations:**

This study has identified a number of benefits for young people arising from their participation in the BBBS-GYDP youth mentoring programme. Improvements have been noted in young people's attitude regarding their own behaviour and their attitude to crime. Benefits have also been identified where young people feel supported in their mentoring relationship, have a greater sense of direction and purpose with regards to their education and future goals, whilst also noting an increase in their confidence and their mental health and well-being. Considering these findings, pathways to youth crime have been explored in line with Hirshci's social bonds theory, highlighting the way in which the placement of a mentor or 'one good adult' in the life of a young person can strengthen their social bonds and reduce the likelihood of their involvement in crime. As a result of these findings it is recommended that, through the continued co-operation of key stakeholders, the maintenance of programme standards in line with best practice and a continued emphasis on the creation of high quality matches, the BBBS-GYDP programme should be continued.

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