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APRIL 2021

Building Bigger Connections

Wave 1 Results

Fall/ Winter 2020-2021

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In Partnership With

Big Brothers Big Sisters OF CANADA

Citation: Craig SG, Ames ME, Urusov A, & Baudin, C for Big Brothers Big Sisters Canada. (April, 2021). Building Bigger Connections: Wave 1 Results.

Executive Summary

While public health officials continue to urge Canadians to practice physical distancing, staying connected is imperative to maintaining mental health and wellness, especially for vulnerable youth. Big Brothers Big Sisters Canada (BBBS) is responding with timely virtual programming across all of their mentoring programs and are uniquely positioned to ensure mentees and mentors continue to connect despite physical distancing and mass closures. BBBS Canada is deeply proud of the innovation and new strength BBBS agencies across the country are demonstrating despite these unprecedented times. Given the evolved landscape of the social service sector, BBBS Canada seeks to understand how COVID-19 has impacted mentee and mentors' relationships.

In summer 2020, BBBS Canada partnered with researchers from York University (Drs. Craig and Pepler) and the University of Victoria (Dr. Ames) on a collaborative project Building Bigger Connections: Understanding the Role of Inequity and Relationships on Adolescent Mental Health during COVID-19 to help understand how mentees ("Littles") were functioning in terms of their mental health and relationships during COVID-19. BBBS Canada also wanted to understand whether (or not) and how mentees were engaging with their mentors ("Bigs"). These findings will be invaluable as they will inform BBBS National strategic direction and future service delivery innovations.

Data collection occurred between November 15, 2020 and February 15, 2021, including 170 youth who reported they were involved with a BBBS agency and 514 youth who were not involved with BBBS.

41.9% of BBBS youth had regular contact with their mentors since the beginning of the pandemic

Youth who had regular contact with their mentors reported **feeling more supported**, and that their mentors helped them to feel **less isolated and worried or anxious**.

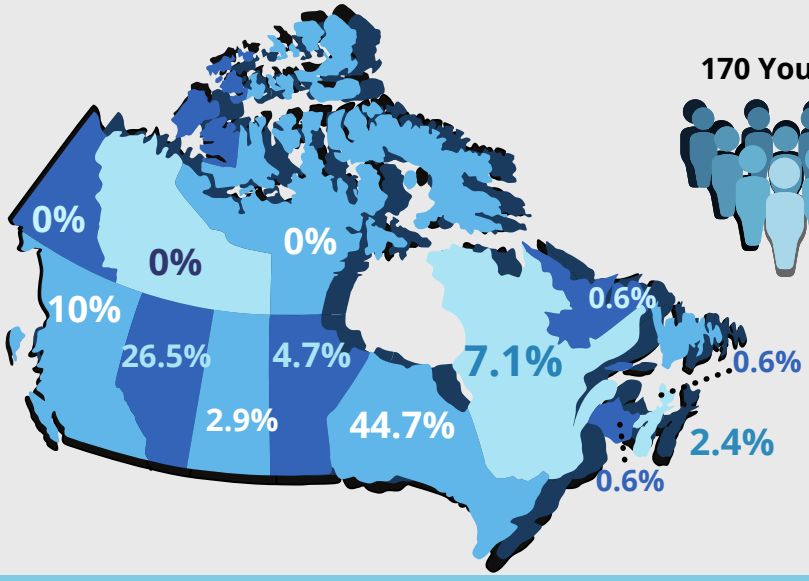
Youth who had more contact with their mentors had **fewer symptoms of depression and anxiety** compared to youth who had no contact with their mentors during the pandemic.

The Building Bigger Connections team is committed to this research initiative and mobilizing the findings of this research across the BBBSC network and sector partners. We are continuing this work over the next year, with the hope of engaging more BBBS youth in our upcoming surveys. This will help us better inform BBBS agencies of youth's needs as the pandemic continues to impact youths' daily lives.

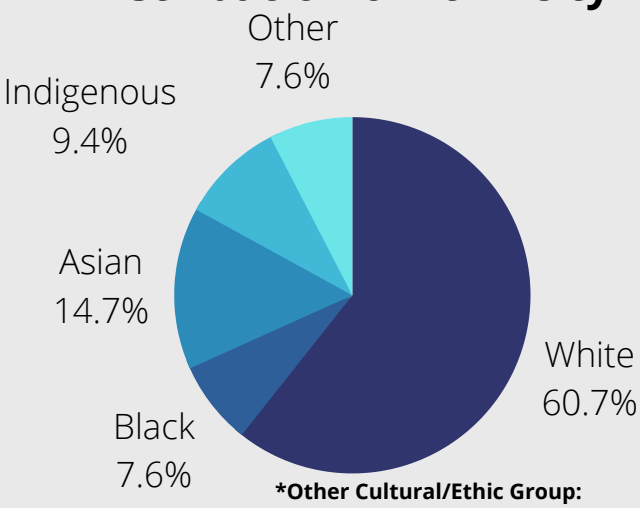
Acknowledgements

We would like to thank all agencies, mentors, and mentees for their respective involvement in the distribution and completion of the survey! We would also like to acknowledge a SSHRC Partnership Engage Grant and University of Victoria Faculty of Social Sciences COVID-19 Research Fund which supported data collection and dissemination. All study protocols and procedures were approved by institutional Research Ethics Boards.

Demographics of BBBS mentee participants



Distribution of Ethnicity



*Other Cultural/Ethic Group: Includes mixed ethnicity & Latin

Area of Residence

53.3% City

35.5% Suburb

11.2% Rural

Distribution of Identified Gender

Trans/Non-Binary Individuals: **4.7%**
Cis-Female: **45.3%**
Cis-Male: **50.0%**

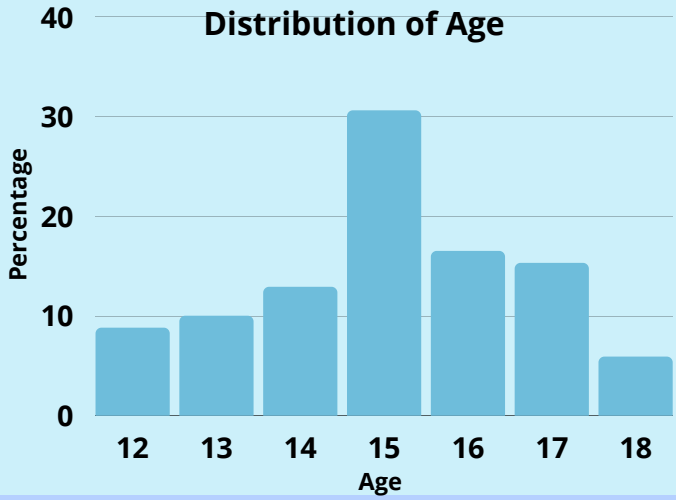
Learning Environment

25.9% Online from Home

31.8% In-person

36.4% Hybrid

Distribution of Age



56.8% Two Caregiver Home

39.6% One Caregiver Home

3.6% Other

*Other Includes: Living with grandparents, home stay, independent living.

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of youth don't have access to a cell phone

Internet Access

"... fast enough to video chat?"

94.5% yes

Data Access

"... do you have enough to video chat?"

63% yes

Having their own computer ⟶ more likely to have met up with their mentors

Having access to a cell phone ⟶ more likely to have met up with their mentors

Reduced availability and access to technology may be a barrier for a mentee who wants to reach out to their mentor and get support.

Research Highlights

We compared BBBS youth with our sample of 514 non-BBBS youth. Compared to non-BBBS youth, the mentees in our survey were:

- On average **1 year younger**
- More likely to **identify as an ethnic minority** (60% vs 73.7%)
- More like to be **living in a single family caregiver household** (29.6% vs 22.5%)
- Less likely to have **access to a computer** (81.2% vs 84.7%) and **cell phone** (92.9% vs 97.9%)

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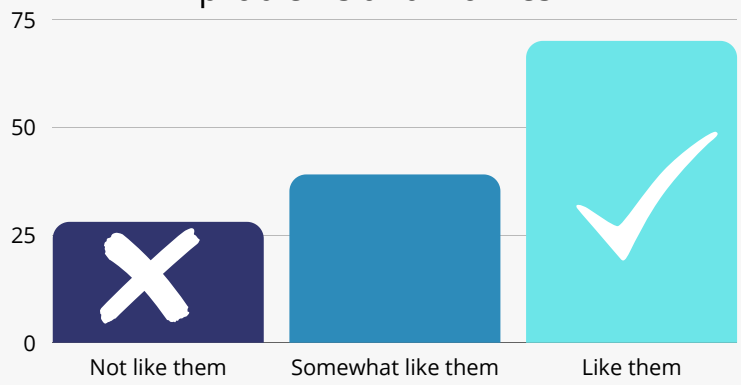
BBBS Relationships

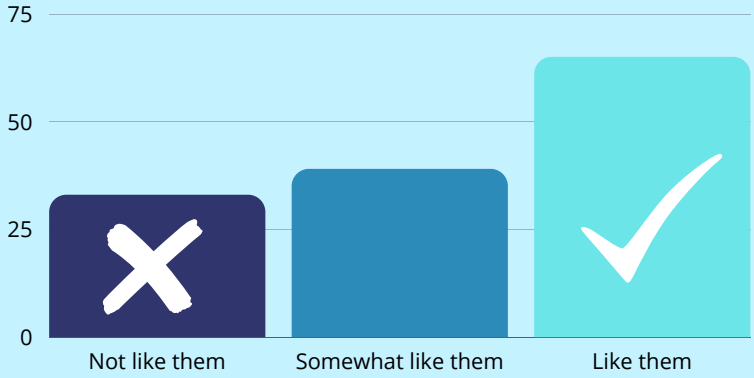
A total of 137 mentees responded to questions about their relationship with their mentors. Their responses for each question are indicated below. In general, most mentees reported a positive relationship with their BBBS mentors.

Participants were asked whether the below statements were like their mentors with their response options being: like them, somewhat like them, or not like them.

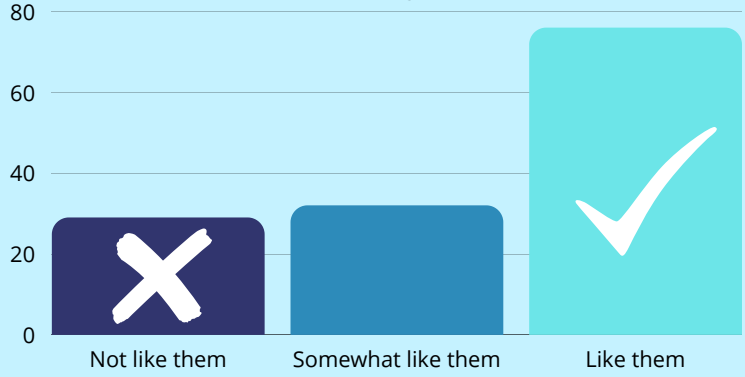
Your mentor understands your problems and worries



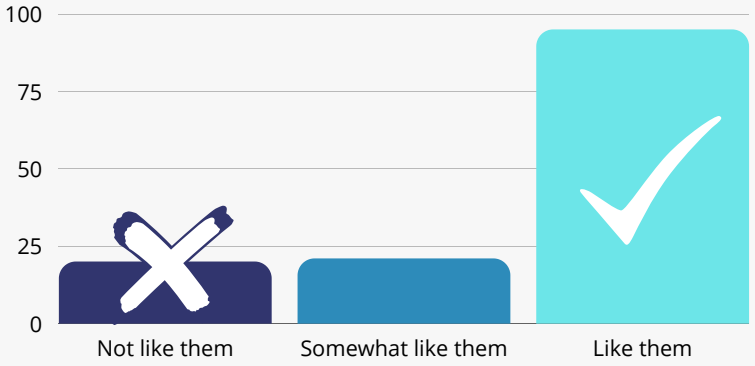
Your mentor makes you feel better when you're upset



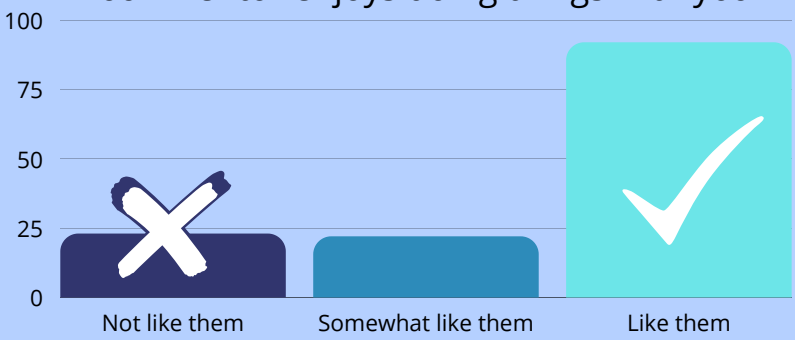
Your mentor enjoys talking things over with you



Your mentor has a good time with you



Your mentor enjoys doing things with you



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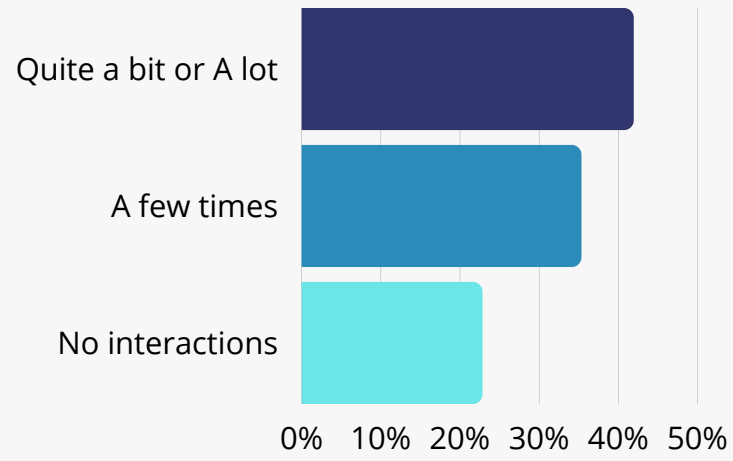
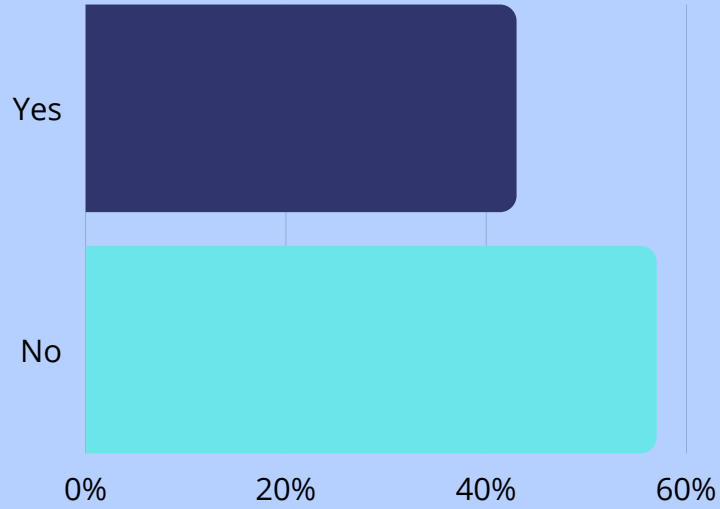
BBBS during COVID-19

136 Mentees responded to questions about their relationship with their mentors during the COVID-19 pandemic, with 80% reporting they had contact, and 40% reporting regular contact as defined by being "A lot" or "Quite a bit".

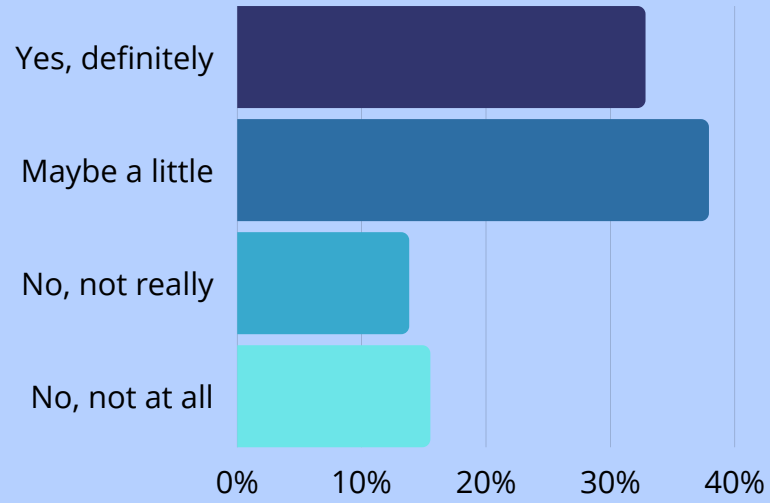
How regularly have you been in contact with your Mentor since the beginning of the pandemic?



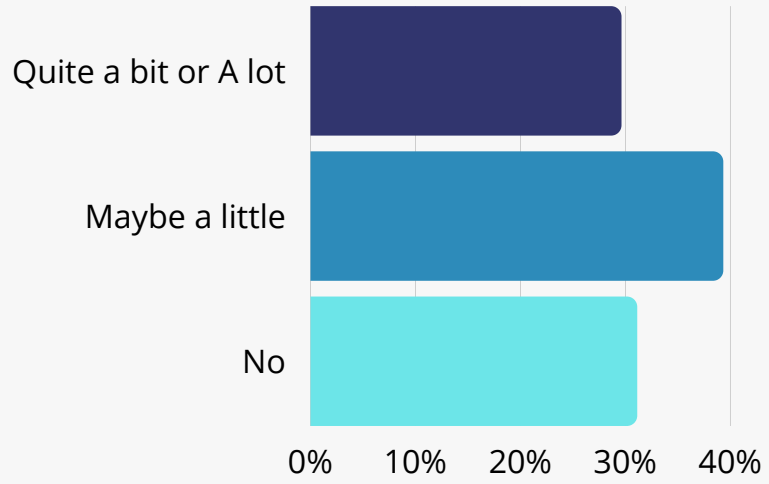
Have you had virtual meet-ups with your mentor since the beginning of the pandemic?



Do you feel comfortable talking to your mentor about things happening in your life when you are speaking virtually (Phone, FaceTime, etc.)?



Has your mentor helped you to better understand the public health regulations around COVID?



Some provinces allowed for in person mentoring during COVID-19. Youth who **reported meeting up with their mentors quite a bit or a lot** were more likely to have **had a virtual meet-up** and report **feeling comfortable talking to mentors virtually**.

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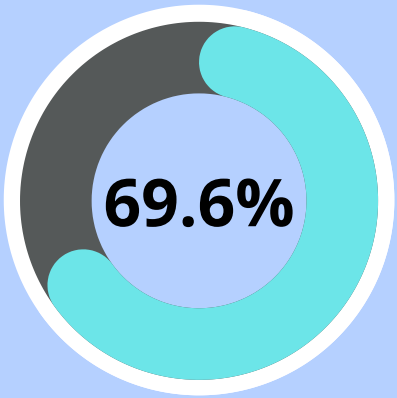
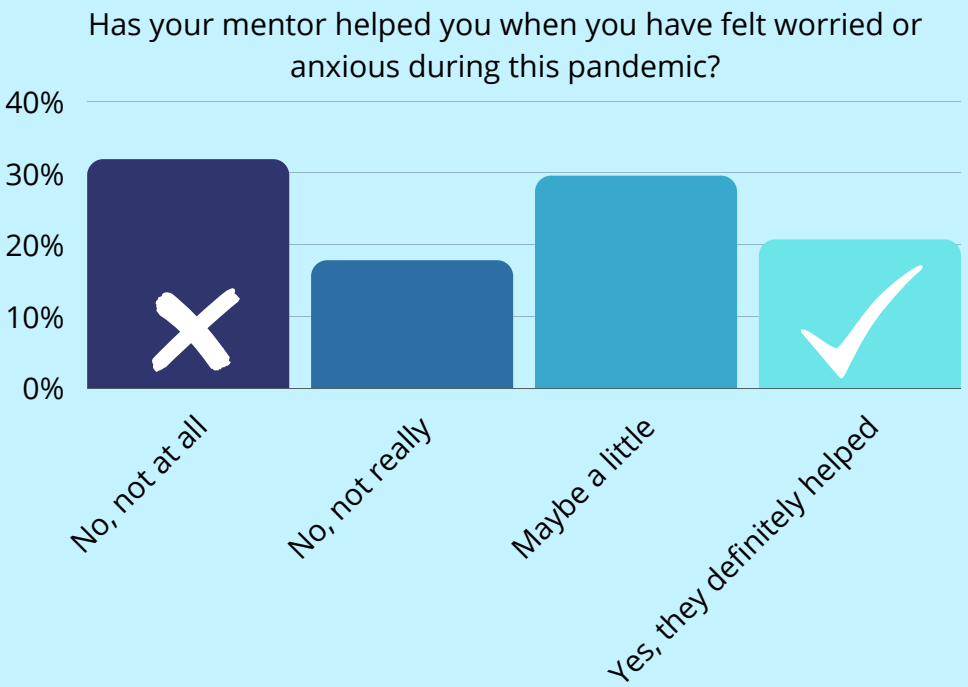
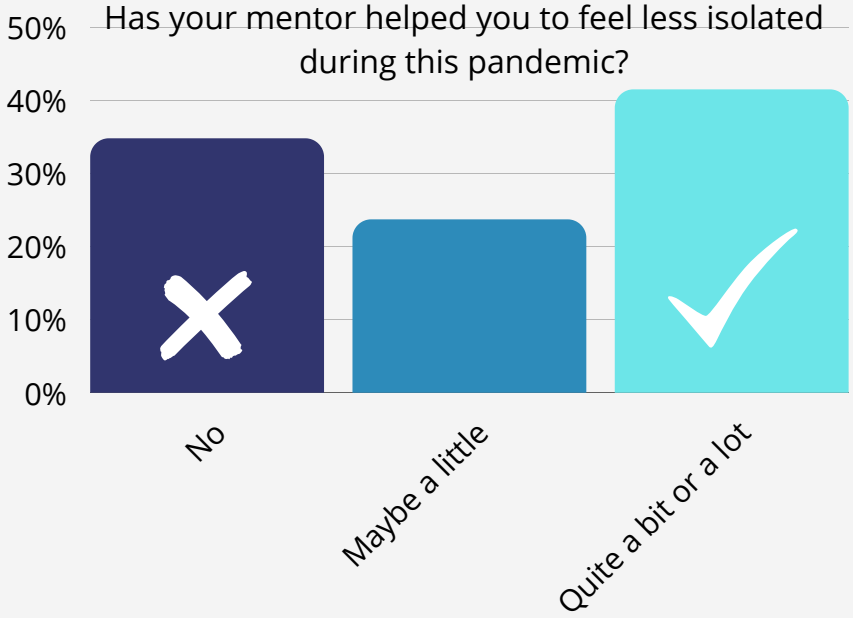
BBBS during COVID-19

Youth were also asked about whether their mentors helped them cope during the pandemic, including feeling less isolated, and less worried or anxious.



... of youth who had regular contact said their mentor helped them feel less worried or anxious. The more contact a mentee had with their mentor, the less worried or anxious they felt about COVID-19.





The more contact a mentee had with their mentor, the less isolated they felt with ...

75% who had regular contact,

and **23%** who had some contact

reporting their mentor helped them feel less isolated.

Any contact with mentors appeared to help, as **52.1%** of youth who had **some contact saying their mentors helped them feel less anxious or worried.**

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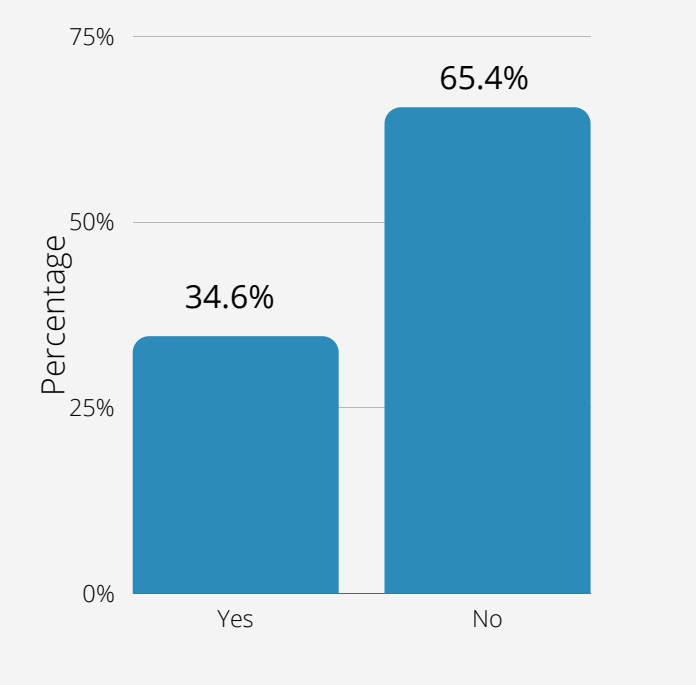
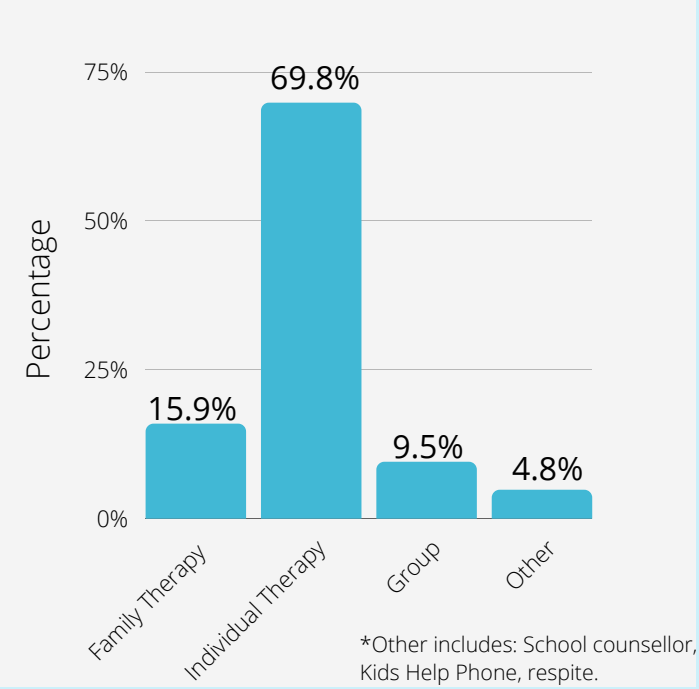
BBBS & Mental Health Services

BBBS youth are accessing more than just mentoring services. Here, we can see the kinds of mental health support services and the percentage of youth accessing them.

Have you accessed mental health services?



Of the 34.6% of youth who said yes, what kind of mental health services?



BBBS supports youth in many ways. One of those ways is connecting BBBS youth with mental health services and other community resources, all while supporting them through the mentorship program. The "other" mental health services utilized by BBBS youth were:

Kids Help Phone
Respite Care
School Guidance Counsellor

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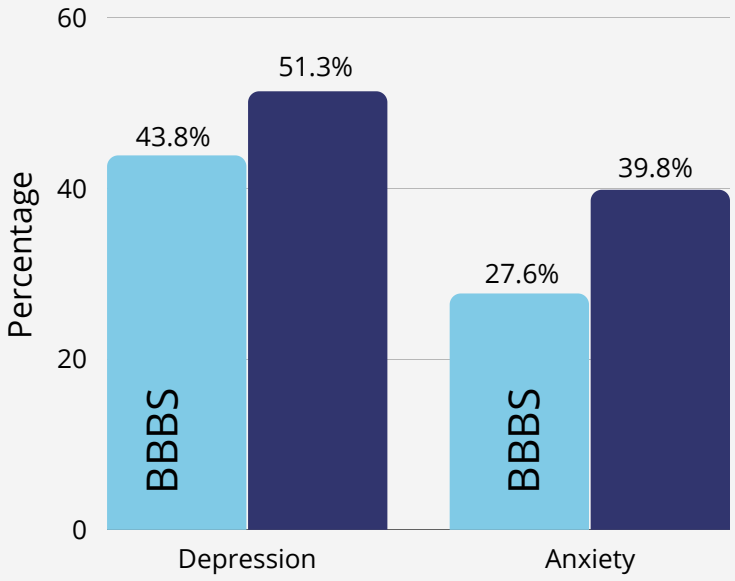
Mental Health & BBBS Mentees

We compared rates of significant mental health concerns related to depression and anxiety between 169 BBBS mentees and 513 non-BBBS mentees in our sample.



Rates of Mental Health

We compared the presence of Mental Health problems (Depression, Anxiety) between BBBS and non-BBBS youth. Non-BBBS youth were more likely to report significant symptoms of depression and anxiety. This result shows us that being a BBBS mentee may be a protective factor against some mental health problems.

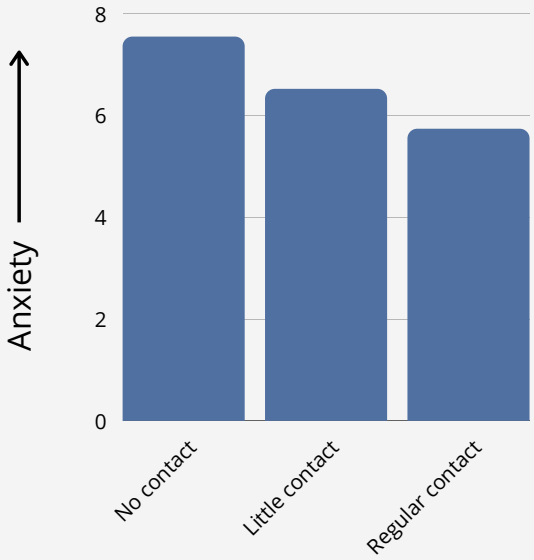
Being a BBBSC Youth was associated with...

Depression

... Lower levels of depression.

Anxiety

... Lower levels of anxiety.



Anxiety

On the vertical axis of this graph, you will see a measure of anxiety (the higher the number, the more anxiety the youth reported). We compared the measure of anxiety with the amount of contact the youth reported to have with their mentors, which can be seen on the horizontal axis. We can observe the downward trend of the bars; meaning, the more contact a youth has with their mentors the less anxiety they report.

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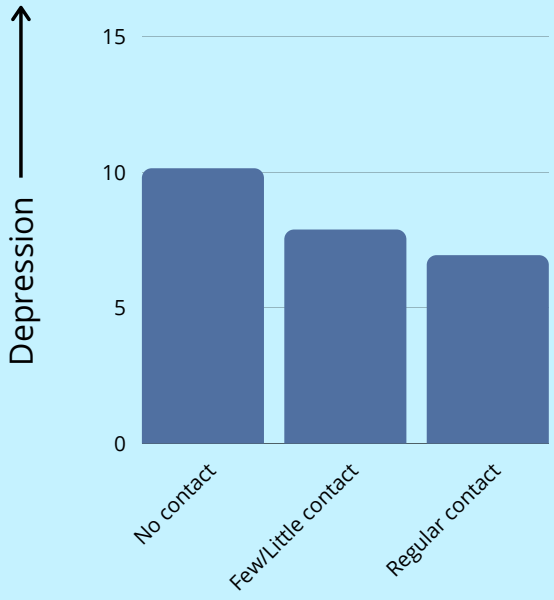
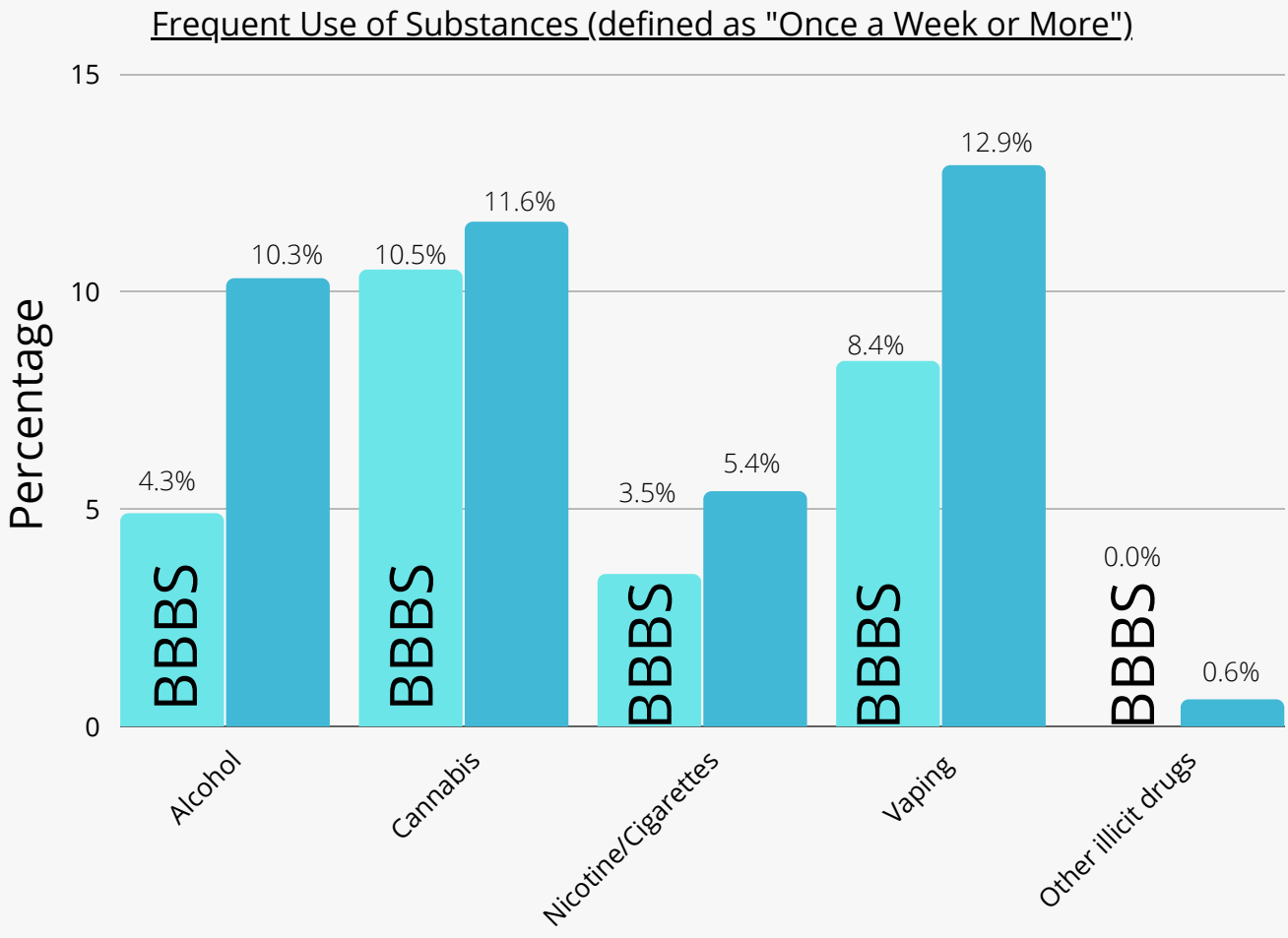


Depression

On the vertical axis of this graph, you will see a measure of depression (the higher the number, the more depression the youth reported). We compared the measure of depression with the amount of contact the youth reported to have with their mentors, which can be seen on the horizontal axis. We can observe the downward trend of the bars; meaning, the more contact a youth has with their mentors the less depression they report.

Substance Use



*Other illicit drugs includes: Mushrooms, MDMA, Cocaine

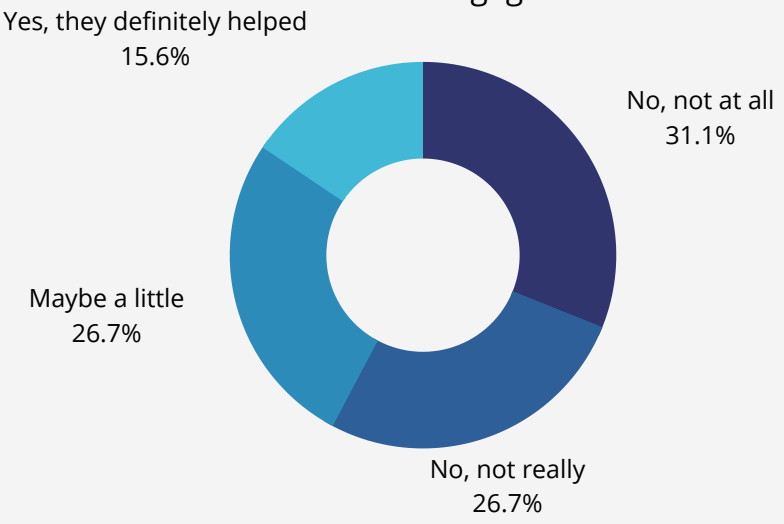
The BBBS youth were less frequent users of alcohol, other illicit drugs, and vaping. Caution should be used in interpreting these results as BBBS youth were also a year younger on average

Moving Forward with Building Bigger Connections

Where We can Focus Efforts

We know that during these uncertain times, agencies are doing more with less to address the critical needs of our communities. To inform their work, we can use this research to see areas of improvement, and move forward by maximizing impact.

When you were at home due to physical distancing requirements, did your mentor help you to stay engaged with school?



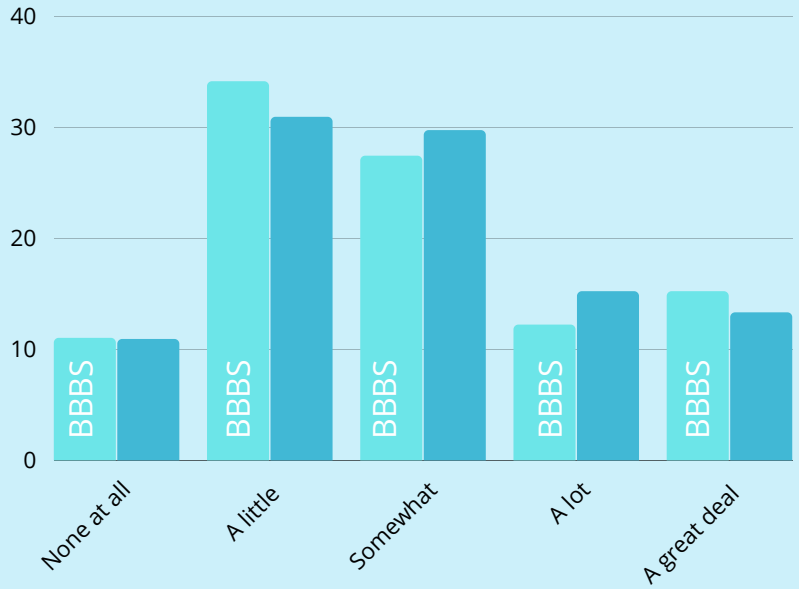
School Engagement and Encouragement

This finding might speak to the general uncertainty surrounding school, with both mentors and mentee facing ever-changing, novel policies directing the way schools are operating. It could also mean that youth don't require additional help. However, this tells us that supporting youth navigating this uncertainty and encouraging school engagement could use reflection and attention.

Social Distancing

This graph reveals that BBBS youth are social distancing to approximately the same degree as the non-BBBS youth, with about 25% of youth reporting regular socializing outside of the home. This tells us that promoting social distancing guidelines could use reflection and attention.

How often in the past month did you socialize in person with someone outside your immediate household or allowable social bubble?



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Conclusions

Our survey captured the reported experiences of 170 youth during the late fall and early winter of 2020/2021 during the COVID-19 pandemic. Overall, BBBS mentees reported more inequities compared to non-BBBS youth; however, despite these disadvantages, they reported better mental health. This included fewer symptoms of depression and anxiety compared to non-BBBS youth. Further, the more contact BBBS mentees had with their mentors during the pandemic, the less isolated and less worried they reported feeling. That being said, any contact with their mentors was associated with feeling less worried and anxious.

Although we had a relatively small sample of BBBS mentees complete the survey in the fall of 2020, these results give us preliminary evidence that the BBBS mentorship program is helping youth during a unprecedented stressful point in our history. This is particularly important as we look towards preventing what some have called the "4th wave" of mental health problems.