

Mapping the Mentoring Gap

Executive Summary

The State of Mentoring in Canada
March 2021



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MENTOR Canada is a coalition of organizations that provide youth mentoring. Our goal is to build sector capacity to expand access to mentoring across Canada. Our work is focused in four areas: research, technology, public education and development of regional networks. It was launched by the **Alberta Mentoring Partnership, Big Brothers Big Sisters of Canada**, and the **Ontario Mentoring Coalition**.

The **Social Research and Demonstration Corporation (SRDC)** is a non-profit research organization, created specifically to develop, field test, and rigorously evaluate new programs. SRDC's two-part mission is to help policy-makers and practitioners identify policies and programs that improve the well-being of all Canadians, with a special concern for the effects on the disadvantaged, and to raise the standards of evidence that are used in assessing these policies. Since its establishment in December 1991, SRDC has conducted over 400 projects and studies for various federal and provincial departments, municipalities, as well as other public and non-profit organizations.

MENTOR Canada would like to acknowledge the generous intellectual contribution of **MENTOR: The National Mentoring Partnership (USA)** to the execution and success of The State of Mentoring Research Initiative. All three studies conducted as part of the *Initiative* are inspired by similar studies previously undertaken by MENTOR (USA).

The opinions and interpretations in this publication are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the Government of Canada.

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If you've ever had a mentor – at school, work, or in your life – then you probably know that mentoring can change lives. Many of us have had informal mentors and benefited from naturally occurring mentoring relationships with caring adults who supported us in our lives and careers. A few among us have also had formal mentors through youth or workplace mentoring programs.

For the first time, we have evidence to support the impact of mentoring on young people's lives across Canada. Mapping the Mentoring Gap is one of three research studies conducted by MENTOR Canada as part of The State of Mentoring Research Initiative – the first ever pan-Canadian study on youth mentoring. Its objectives are to understand which young people do or do not have access to mentors as well as the value and impact of mentoring relationships.

The results clearly show that youth who have access to the support of a mentor are more likely to report positive mental health, education, and career outcomes than their peers who did not have a mentor.

This executive summary provides insights on young adults' perspectives on youth mentoring in 3 areas:

1. The availability of mentors.
2. The effect of mentoring on youth outcomes.
3. The value of mentors.

The results clearly show that youth who have access to the support of a mentor are more likely to report positive mental health, education, and career outcomes than their peers who did not have a mentor. Mentoring can and should be leveraged as a key tool to address the next generation's pressing needs and help them realize their potential.

10 Key Findings

- 1.** Mentored youth were 53% more likely to report good mental health than non-mentored youth.
- 2.** Youth who had a mentor were over two times more likely to feel like they belonged in their local community.
- 3.** Mentored youth were twice as likely to have completed high school.
- 4.** Mentored youth were 95% more likely to have pursued further education after high school.
- 5.** Young people who had a formal mentor were 78% more likely to have an occupation (studying and/or employed) than youth who only had informal mentors.
- 6.** Close to 3 out of 4 mentored youth said that their mentor had a significant influence on their self-confidence.
- 7.** Youth who had a mentor were twice as likely to be interested in mentoring others in the future compared to their non-mentored peers.
- 8.** Over 44% of young people grew up without the support of a mentor.
- 9.** More than 1 in 2 young people recalled a time growing up when they wished they had a mentor but did not have one.
- 10.** 55% of young people who faced barriers accessing a mentor said that they did not know how to find one.

Overall, 56 percent of respondents had a mentor at some point during their childhood or adolescence

In our analyses we examined young people's **access to mentoring in general**, which includes natural/informal mentors and formal mentors (this category is referred to as 'any mentor'). We also examined **access to formal mentoring** in the context of a structured program that matched a young person with a mentor (this category is referred to as 'formal mentor'). Since the 'formal mentor' category is a subset of the 'any mentor' category, data pertaining to access to formal mentors is also included in the any mentor category.

Study design

The lack of research on youth mentoring in Canada is an important barrier to generating evidence-based policies and practices which have the potential to improve the effectiveness and reach of mentoring for young people across the country. To address this barrier and collect essential data about youth mentoring, MENTOR Canada launched The State of Mentoring Research Initiative in 2019 with support from the Government of Canada's Youth Employment and Skills Strategy and BMO Financial Group. MENTOR Canada worked with the Social Research and Demonstration Corporation (SRDC) – a non-profit research organization with almost 30 years' experience providing high-quality research and evaluation support for evidence-informed decision-making – to carry out the research. As part of The State of Mentoring we consulted extensively with every critical stakeholder group of the sector: youth, mentors, and mentoring service providers.

Between January and March 2020, 2,838 young adults aged 18 to 30 participated in the National Youth Mentoring Survey, a nationally representative online survey, and reported on their experience during their childhood and adolescence (ages 6 to 18). To supplement the survey findings, we conducted 19 one-on-one interviews with young adults. **Mapping the Mentoring Gap** uses the information collected through the survey and interviews to shed light on young people's perspectives on and experiences with mentoring.

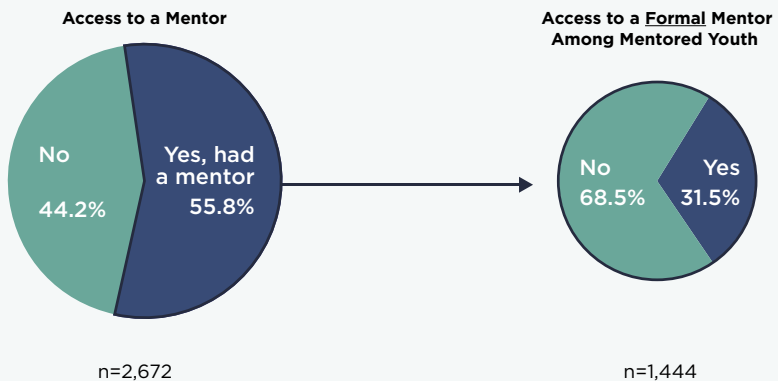
Insight area 1: The availability of mentors

Overall, 56 percent of respondents had a mentor at some point during their childhood or adolescence:

- During their childhood (6-11 years old), 39 percent of respondents recalled having at least one person they would consider a mentor;
- During their adolescence, 41 percent had a mentor;
- On average, between the ages of 12 to 18, mentored youth had 2.5 mentors (mean).

These young people had naturally occurring mentoring relationships (natural/informal mentors) and/or had access to a mentor as part of a structured mentoring program (formal mentors).¹ The vast majority of mentoring relationship in Canada occur naturally or organically. Only about 1 in 3 mentored youth had a formal mentor, that is equivalent to approximately 16 percent of all respondents (See figure 1).

Figure 1
Access to mentoring
(ages 6 to 18 collectively)



Not every child in Canada has the same odds of having a mentor.

Young men and women who grew up in Canada had similar odds of having access to a mentor (any mentor). However, gender diverse youth were 50 percent less likely to have a mentor (any mentor) than youth who identified as women.

Some young people were more likely to have mentors:²

- Indigenous youth were 39 percent more likely to have access to mentoring (any mentor) than non-Indigenous youth. They were twice as likely to have access to a formal mentor;
- Young people who experienced at least one risk factor during their youth – such as family interaction with the law, school troubles, or economic disadvantage – were 31 percent more likely to have a mentor, and twice as likely to have a formal mentor, than respondents who did not have such experiences;
- Youth with a functional disability³ were 44 percent more likely to have access to mentoring (any mentor) than youth who do not have a disability;
- Men (compared to women), transgender youth (compared to youth who do not identify as transgender), and racialized youth (compared to White youth) were also more likely to have access to a formal mentor.

54 percent of respondents indicated that they could recall at least one time between the ages of 6 to 18 when they did not have a mentor but wished they had one.

Although many young people had a mentor growing up, a large proportion still faced barriers. 54 percent of respondents indicated that they could recall at least one time between the ages of 6 to 18 when they did not have a mentor but wished they had one (this category is referred to as ‘access to mentors: unmet needs’).

Closing the mentoring gap means working to ensure that every young person who wishes to have a mentor, or mentors, is able to access the right mentors capable of responding to their unique goals or needs, and to do so at the right time.

Young people belonging to certain groups have greater odds of reporting unmet needs:

- Sexual minority youth were 39 percent more likely to report unmet needs than heterosexual youth;
- Youth with a functional disability were almost three times more likely to report unmet needs compared to youth who do not have a disability;
- Youth who faced at least one risk factor during their youth were twice as likely to report unmet needs than youth who did not experience risk factors.

The obstacles to accessing mentors were remarkably similar across the country. According to respondents, the most significant barriers were:

- Not knowing how to find a mentor (55 percent);
- Not understanding what mentoring was or the value of having a mentor (43 percent); and
- Not having any mentoring programs available to them (34 percent).⁴

Young people have complex mentoring needs. Meeting children and adolescents' mentoring needs is more complex than providing each young person with a single mentor at some point during their youth. Indeed, 62 percent of mentored youth indicated that they wish they had had access to more mentors. Our study also revealed that the mentoring gap is particularly pronounced for youth who have certain demographic characteristics or identities. Closing the mentoring gap means working to ensure that every young person who wishes to have a mentor, or mentors, is able to access the right mentors capable of responding to their unique goals or needs, and to do so at the right time.

Youth Facing Barriers and Mentoring

59 percent of youth who experienced at least one risk factor while growing up had a mentor.

Youth facing barriers were twice as likely to report that they had unmet needs with regards to access to mentors than youth who did not face barriers.

Youth with one or more risk factors were 53 percent more likely to initiate their mentoring relationships (as opposed to it being initiated by others such as a parent or the mentor) compared to youth who did not experience risk factors.

Approximately 1 in 5 youth facing barriers had access to a formal mentor.

Insight Area 2: The Effect of Mentoring on Youth Outcomes

Over the last decade, a robust body of international research has confirmed that natural and formal mentoring relationships have positive effects on a wide range of youth outcomes, including the social, emotional, behavioural, and academic areas of youth development.⁵ **Our findings from The State of Mentoring Research Initiative prove that access to mentors has a positive impact on young people's outcomes in Canada as well.**

Young adults who had access to mentoring (any mentor) while they were growing up were more likely to report the following positive outcomes than non-mentored youth.⁷ They were:

- 53 percent more likely to report good or excellent mental health;
- Over two times more likely to report a very or somewhat strong sense of belonging;
- Over twice as likely to have completed high school;
- 95 percent more likely to have pursued further education after high school;
- 59 percent more likely to have an occupation (either employed and/or studying);
- More likely to report feeling positive about their career planning;
- More likely to report having strong social capital.⁸

Young people who had access to a formal mentor were almost three times more likely to report good or excellent mental health than non-mentored youth.

Young people who had access to formal mentors were also more likely to report positive outcomes compared to their peers who only had informal mentors. They were:

- Almost three times more likely to report good or excellent mental health;
- 83 percent more likely to report a very or somewhat strong sense of belonging;
- 78 percent more likely to have an occupation (either employed and/or studying);
- Also more likely to report feeling positive about their career planning.

Interview participants confirmed that their mentoring experiences had a positive influence on them. Some participants reported that their mentors made them feel more hopeful and more confident in their own abilities. Mentors also made young people realize that there is help if they need it. Some participants reported that their mentors empowered them to try new or difficult things and not be afraid of failure.

Youth who have been mentored showed a continued interest for mentoring:

- Mentored youth (any mentor) were twice as likely to be interested in mentoring others in the future compared to their non-mentored peers;
- They were 2.6 times more likely to have served as a mentor since turning 18.

This continued interest is a powerful testimony of mentoring's value as well as a strong indication that mentored youth are empowered to make a positive contribution to society.

Insight Area 3: The Value of Mentors

Mentors provided young people with the holistic support and guidance they needed to do well. Respondents retained a positive memory of their mentoring relationships: 95 percent of mentored youth reported that their most meaningful mentoring relationship was a positive one. They also had a positive perception of the influence that their most meaningful mentor had on their lives:

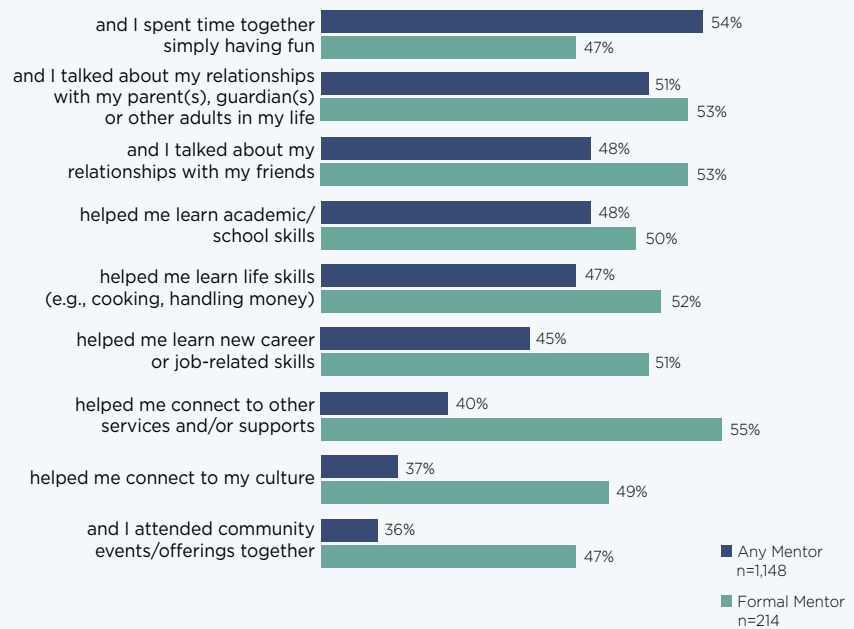
- 73 percent reported that their mentor had a significant influence on their self-confidence;
- 70 percent said that their mentors had a noticeable influence on their hope and optimism for the future;
- 67 percent stated that their mentors influenced their self-pride and ability to like who they are;
- 58 percent reported that their mentor positively influenced their understanding of where they wanted to go in life.

Beyond spending time together simply having fun, most meaningful mentors provided a variety of life supports (See figure 2). Close to half of respondents reported that their mentor (any mentor) helped them learn academic skills (48 percent), life skills (47 percent), and career-related skills (45 percent).

Figure 2 Other life supports provided by most meaningful mentors.

Figure shows the proportion of respondents who answered “very true” to questions about their most meaningful mentor.

My most meaningful mentor...



Our study revealed that informal and formal mentoring relationships can provide complementary benefits. Formal mentoring relationships were more likely to focus on providing school or educational support (62 percent compared to 55 percent for any mentoring relationships) whereas mentoring relationships overall (any mentor) were more likely to focus on providing emotional or social support (71 percent compared to 57 percent for formal mentors).

On the whole, formal mentors may provide slightly more support to their mentees when compared to all mentors (any mentor). Slightly over half the respondents who indicated that their most meaningful mentor was a formal mentor reported that this mentor helped them build their skills and navigate interpersonal relationships.⁹ Formal mentors also played an important role as connectors: they helped mentees connect to other services or supports (55 percent) and to their culture (49 percent).

Implications for policy and practice

What we heard from many young people confirms that mentoring is needed and wanted to help them stay on the path to productive adulthood. **Mentoring can and should be integrated into holistic approaches to empower youth to fulfil their potential and increase opportunities at home, school, and in the workforce.**

More than 2 out of 5 respondents did not have any mentor while they were growing up.

Yet, a significant mentoring gap exists in Canada. More than 2 out of 5 respondents did not have any mentor while they were growing up. Furthermore, over half of young people could recall a time growing up when they did not have a mentor but wished they had one. **Our findings corroborate recent efforts in the mentoring field to reconceptualise how we define the “mentoring gap”: from having access to one mentor at one point to having access to multiple and evolving supportive and caring relationships - mentoring and otherwise - throughout childhood and adolescence.**

The mentoring gap is concerning since children and youth who do not have access to mentors while growing up risk missing out on a number of important benefits. Indeed, our study shows that young people who have mentors are more likely to report a number of positive outcomes in early adulthood than their non-mentored peers. As such, barriers to mentoring need further exploration - particularly for Indigenous and racialized youth, transgender youth, LGBTQ2S+ youth, youth with disabilities, and youth who face adverse life experiences. **The mentoring gap can be closed - with benefits to young people, their communities, and Canada.**

MENTOR Canada worked with youth representatives and key stakeholders from the mentoring sector to co-create a set of calls to action based on the findings from the State of Mentoring Research Initiative. [Read the State of Mentoring: Areas for Action.](#)

Learn more

MENTOR Canada has released a complete [Mapping the Mentoring Gap report](#). The report expands on the study's methodology, the dynamics of mentoring relationships, and additional qualitative and quantitative findings.

MENTOR Canada has also shared the results from *The State of Mentoring Research Initiative's* two other studies:

- **[Capturing the Mentoring Landscape](#)**: This study seeks to better understand the prevalence, scope, structure, strengths and challenges of youth mentoring programs and services across Canada;
- **[Raising the Profile of Mentoring](#)**: This study examines adults' opinions about youth mentoring and its place in Canadian society. The study also explores adults' experiences as mentors: their interest and capacity to become mentors as well as the barriers and facilitators to mentoring.

Help close the mentoring gap today:

Visit becomeamentor.ca to learn more about volunteer mentor opportunities in your community and beyond.

Are you a mentoring service provider? Visit mentoringcanada.ca to increase your recruitment and visibility to potential mentors by listing your programs in the MENTOR Connector, a free online platform that links mentors and youth to mentoring programs across Canada to learn more.

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Endnotes

- ¹ The survey provided the following definition of a mentor: someone other than your parent(s) or guardian(s) who is usually older with more experience than you, who you could count on to be there for you, believed in and cared deeply about you, inspired you to do your best, and influenced what you do and the choices you made then or make now. Formal mentoring was defined as when an organization like a school or a community group matches a young person with an adult with whom they develop a relationship in a structured manner through regular meetings and activities.
- ² Results reported here are statistically significant with at least 95% confidence – this means there is at least a 95% chance the results are not arrived at by chance.
- ³ Self-reported functional disability refers to reduced activity and does not require a professional diagnosis.
- ⁴ Respondents could select multiple items, total exceeds 100%.
- ⁵ Raposa, E. B., Rhodes, J., Geert Jan, J. M. S., Card, N., Burton, S., Schwartz, S., . . . Hussain, S. (2019). The effects of youth mentoring programs: A meta-analysis of outcome studies. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 48(3), 423-443. DuBois, D., Portillo, N., Rhodes, J., Silverthorn, N., & Valentine, J. (2011). How Effective Are Mentoring Programs for Youth? A Systematic Assessment of the Evidence. *Psychological Science in the Public Interest*, 12(2), 57-91. Van Dam, L., Smit, D., Wildschut, B., Branje, S., Rhodes, J., Assink, M. and Stams, G. (2018). Does Natural Mentoring Matter? A Multilevel Meta-analysis on the Association Between Natural Mentoring and Youth Outcomes. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 62, 203-220.
- ⁶ Our analyses do not allow us to conclude whether mentoring causes or leads to young people having better outcomes. We were able to demonstrate a clear correlation (statistical association) between access to mentoring
- ⁷ Results reported here are statistically significant with at least 95% confidence – this means there is at least a 95% chance the results are not arrived at by chance.
- ⁸ The career planning and social capital measures were composite measures. To determine if access to mentoring had an effect on the respondents' results, we generated a score based on the respondents' answers and performed a multivariate linear regression.
- ⁹ Results based on descriptive statistics. No statistical significance test was performed to determine if formal mentors were more or less likely to provide certain supports. The relatively small differences in the percentages may be explained by the difference in sample sizes as the formal mentor sample is smaller (n=214) than the any mentor sample (n=1,148).