

Key findings

In late 2017, 82 Pillars' mentors answered a survey about their role. They found out about the programme primarily through word of mouth, billboards, newspapers and social media.

They contacted Pillars and after screening, were accepted for training. Some had weekend training while others went after work. Training included induction, speakers, group discussions, booklets and personal help from co-ordinators.

Three quarters of mentors waited three months or less to be matched with a mentee. Nearly all were matched within six months. Most first met at the mentee's home, and they were excited and a bit awkward at the meeting, but thought it was a great process. Communication was often hard at first, and they had to work hard to bring down the barriers.

The role is challenging, a term used time and again by the mentors. But right from the start it was clear that the experience would be life-changing for both participants.

Most (96%) reported they bonded well or quite well with the mentees. They engaged in a wide range of activities together, talked a lot, went to the mentor's house and did many other things. When things got awkward (or not) food was a great (and common) way to communicate.

Most mentors attend supervision monthly or more often. All but one found the supervision effective or OK. Mentors feel well-supported by Pillars and participate in a wide range of events with them. Mentors receive many personal benefits from mentoring, including increased confidence, new perspectives on the world around them and support for their aspirations.

Most were clear that mentoring had made significant difference to their lives. They find the role fulfilling and, at times, eye-opening. The challenge of communicating with a young mentee is important, as is the feeling of making a difference to the life of a disadvantaged child. Challenging, enriching, changing, precious... all of these terms are used by the mentors.

The report contains a number of stories by the mentors of how the children have developed through the mentoring process, nearly all of which were positive.

Not surprisingly, all of the mentors would, or have already, recommend to others around them to take on a mentoring role.

This is a study of an amazing group of people. They enter into an agreement to become friends with a child whose family has been impacted by parental imprisonment. Not only friends, but also visitors, companions and, in many cases, advisors, who visit with their mentee for at least a year, receive training and supervision and engage in an unlikely relationship with a young person.

They are, or have been, mentors for Pillars Ka Pou Whakahou, a children’s charity that offers a wide range of services to the whanau and tamariki of people in prison in Aotearoa. They work through either the Manukau (Auckland) or Christchurch offices. We surveyed them in late 2017 and received 82 responses from current, former and non-matched mentorsⁱ.

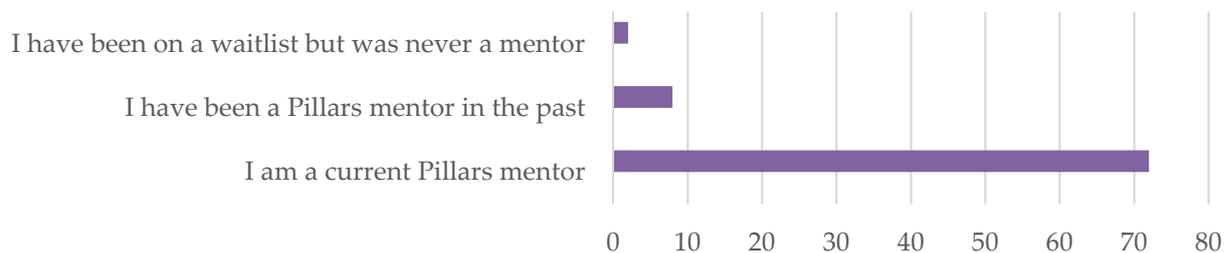


Figure 1. Current status of mentors (n=82)

We are not going to describe here the range of needs and barriers that face these tamariki, nor about the research that leads to the conclusion that mentoring provides an effective intervention for them. There are a wide range of research reports, plus a link to our book (Gordon 2018), available on the Pillars website. This report gives mentor’s views and comments about their role. They found out about the Pillars mentoring programme from a wide range of sources.

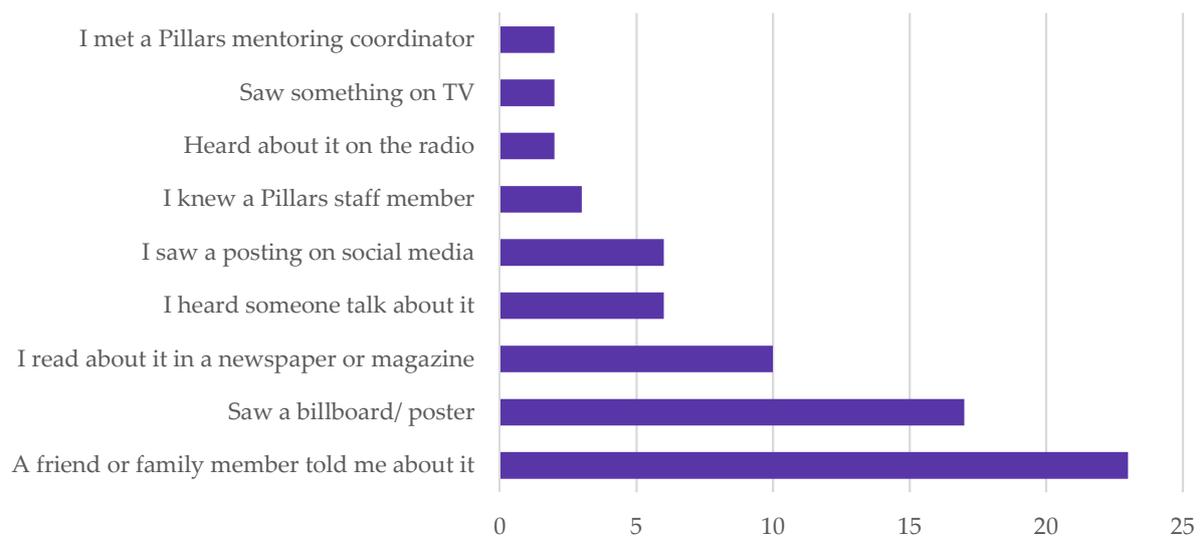


Figure 2. Where mentors found out about Pillars’ mentoring programme

No-one found out about the programme by seeing posters or receiving information from the prisons. No-one reported knowing a family where a parent was in prison.

Some heard about the programme through the local university, via careers day, class presentations, student job search and other:

I was studying full time and got an email about a presentation taking place. I liked it so much we had her return to present to our cohort.

Others who commented heard about the programme through a mentor, church activities or the workplace, saw something on TV, searched out programmes on the internet or via Volunteering Canterbury.

A quarter of participants rang the 0800 number to get further information, and others talked to someone they met at a presentation. The remainder contacted Pillars via email, a flyer given out at a talk, Facebook, other means or: "I walked into the building and spoke to reception".

Becoming a mentor

All except one were interviewed by the mentoring co-ordinator at the start of their Pillars journey. Training provided included full day, half day, induction, orientation or in a couple of cases two seminars.

COMMENTS ABOUT MENTOR TRAINING

Half a day training session (from memory) but also attended supervision sessions before match that included mini trainings.

An induction session and a couple of group mentor evenings.

A 4 hour session on a Saturday, covering different kinds of abuse and how to spot it, knowing what to do in certain difficult situations.

Had a group training session which lasted for a few hours with our coordinator. There, we also received a few helpful booklets.

There was an initial information evening and then maybe two trainings after that... I can't remember but I felt it was enough.

A very thorough and comprehensive orientation for potential mentors.

Mentors were asked how long they had to wait from the completion of their training until they were matched with a young person. Three quarters of mentors were matched within three months of being trained, with a third being paired with a mentee in less than a month.

Waiting times are shown in Figure 3 below.

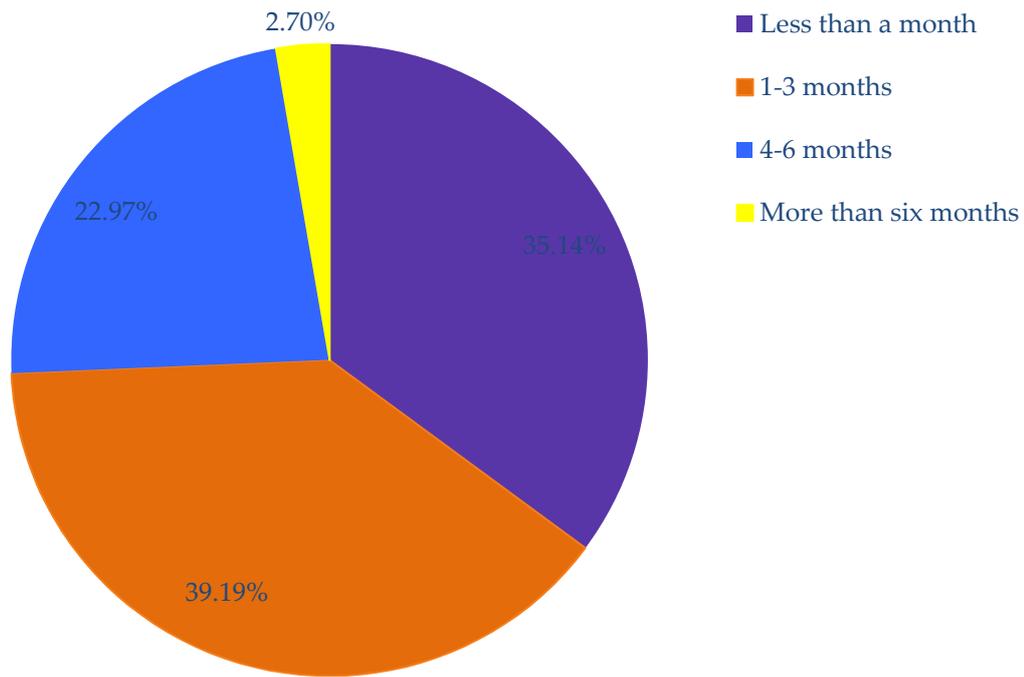


Figure 3. Waiting time until mentor match.

Most of the mentors first met the young people at the family's home (94%), with the rest meeting at the Pillars offices. Participants were asked what their thoughts were about mentoring in the first couple of months. A 'word cloud' of common responses to this question was built and can be found on the cover of this report.

COMMENTS ON MEETING MENTEES

I was nervous and just wanted my mentee to feel comfortable with me - she didn't like her first match, they think she was too young/shy. I was excited to finally be matched as well. The whole experience though was very eye-opening.

Little apprehensive and unsure what the mentee would want to do. I mainly tried to ensure my mentee was having fun so that the meetings would be an enjoyable experience.

It was challenging as I was worried that she wouldn't like me!

Many found an instant feeling of rapport with the child, and a desire to do things together. Mentees were often keen to get out and have fun, and mentors aimed to both do familiar things and also introduce the mentee to new experiences.

Some initially found the experience quite daunting and frightening. One mentor had a young person crying because he did not want to be away from his mum. Another had some problems, but once he starting attending supervision, realised these were minor compared to obstacles faced by some others. Other mentors found it hard to communicate with the child, either because of shyness or other barriers

Challenges

Many of the mentors talked about the various challenges they faced from the relationship itself but also the context. Challenges came from the disadvantage faced by some of the children, the unmet potential, overcoming barriers initially and the sense of responsibility felt by the mentors. On the other hand, there was enthusiasm by mentor and mentee, some brilliant rewards and lots of enjoyment. The various sentiments are reflected in this following word cloud of quotations from mentors:



In short, at the beginning mentoring was challenging both personally and in terms of the context. It did not take long for many mentors to realise that the engagement would be life-changing for one or both of those in the relationship, as expressed in many of the responses, some of which are reproduced below:

It's a great initiative that brings a different perspective to the kids. It's humbling to be involved with such an amazing family and to have the support of an incredible organisation.

Great - felt a connection with her and looked forward to being a positive part of her life

I loved it! Mentoring brings joy, love and meaning to my life - everything I give is returned 10 times over!

That I would like to get to know my mentee and the mentees family and make a positive difference to my mentee's prospects and ambitions in life and be a trusted buddie.

Awesome. My mentee is only 6 but is able to articulate and/or relate her feeling through experiences she has had, commercials she has seen and even dreams that she has had.

While it is obvious from these positive comments (there were no negative ones in the section) that the mentors felt very positive about the growing relationship, the next question quantifies this by asking whether mentors felt they bonded with their mentee. Bonding is, of course, much more than a casual relationship or friendship. It implies a relationship of substance. It is more than is required for a mentoring relationship, as influence can be asserted and good times experienced without bonding. For the Pillars mentors, over 95% felt they bonded quite well or definitely with their mentee, while the rest 'maybe' bonded:

Definitely	45.21%
Quite well	50.68%
Maybe	4.11%
Not really	0.00%
Definitely not	0.00%
Total	100%

Table 1. The extent to which mentors felt they bonded with their mentees (n=73).

The survey questioned mentors on what they did with their mentee when they met. They were able to tick more than one box, and most did so. Results are in Table 2 below.

	%	Count
Activities	41.77%	66
Just talking	25.95%	41
Liked coming to my place	20.25%	32
Other, please specify	12.03%	19
Total	100%	158

Table 2. What mentors and mentees did together, as reported by mentors

Other things included driving around in the car “which we both love”, and “uncanny” bonding over animals, playing games, crafts and cooking, talking, food, cooking, food and “best activities are when we don’t do much, like walking through the Botanical Gardens”.

Being a mentor

Mentors sign up for a twelve-month contract and about half in this survey (36/73) have been a mentor for over a year, with one person who noted they were now in their sixth year. As the survey included current mentors, many had not yet made the twelve month threshold, with 28% having mentored for less than six months, and 22% for between 6 and 12 months. One person had a break in mentoring:

I was mentoring a little girl for 7 months but she moved away so I have had an 8-week gap, tomorrow I meet my new mentee so the journey continues :-)

Most mentors attended supervision monthly, with about one third attended every two to three months or less often, as shown in Figure 4.

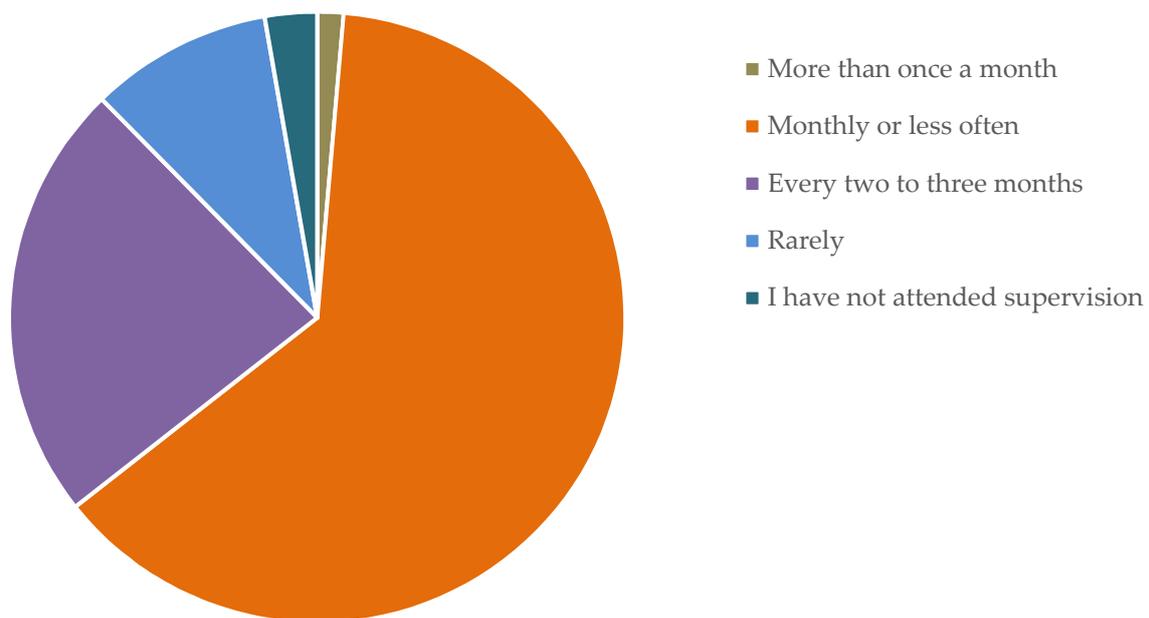


Figure 4. Reported attendance at supervision sessions.

While Pillars requires mentors to attend monthly meetings, and most do, a further question is how effective these are. The format followed is group supervision, where mentors share their experiences and provide advice and support. The mentor co-ordinator runs the meetings and provides professional advice when required.

Participants were asked how effective they found the supervision (see Table 3 where the numbers responding to each option are listed):

Very effective	27
Quite effective	30
OK	14
Not very effective	1
Not effective at all	0

Table 3. Perceived effectiveness of supervision to mentors (n=72).

The survey did not ask mentors what would have improved the supervision for them, although, given the responses, that would have been a good question (perhaps it might be explored in supervision sessions in the future).

Pillars also supports the mentors in other ways than supervision, for example by fun days, events and parties. As well, some mentors have worked with Pillars at various public events, such as the annual Children of Prisoners week. Also, some mentors put on auctions each year to raise funds for Pillars. Most of the mentors feel that they are given a lot of or some support by Pillars, outside of the supervision role:

A lot of support	37
Some support	33
Not much support	3
No support	0

Table 4. Perceived levels of support provided to mentors by Pillars (n=73).

Asked to comment on the support they received in becoming a mentor, participants expressed diverse views. One was reassured by the cultural respect shown by the Pillars' workers in making a connection:

From the very first moment they came to my home it was a perfect match. Both women being tauiwi were respectful of my home and space and came with a knowledge and understanding of tikanga which I believe to be vital considering their kaupapa. At the same time, I was dealing with another state organisation where this unfortunately was not the case. They came with a genuine aroha for the mahi which they were doing. Later upon my visit to the Pillars office I got to witness their bicultural practice first hand.

Some mentors discussed the personal benefit they have found through the support and supervision, including benefits beyond being able to work as a mentor. Benefits included new skills, different viewpoints and more confidence:

It has helped me realise that I am not alone in my struggles, get inspired with new ideas to try, learn techniques for dealing with situations that might come up, sounding through ideas with mentoring coordinators is really helpful too. Also, just learning about wider topics such as abuse has equipped me in my life generally with more empathy and skills to recognise warning signs.

The support I receive is adequate and I would not ask for anything more. I think that the training, particularly the group discussions, have value outside of the mentoring program. Unexpectedly, I've found personal benefit from the sessions.

Gave me more confidence to handle different difficult situations. Good to know they are always there as well and that there is a network of knowledge if we need it.

One person used to attend the supervision regularly but, as she has gained experience and her own professional qualification, has not needed to:

The supervision is extremely valuable, and it is worth noting that at the beginning I attended this regularly, but now do not attend, mostly because I have been with my mentee for almost 3 years and have completed my Bachelor of Social Work during this time so have had independent supervision - both these types of supervision are incredible for application in everyday life.

A number noted that working with other mentors through the supervision sessions was very valuable, such as the following mentor who noted:

The main support came from meeting other mentors (of all different levels of experience) at the organised group sessions. Sharing of good and bad moments... Our co-ordinator managed these sessions well.

Finally, mentors noted that discussions in the group supervision had widened their outlook and "opened my eyes to the difficulties others faced and New Zealand's terrible systemic poverty cycle".

Making a difference

In various talks given by mentors over the years for Pillars, it has become clear that mentoring is not just passive voluntary work carried out to offer help to the children of prisoners. For many, probably most, of the mentors, their work with Pillars is transformative of their own lives in a range of ways. Mentors were asked how much

difference mentoring had made to their lives. All noted some change, and nearly all noticed some, major or quite a lot of change, as shown in Table 5:

Much difference	12
Quite a lot	37
Some	19
Not much	5
None	0

Table 5. Amount of difference made in their lives by being mentors (n=65)

The following extracts from the survey provide snapshots of how being a mentor has changed the lives of the participants.

It gave me a real appreciation for 'how the other half live' - my mentee's life was so very different from my own, but we still had things to connect on and I think that's what made it valuable for both of us - without all the 'social' factors, we were both two people, who loved our family and wanted a good life, and to be happy. Based on those simple foundations, we could connect and help each other grow. Since the age of 13, I have been a volunteer, mostly with youth groups, but this was the first one-on-one volunteer relationship I had. Without volunteering, I feel a bit out of sorts, so I guess the difference this connection made to my life, was that it felt 'normal' and right for me to be giving some of my time to help and support someone else.

One of the most fulfilling things I've done, I took as much satisfaction from it as from my paid employment.

Being a mentor has challenged my perceptions about society, poverty and what children need. I am blessed to have been matched with such a vibrant, fun loving mentee. Being a mentor makes me feel like I am giving back to the NZ I so love. I have learned so much and I treasure the adventures I have with my little buddy.

It's allowed me to look outside myself and also learn how other people live and value different things. It has widened my world view

It puts your life in perspective, makes you grateful for what you have and brings the satisfaction in seeing how the smallest effort for one person can mean the world to another

I have enjoyed the fact that I might be making a difference to someone who has been unfortunate in their circumstances. The massive disparity in opportunities that can arise due to the situations that children are born into alarms me. Any small contribution I can make to lessen this I feel is worthwhile.

To do this justice I would need more space and time, but in brief it has made an immeasurable difference to my life. It is one of the most precious things in my life.

I don't do it for my benefit. It's a bit of a hassle, to be honest, but my mentee seems to value our relationship, which is the main thing.

It has shown me another side of society. I have always believed that we should all be working together for a better future for all of us but getting close to a family and seeing their difficulties has made me realise how much more I could do.

I never really knew if it helped her and was disappointed to later hear she was a bit off the rails.

Mentoring has deeply enriched and enhanced not only my life, but the lives of others within my family and circle of friends. I'd highly recommend it to anyone.

Mentoring can be life-changing for the mentors, but do they think they make a difference to the children? Quite a number of mentors thought they 'definitely' made a difference to the young people, while nearly all the others 'probably' did. Around 10% thought they might or might not make a difference, and none reported they did not make a difference. The following comments provide some strong insights into the nature of the mentoring relationship, with its strengths and sometimes its disappointments.

She took a while to open up to me, but after a while, she wanted to share her news/stories, I wasn't having to ask 20 questions! She didn't have to be 'cool' with me all the time, she would tell me how she felt, or what was going on for her. I think that it was nice for her to have someone she could 'let go' with. At home, while she wasn't the oldest kid, she was always looking out for someone in the family - so with me, it was time for her to be herself, I think.

I'm concerned that he still has a significantly higher chance than his peers of becoming a criminal and ending up 'in the system'. Despite all the time I spent with him over the years he has still ended up doing a bit of petty crime I think and he has dropped out of education, etc.

Over the year she has become to trust and confide in me about what's happening at school and at home. We talk about problems and how to deal with things. She's also become more confident and improved on her manners. A goal we had was to improve her manners and now she almost always acknowledges people saying please, thank you and you're welcome. I feel so proud of her.

My mentee has grown up a lot since I met her and she did go through a rough patch through the middle of our relationship and has really come out the other side, she also has a lot of other support through this and I don't feel accurately able to comment on how much of this might have been due to our relationship, I think her and her family would be better sources for this question

My mentee seems to be a much more settled individual. Issue with my mentees schooling have become much less, with an award for "making good decisions" being a recent highlight.

My mentee is always looking out the window waiting for me to arrive, very happy to go out on outings. He has a number of fears and has opened up about these. He often seeks support close to me in certain situations and talks about things too to let me know how he feels. We had a fairly good rapport from the beginning but he has developed trust and talks more about things now

Initially, she seemed to really value our time together and was getting a lot from it. However, once her mother was released and back with the family, her behaviour changed quite dramatically and she began to expect me to constantly purchase things for her, and if I refused, became rather petulant and would ask to be dropped off home earlier than planned.

My mentee bonded with me very quickly and clearly trusted me. I loved hearing about her successes. She has the ability to go far in this world as she has a positive mindset. I hope she continues to stay this way. We set little goals and she worked at them - we both saw the progress made.

She feels loved, valued and important, her confidence has grown, she has accomplished goals and has dreams for fulfilling her potential which she is prepared to work hard for. She is also aware of the special qualities she possesses and the difference her presence makes in the lives of many people she might otherwise not have been able to meet.

I think the biggest thing I have offered my mentee this far is the opportunity to try new things and give her opportunities she wouldn't have otherwise. I guess something to look forward to, as she often seems bored otherwise.

He is very confident now, he mingles with my family at large gatherings and fits in like one of the family. He is learning to not be so aggressive and trying hard to be the peacemaker at school. He now believes that his voice and wit is a better asset than using his fists at school.

Having been a mentor, then, and seen all the ups and downs of the role, would mentors recommend such a role to others? In a ringing endorsement, 45 (62%) said they would, 25 (35%) said they had already done so, and 2 (2%) made the following comments:

Yes, but they would need to be aware of the challenging side of it and have time to commit.

Yes, but would be really clear of the time commitment and boundaries from the beginning, and that even though the minimum time to mentor a child is a year it is likely it will be an ongoing relationship beyond that.

No-one said they would not recommend the role to others.

In conclusion, this study of Pillars' mentors demonstrates the significant success of the role in developing and maintaining good relationships between mentors and mentees, who mostly come from very different backgrounds and, on the face of it, have little in common. Successful mentoring relationships are seen in research to provide the opportunity for significant change for the mentees (and, it appears, mentors) towards a pro-social life.

With an estimated cost of just \$3000 to train, supervise and support mentors and ensure good mentoring matches, Pillars' programme is cost-effective and with evident strengths. The major problem is that the reach of the programme is fairly small, reaching only a fraction of the children of prisoners that may need it.

Dr Liz Gordon
July 2018

ⁱ Two mentors declined to participate in the survey, and three others dropped out, leaving 77 mentors who participated beyond the screening questions.