Although there are fewer youth in confinement now than in the past, recidivism continues to be a problem, both nationally and at the state levels. Approximately 55 percent of youth who leave long-term correctional confinement return to incarceration within one year (Rand Corporation, 2014). Youth in Indiana, just as with those in the rest of the United States, struggle with community re-entry after correctional confinement. In 2013, there were 54,148 youth in long-term residential confinement in the U.S. compared to 61,000 in 2011 (Office of Justice Programs, 2016). In Indiana, a study of individuals released from state-level juvenile correctional facilities in 2012 revealed an overall recidivism rate of 35.3 percent. While Indiana’s rate of recidivism is lower than the national level of 55 percent, a study conducted by the Indiana Department of Correction revealed that there was a significant increase in overall recidivism from 16.7 percent in the first year post re-entry, to 35.3 percent in the third year of re-entry (Schelle, 2015). Research has consistently shown that the lack of employment is the top predictor of recidivism (Lockwood & Nally, 2017). In fact, Lockwood and Nally concluded that individuals who are young, unemployed and without a high school
credential are the most likely to return to correctional confinement.

Mentoring can interrupt the cycle of incarceration (Lowe & Nisbett, 2013; Matz et al., 2014; Youth Re-entry Task Force, 2009). The Helping Offenders Prosper through Employment (HOPE) Mentoring program is a university-based program at Indiana University (IU). HOPE’s mission is to provide mentoring to youth who are incarcerated. HOPE provides opportunities to develop employability skills while supporting the application of those skills. HOPE mentors provide support throughout confinement and upon re-entry into the community.

**Mentor recruitment and training procedures**

The HOPE mentoring program began in 2013 at the Madison Juvenile Correctional Facility (MJCF). By the summer of 2017, all three state-level juvenile correctional facilities (LaPorte Juvenile Correctional Facility, Logansport Juvenile Correctional Facility and Pendleton Juvenile Correctional Facility) adopted the HOPE mentoring program, making HOPE a statewide mentoring program in long-term juvenile correctional facilities. HOPE recruits and trains undergraduate volunteers from multiple academic disciplines, including criminal justice, sociology, psychology and education, to serve as mentors to youth involved with the criminal justice system. To date, 18 undergraduates have served as HOPE mentors. HOPE requests a minimum one-year commitment from the undergraduate students, who also submit background checks, complete four online training modules and undertake two visits to one of the state juvenile correctional facilities prior to mentoring a youth. HOPE mentors are matched with a youth at the point of intake to the correctional facility. Correctional staff make the referrals for youth to be placed in the mentoring program. The average length of incarceration is five months for females and eight months for males. Mentors provide weekly mentoring throughout confinement and in the community upon release. Mentors are provided supervision by correctional facility staff and ongoing supervision from HOPE staff.

Once trained and matched to a youth, HOPE mentors receive weekly guidance and support by a university-level professor who serves as the site coordinator. HOPE mentors at the LaPorte Juvenile Facility are supervised and supported by an associate professor at the IU Northwest campus. HOPE mentors at the Logansport Juvenile Correctional Facility are supervised and supported by an associate professor at the IU Kokomo campus. HOPE mentors at the Pendleton Juvenile Correctional Facility are supervised and supported by an associate professor at the IU Bloomington campus. Regular meetings between site level coordinators are held to ensure mentoring at each site is consistent with HOPE principles.

**HOPE principles**

The HOPE mentoring program adheres to three basic principles:

1. Exit begins at entry
2. Positivity and responsiveness
3. Collaboration

These three principles, described below, are grounded in best practice recommendations.

**Principle 1: Exit begins at entry**

By establishing mentoring during the initial phase of confinement, stronger relationships between mentors and youth can develop, increasing the probability that the mentoring relationship will be
sustained when the youth re-enters the community. Additionally, the mentor supports the youth with individualized guidance focused on employment under the direction of the facility’s transition coordinator (TC). Throughout the youth’s confinement, HOPE mentors and the facility’s TC meet with the youth to develop a comprehensive transition plan. This includes a discussion of career interests, education needs, personal needs and problem solving skills. The TC and mentor help the youth confirm the address where he or she will be released and connect the youth with the local representative from the Department of Workforce Development, who is able to assist the youth with re-enrollment in traditional school, an adult education program or job training. At the time of release, the youth and mentor meet in person on a weekly basis, with daily contact via text messaging, phone calls or emails. The mentor serves as a bridge between the facility and the community by providing a continuity of services from adjudication through re-entry.

**Principle 2: Positivity and responsiveness**

HOPE mentors are encouraged to create an environment of hopefulness and positivity, inspiring and encouraging youth to achieve their goals. This non-punitive approach to interactions with youth is based on empirical evidence that shows that positive or humane approaches are better than harsh treatment (Ochoa, Otero, Levy, & Deskalo, 2013). A HOPE mentor rewards the socially adaptive behavior of the youth, remaining positive, consistent, patient and respectful, regardless of the youth’s behavior. HOPE mentors do not use threats or consequences when a youth cannot, or will not participate in the mentoring activity. On occasions in which the mentoring activities are not completed, mentors are reminded that sitting quietly with the youth is a meaningful and adequate response. In an attempt to create positive and supportive relationships, HOPE mentors do not force youth to participate in mentoring activities, reducing the likelihood of straining the mentoring relationship. The mentor relationship is a curative and healing experience. In addition to positivity, HOPE mentors use a responsive approach by individualizing activities to fit each youth’s needs. For example, mentoring activities for older youth might focus on earning a high school equivalency certification or practicing for a job interview, while younger youth might explore different career interests or receive help with school assignments. For example, if the youth has a specific reading disability, the mentor designs activities at the appropriate reading level or assists the youth with reading assignments under the supervision of a special education teacher. The first and second authors supervise HOPE mentors to ensure they individualize activities to match each youth’s educational needs and employment goals, as indicated in the youth’s learning plan developed at the facility’s school.

**Principle 3: Collaboration**

The HOPE mentoring program functions as a conduit for communication and collaboration between the youth, staff and parents. The mentoring program is embedded in the activities and programs within the correctional facility to allow mentors to assist each youth with behavioral and programmatic goals. If the student has a diagnosed disability under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA), the goals are established in the individual learning plan (ILP) and/or individual education program (IEP). As such, mentors can be liaisons between the youth’s teachers and the facility TC when the youth is confined, and can be the liaison among the facility, parents and community at the time of release. In the community, the mentor supports and assists the youth with connecting to the local Department of Workforce Development representative, who can guide the youth to access existing education and employment resources.

Correctional facility superintendents, school principals, mental health treatment staff and security personnel all indicate that the HOPE mentoring program is a positive and valuable experience for the youth and staff. After almost five years, the state-wide infrastructure is in place to achieve the vision of pairing every youth in confinement with a HOPE mentor, who can work in collaboration with facility personnel and the family to support the youth in making academic gains and developing pre-employment skills. As these tasks are successfully completed during the youth’s confinement, the mentor’s role in supporting the youth in the community at the time of release can be the key component...
to successful re-entry and recidivism reduction.

ENDNOTES


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