

Study finds youth-mentor relationships particularly helpful for those experiencing hardship

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In a time of transition for rural African-American young adults, natural mentors in the community help them stay focused on their goals and avoid potential difficulties associated with emerging adulthood, according to findings from an ongoing University of Georgia study.

The study, published in the early online edition of *American Journal of Community Psychology*, is part of a broader research program called the Adults in the Making project, which is aimed at helping rural African Americans transition to adulthood. The researchers found that behaviors such as anger, breaking the law, and [substance abuse](#) were reduced when informal mentors provided support and helped them learn to deal with adult problems. These relationships were even more powerful for [young adults](#) experiencing hardship.

"If the youths had some bad things going on in their life, including being treated badly through [discrimination](#) or different family stressors, it was particularly helpful for them to have a good relationship with a mentor," said Steve Kogan, assistant professor of child and family development in the UGA College of Family and Consumer Sciences.

Kogan and his colleagues studied 345 [African Americans](#) starting when they were aged 17 to 18 and measured how they progressed over the following year and a half by interviewing the youths, their mentors and their parents.

The eight Georgia counties in which the young adults in the [mentoring program](#) lived—Baldwin, Butts, Elbert, Hancock, Morgan, Putnam, Twiggs and Wilkes—are among the highest in the nation in poverty rates, and unemployment rates there are above the national average, said Kogan. "If you have someone special outside of your family that helps you set goals and maintain self-control, you can compensate for difficulties in your own life," he said.

The youths were not assigned mentors, but were allowed to choose a mentor from the community. The mentor could not be an immediate [family](#) member or live in the youth's home and had to be at least five years older. In many mentoring programs, the mentors come from outside sources. "One of things that we thought about was that we ought to really look at people in the community who already know this young person and have an investment in them," said Kogan. "A mentor doesn't have to be a stranger."

The study sought to better understand why some young adults succeed despite tough circumstances after high school, said Kogan. "The better the youth-mentor relationship was, the less likely the young adults were to be acting out, breaking rules or being aggressive when they were 19 or 20," said Kogan.

Provided by University of Georgia

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