

## Reducing Youth Crime: The Role of Mentoring

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**Summary:** This article discusses the role of mentoring in reducing youth crime, drawing on a 2016 evaluation of Le Chéile<sup>1</sup> mentoring services in the Republic of Ireland. There are many studies of mentoring of 'at risk' children and young people, which show a range of benefits when good practice is followed. There are fewer studies of mentoring of young offenders, and results are less clear-cut – variously described as 'promising', 'mixed', 'indirect', 'modest', 'tantalising' or lacking clear evidence. The Le Chéile evaluation identified benefits that included reductions in offending behaviour. The article examines the reasons for the equivocation about mentoring outcomes in other jurisdictions and explores possible reasons for Le Chéile's positive results. It discusses a number of themes, including the importance of volunteer mentors, the building of relationships of trust, the balance between listening and challenging, and the importance of commitment and perseverance. It also considers the nature of mentor support and transitions out of mentoring. Other themes discussed briefly are the integration of child and parent mentoring, earlier intervention, and mentoring of children in care and detention.

**Keywords:** Early intervention, mentoring, young offenders, evaluation.

### Introduction and growth of mentoring programmes

The concept of youth mentoring was developed in modern times in the United States when the Big Brothers/Big Sisters programme was established in 1904 as a formal response to concerns over social welfare and exclusion (Newburn and Shiner, 2006). In 2011, there were said to be over 5000 programmes serving about three million youths across the US (DuBois *et al.*, 2011). In the UK, mentoring for 'at risk' youth developed in the mid to late 1990s, heavily based on the US programmes (White, 2014). The Youth Justice Board, established in England and Wales in 1998, embraced mentoring as an intervention and by 2000 had funded and supported almost 1000 mentoring

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<sup>1</sup> Le Chéile is a Probation-funded community-based organisation working in partnership with Young Persons Probation to provide a mentoring service to children and parents.

schemes (White, 2014: 6). In Ireland, Le Chéile was established in 2005 and provides a mentoring service for young people aged 12–21 who appear before the criminal courts and, since 2008, a mentoring service for parents or carers of young people who offend.

Most mentoring programmes are premised on the belief that 'a created relationship between an older and younger person will be a support to a young person facing adversity in their lives and will help them to have a positive sense of themselves and their future' (Dolan *et al.*, 2011: 2). Mentoring programmes for 'at risk' youth are designed to give them help and guidance so they can become responsible adults and compensate for their presumed lack of mentors otherwise in their lives (DKR, 2012: 22).

Mentoring programmes might be understood as 'interactive helping relationships between two individuals over an extended period, wherein an approved adult mentor develops trust, spends quality time, and passes along knowledge and skills to the mentee' (Tapia *et al.*, 2013: 2). Anton and Temple argue that 'the ultimate purpose of mentoring programs is to change the trajectories of the lives of young people and set them firmly on the path to becoming successful, productive adults who contribute to society' (2007: 26).

Much of the literature on mentoring focuses on 'at risk' children rather than those who have actually come into contact with the criminal justice system. The offending profile of the young people in the Le Chéile programme differs significantly therefore from that of mentees under many other programmes. Their age profile is also different, with a higher age cohort in the Le Chéile programme. There are other features that make comparison difficult, notably around style of mentoring in other programmes (not always one to one, sometimes using paid mentors, often incorporating group work or focusing on specific activities), duration (not always 12 months), frequency (not always weekly), intensity (varying number of hours) and location (sometimes in mentoring premises).

## **Overall effectiveness of mentoring**

A large-scale study of the US Big Brothers Big Sisters programme found a wide range of benefits for participants: they were less likely to drink alcohol or use drugs, and had increased competency in their school work, less truancy, better grades, and better relationships with their families and friends; no negative effects were found (Grossman and Tierney, 1998). A later US meta-analysis of 55 evaluations, based primarily on perceptions of youths,

mentors and parents, found only modest benefit for the average youth. Importantly, however, it found that results were significantly improved if best practice was followed and the mentor–mentee relationship was strong. It also found that poorly led programmes could have a damaging effect (DuBois *et al.*, 2002). Similar results were reported from a review of research by Rhodes (2008), who concluded that positive effects were modest at best and that poor relationships could have negative impact. Roberts *et al.* (2004) commented that research ‘does indicate benefits from mentoring programmes for some young people, for some programmes, in some circumstances, in relation to some outcomes’. A large-scale evaluation of the Big Brothers Big Sisters programme in Ireland found positive results on some dimensions (Dolan *et al.*, 2011), including improved feelings of hopefulness, perceived social support and pro-social behaviour, but little impact as regards education or misconduct.

A systematic review of mentoring studies by the Danish Crime Prevention Council concluded that all the studied programmes for ‘at risk’ youth had at least one positive effect and mentoring interventions were described as ‘promising’. They noted positive effects within various measures of crime, behaviour, attitude, psyche, alcohol and drugs, school and relationships with family and friends. They also noted variations between programmes and that not all the effects were present in each study. Interestingly, impacts were greatest for younger children (aged 11–14) who were not already committing offences (DKR, 2012: 6).

An evaluation of mentoring schemes supported by the Youth Justice Board in England and Wales found evidence of improved educational performance, including better school attendance, a reduction in disruptive behaviour and less risk of school exclusion. Results were best for young people involved in low-level offending or ‘at risk’ youth and where the schemes provide a structured educational component. The evidence as regards improvements in self-esteem was inconclusive (Tarling *et al.*, 2004: 44–45). Another study of schemes supported by the Youth Justice Board found evidence of greater likelihood of entering education or training but that the schemes failed to improve problematic behaviour and basic education skills or to reduce drug or alcohol use; however, the average age of participants was 14 and attrition rates were high (St James-Roberts *et al.*, 2005).

A research synthesis for the UK Mentoring and Befriending Foundation reported that mentoring could produce positive outcomes when implemented alongside other interventions, but it was not clear that the same effects

resulted from mentoring alone (Philip and Spratt, 2007). A UK evaluation of 28 pilot mentoring programmes for 'looked after children', mostly in foster or residential care, found positive results that included self-reported improvements in all areas of their schooling, feelings about themselves and their future, likelihood of staying out of trouble and relationships with others. Several young people specifically mentioned that it was the mentor who had made the difference for them and several also indicated that the voluntary nature of the relationship was particularly important. Many felt that it was important that the mentor was there specifically for the young person and the time spent together was dedicated solely to them (Renshaw, 2008).

A small number of studies have highlighted potential negative effects of mentoring. These tend to be associated with short-term mentoring relationships or breakdowns in relationships and cause lower self-worth or negative peer influence (Grossman and Rhodes, 2002; DKR, 2012). Rhodes *et al.* (2008) point out that if mentees lack a strong bond with their mentors, feel that they cannot trust them, or have been let down by them, then the mentoring can have a damaging effect that outweighs the positive (cited in White, 2014: 8). Piper and Piper (2000) argue that the stigma of disaffection can be reinforced by involvement in mentoring because it suggests that there is something wrong that needs to be changed and is reinforced further by differences in status between mentor and mentee; they concluded that an empowerment approach was required in programmes.

## **Effectiveness of mentoring in reducing reoffending**

The evidence on the impact of mentoring on reoffending is of more recent origin and somewhat ambivalent. A 2016 UK Ministry of Justice report described findings from recent reviews and meta-analyses as 'promising' but suggested a need for caution in interpreting results because of the variability of type of scheme implemented and the limited detail in studies of what mentoring actually involved and of key successful implementation characteristics (Adler *et al.*, 2016). An earlier Ministry of Justice report noted that some, but not all, evaluated mentoring programmes had demonstrated a positive impact. The effectiveness of mentoring was therefore described as 'mixed/promising' (Ministry of Justice, 2014). A Campbell Collaboration systematic review of 46 studies in 2013 reported significant but 'modest' effects from mentoring of 'high-risk' youth as regards delinquency and three associated outcomes: aggression, drug use and academic performance (Tolan

*et al.*, 2014). In a rapid review and meta-analysis for the Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention, Jolliffe and Farrington (2008) examined 16 studies and suggested that mentoring reduced reoffending by about 4–10%. They noted that the better results were associated with lower quality studies and that higher quality evaluations did not find that mentoring had an appreciable beneficial effect on reoffending. They described their conclusions as ‘tantalising’ and described mentoring as a ‘promising intervention with some very hopeful results but also with some puzzling features’ (p. 39).

Other studies have produced less promising results. A study of 80 UK mentoring programmes supported by the Youth Justice Board failed to find ‘convincing evidence’ of a reduction in offending or in severity of offending during the first year after the start of a mentoring relationship (St James-Roberts *et al.*, 2005). Tarling *et al.* (2004) reviewed 36 mentoring schemes funded by the Youth Justice Board and, comparing reoffending rates for 359 mentees and equivalent national cohorts, found that those on the mentoring programmes fared a little worse than the national cohorts.

## **Factors critical to success in mentoring**

Several studies have identified how the effectiveness of mentoring could be enhanced. DuBois *et al.* (2002), in their meta-analysis of 55 evaluations, reported that effects were greater where the mentoring involved more frequent contact and emotional closeness, where the duration was of six months or more and where there was intensive training, structured activities, greater support from parents and programme monitoring; they summarised that when best practice is followed and the relationship is strong, results are significantly improved.

The Danish Crime Prevention Council recommended that programmes should be ‘intense with weekly meetings lasting several hours and involving a supporting, trusting and emotional relationship for a period of at least a year ... and that especially volunteer mentoring should include professional staff to screen, match, train, support and supervise the mentors’ (DKR, 2012: 6). The research identified other criteria for effective mentoring, including combining mentoring interventions and leisure-time programmes, emphasis on the importance of the young person’s psychological and social development, and parental involvement.

The Campbell Collaboration meta-analysis found that programmes that stressed emotional support and those that emphasised an advocacy role on

behalf of the mentee had larger effects, while teaching and modelling/identification were regarded as 'worthwhile foci of attention in mentoring design' (Tolan *et al.*, 2014: 7/185). In summarising international evidence, Adler *et al.* (2016: 21) noted that 'when meetings lasted longer and took place once a week (as opposed to less frequently), mentoring had a greater effect on reducing re-offending'. Jolliffe and Farrington (2008: 8) reported that programmes 'in which the mentor and mentee spent more time together per meeting (5 hours or more) and met at least weekly were more successful in reducing reoffending'.

In judging what makes for an effective mentoring intervention, Tarling *et al.* (2004: 53) suggest focusing attention on three broad areas: the organisation and administration of schemes (including strong co-ordinator, critical mass, support for volunteers), the attitudes and attributes of volunteer mentors (realistic expectations, early matching, patience) and the nature of the mentoring relationship (good start, agreement, trust and respect, minimum 12 months, planned endings). As regards relationship quality, Sale *et al.* (2008) reported greater impact on social skills for youths who felt higher levels of trust, empathy and mutuality from their mentors.

## **Overview of Le Chéile mentoring**

Le Chéile's mentoring service is delivered in partnership with the Probation Service and covers eight regions: Dublin (2), Cork (2), Meath, Midlands, South-East and South-West. Most referrals come from the Probation Service and the mentoring occurs in the context of Probation supervision. In each region a co-ordinator recruits, trains, supervises and supports a team of volunteers who mentor young people and parents/carers. Nationally there are over 200 volunteers and in 2017 mentoring was provided to 153 young people and 46 parents/carers. The profile of youth mentors is that they are caring, mature persons, aged 20 or more; they enjoy working with young people; and they are non-judgmental, are unbiased in their approach and have a good understanding of young people and the issues and challenges they face. They comprise men and women from all walks of life and do not need to have any specific educational qualifications.

The mentors for young people act as a positive role model, advisor and friendly supporter. They offer them support, stability and general guidance and help them make choices as well as set achievable goals and realistic challenges. They listen, give care and advice and share information and life/

career experience with them. They get involved with young people in various structured and planned activities and help them build self-esteem and self-confidence. At the beginning of the mentoring relationship, the mentors engage in social, fun activities such as bowling and playing pool, designed to help build a relationship. After this time, they jointly set some longer-term goals such as working on literacy skills, joining a sports club or class, working on the driver theory test, and re-engaging with education or training. The mentors typically work with the young people for about two hours a week for between six months and a year and sometimes for longer periods.

## **Evaluation of Le Chéile mentoring**

The evaluation of Le Chéile mentoring showed significant positive impacts for young people who engaged with the service. Benefits were recorded in respect of improved family and peer relationships; involvement in activities outside the home; reduction in misuse of alcohol and drugs; involvement in education, work and training; increased self-confidence and well-being; and reduced reoffending. The estimated reduction in self-reported offending of 28% is significant given international experience. Full details are available in the report on Le Chéile's website (O'Dwyer, 2017). The social return on investment (SROI) was calculated at €4.35 for every €1 invested in Le Chéile.

The methodology for the study included interviews with and surveys of young people, parents, mentors, co-ordinators and Probation Service staff. The surveys provided quantitative data for the calculation of the SROI. They involved participants subjectively rating positions on a scale of 1–10 at the start and end of mentoring for themselves or, in the case of mentors and co-ordinators, in respect of mentees in their charge. They also indicated on a scale of 1–4 the extent to which they thought mentoring helped bring about the change. The sample of young people was selected randomly by the evaluator. Possible response bias was addressed by triangulating responses from the young people, mentors and co-ordinators and by conservatism and transparency in the assumptions about the size and value of impacts. The calculation of the SROI included all 69 cases that were recorded in 2015 as 'completed successfully' or 'active' and had lasted for a minimum of six months. A 50% allowance was made in respect of another 27 mentees who had been mentored for between four and six months. The methodology of the evaluation thus differed from at least some of the cited studies in that it involved mentees who had been mentored for at least four months (and not

all mentees who were ever assigned a mentor) and self-reporting of offending levels and other variables (and not, for example, drawing on police or other criminal justice offence records).

A theory of change for young person mentoring was developed for evaluation purposes as follows: through mentoring, mentees build a trusting relationship with an adult who is interested in them, develop communication practice, engage in positive leisure activities, and build self-confidence and self-esteem; this in turn leads to increased awareness of choice and goal-setting; and this results finally in achievement of positive outcomes, including reduction in antisocial activities, development of pro-social behaviour and integration as productive members in the community. The theory was developed by the evaluator and research advisory group and agreed with stakeholder interviewees as a satisfactory explanation of how mentoring works. It is in close accordance with the international literature.

Key strengths of Le Chéile mentoring identified in the evaluation were the space and time for the mentee and the exclusive focus on them; the patience and persistence of mentors and co-ordinators; the fact that mentors were unpaid volunteers; the personality of mentors and close relationships of mentees with their mentors; and mentoring values such as being non-judgemental and attentive. Probation Officers also referred to the structure and routine that mentoring brought into young people's lives, while Le Chéile co-ordinators drew attention to the flexibility of mentoring and the ability to customise the mentoring to individual needs, as well as the community location of mentoring sessions.

The quality of the relationship between mentor and mentee is seen as key to all mentoring outcomes, as emphasised in the literature. Young person mentees who were interviewed were universally positive about their mentors and consistently spoke very highly about them. A typical comment was 'I just liked the way she was, like. She talked and had a good personality. She was a nice person. I got on with her from the start.' Another commented that 'I liked a lot about him. He would listen, was always there, reliable, a good friend and good support, a good help. He was just a great person to be honest.'

Mentors as a group stressed the objective of helping young people to realise that there is a different way to live and behave and creating a space for them to get away from negative influences. They mentioned linking in with young people who feel alienated and disrespected and recognising that damage has often been caused to them wilfully or through neglect. They expressed empathy with young people and again emphasised the importance



of not being judgemental and being honest. Individually, other mentors mentioned providing a listening ear and supportive environment, developing coping skills, building confidence, offering an alternative role model, promoting a healthier lifestyle, empowering mentees to be more independent, helping them identify longer-term aspirations for themselves, giving hope, and getting them to respect and believe in themselves. Several referred to the absence of adequate supports and positive voices in the young people's lives. Getting the mentee from one week to the next could be the main objective initially, according to one experienced mentor. Objectives had to be realistic at the beginning.

Mentors also spoke about their understanding of the motivations of young people being mentored. For most mentees, having someone to talk to was an important motivation, especially if they had moved away from negative peers who were previously their only friends. This could be viewed as filling a gap until they had re-established themselves. For others, they came because they felt they had no choice and their initial position tended to be that they had no problems, no need to talk. It could take a long time to build up enough trust and comfort to open up. For some, the motivation was space and stability in otherwise chaotic lives. The various activities available with mentoring were also motivating factors. These were seen as hugely important in many respects, including learning social skills, overcoming fear that they would not be welcome, doing things that they would not dream of doing on their own, opening up new ideas and discovering that they are accepted as part of the community. Mentors believed that there had to be something positive in it for the young people and noted that many activities involved things that most others take for granted.

As regards positive role models, co-ordinators identified as common mentee backgrounds the absence of a constant adult male, families with negative influences such as ambivalence about offending or violence, and families that simply failed to recognise and encourage achievement. Mentors would be the first people to believe in them and begin the process of thinking about a better future. Developing social skills and life skills was an important objective in all this, often learning to do things that would be considered normal, everyday things by most people. Concerning development of communication skills, co-ordinators noted that a lot of the young people were not used to having a conversation or dialogue and were fearful of their views not being taken seriously or being ridiculed. Small things such as ordering in a restaurant or being asked their opinion on a movie could be powerful.

Several co-ordinators and mentors identified a particular objective of mentoring as giving mentees a belief that change was possible and introducing them to different concepts and social groupings. Many alluded to the objective of bringing about longer-term change rather than necessarily achieving immediate impact. This is an important point and highlights the value of planting a seed that may not germinate and take root for some years.

Mentors felt strongly that the voluntary nature of their service was valuable and helped build the relationship with mentees. One commented that mentees were impressed that they actually wanted to spend time with them and that it was 'a huge thing' for mentees that mentors were not being paid. The relaxed, casual, enjoyable nature of the interaction was also seen as important. Mentors spoke in positive terms about their mentees, recognising their talents and potential while acknowledging the challenges they faced. Several commented specifically that they enjoyed the company of their mentees.

From the mentors' own perspective, Le Chéile's support was a major strength. They had formal supervision, generally in groups, and could get informal supervision and advice anytime. They valued the supervision in terms of overcoming isolation and feeling part of a group as well as clarifying boundaries. They also praised the initial and ongoing training and highlighted good relations with co-ordinators and the fact that you could raise anything with them with confidence. These views are echoed in Le Chéile's annual surveys of volunteers, which show consistently high levels of satisfaction with induction training, ongoing training, group supervision, ongoing support and overall experience of mentoring (Le Chéile, 2013–2015).

## **Phases of relationship-building and challenging**

Two phases can be identified in mentoring: a relationship-building phase and a more challenging, target-focused phase. Both were seen by all parties as important. The first phase was critical and took priority. It was expected to last six to eight weeks but in practice it was often longer and was tailored to the individual. The focus in this phase for mentors and mentees is on getting to know each other and on building trust. This is achieved primarily through participation in fun, non-threatening activities and simply sharing time talking. Co-ordinators and mentors pointed out that to rush this phase risked undermining the quality of the relationship and ultimately failure. Several co-ordinators remarked that it was the activities that drew mentees into

mentoring to begin with, and they only began to engage meaningfully once the activities had progressed. They pointed out that just keeping appointments was an important step for many mentees. Several noted that mentees often began to take better care of their appearance and dress more smartly for their meetings and this too was an indicator of progress as well as improving their self-image.

Co-ordinators and mentors acknowledged the need to move from trust-building to goal-setting. They emphasised the need to go 'softly, softly' in terms of target-setting and stressed the importance of the mentoring process itself, adding that mentoring was about challenging behaviour and attitudes in subtle, progressive, encouraging and supportive ways at a pace that the mentee could manage. Role modelling was seen as key and mentors demonstrated appropriate behaviours and attitudes in a natural way.

The average duration of Le Chéile mentoring in 2015 was 10.2 months in successfully completed cases, with almost a third lasting more than a year. In cases that were still active, the average duration was 7.7 months at the end of the year and 18% of active cases had already lasted more than a year. So it could be said that the mentoring was of sufficient duration to build a close relationship, have a positive impact and minimise any risk of negative effect.

Le Chéile guidance stipulates that a case review is arranged six to eight weeks prior to the end of mentoring and an exit strategy is devised with the young person. This exit strategy is designed to look at supports available outside of mentoring and to help the young people set future goals for themselves. Such planned meetings worked well where they took place. Mentors felt that it was important that mentoring relationships ended appropriately. Ending could be difficult at the best of times since a good relationship had usually been formed. Normally, mentoring ended when Probation supervision ended but flexibility was needed sometimes to allow continuation after the formal agreed period. Some mentees said that they would have liked their mentoring to continue for a while longer than occurred.

The international literature drew attention to the value of parental support in mentoring of young people. This was not a central focus of the evaluation of Le Chéile's youth mentoring but it was clear nevertheless that a high level of parental support existed in most cases. Some parents whose children were mentored availed of Le Chéile's parent mentoring service (which is available to all parents of children who offend). The most significant benefits for parent mentees were in the areas of self-confidence and emotional well-being, with benefits also in terms of improved self-esteem, hopefulness and ability to

manage stress, improved parenting skills and family relationships, and greater involvement in activities outside the home.

A number of mentees and their parents commented that they would have benefited from earlier access to mentoring. This was recognition of the value of mentoring to them but also an acknowledgement of hardship that might have been avoided. Some mentors and co-ordinators made similar comments and felt that mentoring was sometimes seen as a service of last resort. They too favoured earlier intervention, while acknowledging that some mentees might not be ready to engage fully with mentoring at a younger age. Their main point was that it was too late for some young people when they had got involved in offending and had gone through the court system. Several mentors and co-ordinators also made a case for mentoring for older age cohorts, up to age 25.

A number of cases examined as part of the evaluation involved young people from care backgrounds. Mentors in one focus group noted a significant difference in cases involving young people from such backgrounds, typically involving a lot of self-criticism and complexity, with a back-story of rejection; the mentors argued for specific consideration of the topic to ensure an effective service for this vulnerable group. One mentee said that if she had had something like mentoring when she was in care, she might not have ended up in trouble. As regards the transition from care, mentoring was seen as having a valuable role in providing support through this difficult phase. Other cases revealed the difficulty of staying in touch with young people who changed addresses during their time in care, either with foster carers or in residential care or both.

Experience with mentoring of young people in detention was broadly positive. The mentoring could be a continuation of mentoring started in the community or be initiated in detention. Mentees and their families appreciated the support at a difficult time and mentors commented that it strengthened the basis for mentoring after release. It was not always possible to arrange mentoring in detention, particularly if detention occurred or ended unexpectedly, was of short duration or brought an end to Probation Service involvement. Practical challenges arose in respect of travel and access, suitability of facilities and inability to participate in activities together. Travel to Oberstown, from rural areas in particular, raised issues of time and cost. Individual experiences showed that the limitations identified were not insurmountable barriers.

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## Conclusion

The international literature on the impact of mentoring on reoffending by young people is somewhat equivocal. It points out great variability in mentoring programmes that makes comparison difficult, but also examines factors that make positive outcomes more likely. These include notably mentor–mentee emotional closeness and strong relationship, frequent contact, duration of six months or more, structured activities and support from parents (DuBois *et al.*, 2002; DKR, 2012; Tolan *et al.*, 2014; Adler *et al.*, 2016; Jolliffe and Farrington, 2008; Tarling *et al.*, 2004).

This article presented findings from an evaluation of Le Chéile mentoring of young offenders in Ireland. A key finding was that a sizeable reduction in self-reported offending occurred as a result of mentoring. The evaluation focused primarily on cases described as ‘successfully completed’ and this may have influenced the results. That said, the qualitative evidence supported the quantitative survey findings. Importantly, Le Chéile’s mentoring programme encompasses most of the features identified in the literature as likely to maximise success. It should not be surprising, therefore, that positive results were achieved, not least as regards desistance.

The evaluation was designed to evaluate practice, provide evidence with regard to effectiveness or otherwise, and highlight where improvements could be made. The approach of the evaluation was primarily qualitative, with a quantitative element. This was appropriate and necessary for a variety of reasons, not least because its purpose was to evaluate a practice model but also because of difficulties in contacting young people after they have completed the mentoring programme and when their Probation supervision has ended. Subjective self-reporting was necessary because access to official criminal justice data was not granted. The methodological limitations were acknowledged in the evaluation report. Research methods such as use of a control group, use of independent offending data and a longitudinal element, while ideal (albeit costly), were simply not realistic options. It is difficult to see how a future evaluation might incorporate all such features and prove or disprove a hypothesis. In the meantime, the Le Chéile evaluation provides further strong evidence that mentoring can help bring about desistance, as well as improving the life chances of the young people concerned.

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