

**The intangible benefits of criminal mentorship**

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**The intangible benefits of criminal mentorship**

**Abstract**

Individuals who report having had a mentor also tend to report higher levels of criminal achievement. However, prior studies focused on indirect yet tangible outcomes of mentorship, telling us little about the direct – though potentially intangible – benefits of these relationships to the mentee. In this study, we analyze the content of 28 life story narratives of offenders to examine the effects of mentor-mentee relationships. Half of the participants reported having had a mentor, but many did not meet our definition of mentorship that emphasized direct support in the context of criminal activities. Instead, participants described many intangible benefits of mentorship that we classified in two general categories: benefits to one's criminal capital (high-level career advice, practical skills), and benefits to one's social capital, in the form of either criminal partnership, an enhancement to one's reputation or protection, or providing mentees with the independence necessary to succeed on their own.

**Keywords:** mentorship; criminal career; criminal capital; social capital; life story narratives

## Introduction

There is ample evidence that individuals who are better at collaborating with others or who are well connected in criminal networks have more criminal success (Bouchard & Ouellet, 2011; McCarthy & Hagan, 2001; Morselli & Tremblay, 2004; Morselli, Tremblay & McCarthy, 2006; Nguyen & Bouchard, 2013; Ouellet and Bouchard, 2017). Nevertheless, much less work is aimed at understanding the underlying mechanisms linking collaboration with better criminal outcomes, such as higher earnings or lower risks of being arrested. This is relatively surprising given that the foundational work on the idea of criminal success — Sutherland's (1937) *The Professional Thief* — is so central to the development of the field. Sutherland (1937; p. 198) highlights a complex set of techniques to distinguish professional thieves from others and that these skills can only be acquired through associating with professional thieves. These offenders grew to become professionals through the reciprocal confidence, appreciation, and mentoring that occurs in connection with others who have already achieved that status (Sutherland, 1937; p. 212). Sutherland saw tutelage as a necessary component of the process leading to gaining recognition as a professional thief, but also to achieve the main objective behind criminal activities that is "to secure money with relative safety." (p. 217). At the end of his book, Sutherland insists on the need to continue research on tutelage, on the processes of selection (not every offender is eligible for tutelage), and the transmission of skills behind this type of tie.

A handful of scholars have taken on the challenge of studying criminal mentorship, specifically in the context of lucrative crime (McCarthy & Hagan, 2001; Morselli, Tremblay and & McCarthy, 2006; Ouellet, Bouchard, & Malm, 2016). The bulk of their efforts has focused on determining whether the presence of a criminal mentor was associated with higher criminal achievement, with most concluding that it does. The concept of criminal achievement proposes that crime is a means to an end,

considering that, for the most part, offenders are rational beings whose involvement in crime is primarily motivated by the pursuit of benefits (Morselli & Royer, 2008; Ouellet, Chouinard & Dubois, 2020). Criminal achievement can be measured by objective (e.g., criminal earnings, detection avoidance) and subjective (e.g., reputation, perceived success) indicators. Yet, the initial link between a specific connection to a more experienced, competent criminal and the direct transmission of knowledge that occurs has not been studied as extensively. Studying the presence of mentors and an outcome like criminal earnings is useful in establishing a correlation. However, the actual theoretical link between mentorship and achievement is likely driven by what occurs in between, by transmitting knowledge from a mentor to a mentee. This transmission is likely to be associated with increased criminal skills — another assumed outcome of mentorship that precedes any criminal achievement outcomes. In addition, not much is known about the initial encounters between mentors and mentees. Are mentors handpicking specific individuals for tutelage, or are offenders actively seeking more experienced criminals to get ahead? That specific, unique social connections would be meaningful in the transmission of criminal skills is not simply an argument made by Sutherland to understand criminal achievement, but also in understanding criminal involvement more generally, via Differential Association Theory (Sutherland, 1947). Yet, our focus on the benefits of mentorship keeps our framework of interpretation around issues of criminal competence rather than criminal involvement per se.

Our study uses the life story narratives of individuals<sup>1</sup> involved in profit-driven crimes to fill these gaps in the literature. We use the narratives foremost to examine the circumstances that led to the first encounters between mentor and mentees and then document the perceived intangible benefits of mentorship. Our focus is on the transmission of knowledge between the two individuals. Our data

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<sup>1</sup> The terms “offender” and “criminal” are used interchangeably to refer to a population of individuals actively involved in profit-driven crimes.

reveal that this transmission cannot be strictly framed in terms of knowledge transmission to refine criminal skills or criminal capital. We also found several different benefits to mentorship that first and foremost belong to the social capital realm: the resources embedded in a social structure that are mobilized in purposive actions (Lin, 2002). These never fully transfer to belong to the individual solely; they remain something that they activate through social ties when needed.

### Mentorship research in criminology and beyond

Of course, the concept of mentorship is not solely found in criminology. Tutelage and peers assisted learning are central concepts in education, the first field we turned to for guidance in defining the concept of mentoring. Mentoring is sometimes defined by the nature of relationships, the roles, and the attributes that frame the link between the mentor and his protégé (mentee). In general, there is agreement on defining mentoring as a supportive relationship that occurs in contexts such as the workplace, in schools, and other types of institutions or organizations (Gagnon & Duchesne, 2018; Haggard & al., 2011; Morselli, Tremblay and & McCarthy, 2006; Ng, Eby, Sorensen et Feldman, 2005; Perrier et al., 2015; Seibert, Kraimer, et Liden, 2001; Topping & Ehly, 2001). The context in which the mentoring takes place is essential. Mentorship can occur in a formal or an informal setting (Floyd, 1993; Haggard et al., 2011). In the formal context, the mentee is matched with a mentor in the context of a planned and structured program. Informal mentoring tends to evolve more naturally, as a friendship would, and advice and guidance are sought more casually. In many cases, informal mentoring is built on friendships, family, or professional bonds. This is the sort of mentoring that occurs in the criminal context. Informal mentoring is much less easy to identify than the formal context and less likely to be clearly defined.

Mentoring is a relationship between two people who interact during a period of time (Haggard et al., 2011; Morselli et al., 2006). Within this dyad, the mentor is perceived to be more competent and often older than the mentee, without being their immediate superior (Gagnon & Duchesne, 2018; Morselli et al., 2006; Topping & Ehly, 2001). The support offered by the mentor can take different forms. Mentors can provide support by sharing their knowledge but also by providing advice, helping solve problems, and encouraging their protégés (Gagnon & Duchesne, 2018; Haggard et al., 2011; Perrier et al., 2015; Topping & Ehly, 2001). Mentors support mentees in developing necessary skills (Topping & Ehly, 2001) or the integration to a community or an organization (Morselli et al., 2006; Perrier et al., 2015; Schaefer et al., 2021). Finally, they can provide the mentee beneficial and timely exposure or opportunities to engage in new challenges (Seibert, Kraimer & Liden, 2001). Mentoring, therefore, makes it possible to develop and increase the human and social capital necessary for both legitimate (Becker, 1996; Ng, Eby, Sorensen et Feldman, 2005; Seibert, Kraimer & Liden, 2001; Tenner, 2004) and criminal success (Loughran et al., 2013; McCarthy & Hagan, 2001; Ouellet & Bouchard, 2017). Even if the mentor also often derives benefits from the relationship, the main objective is usually to provide benefits to the mentee (Haggard et al., 2011; Topping & Ehly, 2001). Mentorship is related to tangible benefits associated with career success (salary and number of promotions) and less tangible outcomes, such as career satisfaction (Ng, Eby, Sorensen et Feldman, 2005; Seibert, Kraimer & Liden, 2001).

In a context where skills and expertise cannot be transmitted through official channels, the positive impact of receiving mentorship in the criminal career seems clear. Sutherland (1937) wrote of the process behind the training of novices, allowing the acquisition of skills that will usually translate into greater criminal efficiency in the planning and execution of crimes, the disposal of stolen property, or in fixing cases where an arrest has occurred. McCarthy and Hagan (2001) add that education and training can help shape individual aptitudes, "*helping people to develop marketable skills and expertise*

*and improving their prospects for success"* (p. 1038). Yet, mentors are not necessarily accessible to all (Morselli et al., 2006; Sutherland, 1937). Indeed, prior research on criminal achievement reveals the existence of a strong asymmetry in the level of success in crime among offenders (Brezina & Topalli, 2012; Morselli & Tremblay, 2004; Robitaille, 2004; Tremblay & Morselli, 2000). These variations can be explained by differential exposure to life circumstances and by the social resources and skills that offenders can mobilize. In this sense, mentors represent a resource in social networks that individuals can mobilize to promote their chance of success in their criminal activities.

One of the clearest examples of how mentorship can lead to criminal achievement was provided by Morselli et al.'s (2006) study of 268 incarcerated adult male offenders in Quebec, Canada. Drawing on Sutherland's insights on tutelage, the authors directly examined the role of mentoring on criminal achievement in a sample of almost exclusively involved in profit-driven crimes. The study examined the prevalence of mentoring in the sample, as well as the characteristics of mentors and their effect on the benefits and costs associated with criminal activity. The presence of a mentor was reported when participants answered yes to the following question: "*Amongst the people that influenced you throughout your life, was there one person that introduced you to a criminal milieu and that you consider to be your mentor?*" (Morselli, Tremblay & McCarthy, 2006; p. 24). Almost 40% of offenders reveal the presence of a mentor in their criminal network. These mentors played various roles; partner in crime, a supplier, or simply individuals that impacted their career beyond any specific roles played in criminal activity. Most, in fact, were identified exclusively as mentors and not as co-offenders. Participants classified all mentors as having superior or equal skills, but most felt that the mentor earned more money than they did. Findings highlight mentorship's direct and indirect effects on criminal earnings and the risk of incapacitation. Overall, the study shows that mentors have characteristics of their own compared to other criminal contacts and have an enduring impact on their protégés' criminal careers.

Following this study, other researchers became interested in mentoring in crime. This research interest is part of a larger objective to understand the processes involved in the transmission, acquisition, and development of criminal competencies. In their study on the role of criminal competence in the probability of being arrested, Ouellet and Bouchard (2017) show that mentors in profit-driven crime were associated indirectly with higher criminal efficiency and lower risks of being arrested. The authors challenged achievement scholars to push the mechanisms linking social capital and criminal achievement by paying more attention to what happens in between — the development of criminal competence.

### Current study

Studies in criminal achievement consistently find a correlation between the presence of a mentor at one point in the criminal career and criminal success (McCarthy & Hagan, 2001; Morselli, Tremblay and & McCarthy, 2006; Ouellet, Bouchard, & Malm, 2016). The assumption is that mentors impact the development of criminal skills, which in turn leads individuals to tangible outcomes, such as higher criminal earnings or lower risks of being arrested. Nevertheless, few studies have been able to examine the role of mentors in the development of criminal skills as its own object of study in the way Sutherland (1937) and other ethnographers were able to do so (Brezina & Topalli, 2012; Steffensmeier & Ulmer, 2005; Wright & Decker, 1994). Mentors' direct effects are not to increase criminal earnings but to transfer knowledge, to help build a mindset that leads to potential success. These effects are front and center in the current study. Drawing from the life story narratives of 28 offenders, we first examine the circumstances surrounding the encounter of their mentor for those who report having had one. Then, we examine the direct effects of the mentorship on our participants, effects that ended up being a series of intangible benefits they acquired from the mentor.



## **Data and Methods**

The interviews used in this study are derived from a research project examining the desistance process of individuals who have had a profit-driven criminal career. Between 2015 and 2017, 28 interviews were conducted to recreate the life trajectories of individuals who have pursued a criminal career. This project received the approval of the research ethics committee of the University of Montreal; all the participants involved agreed to participate in this study and gave free and informed consent. In addition, they were assured of the confidentiality of the data and received financial compensation for their participation. The interviews carried out lasted 2 hours on average, including completing a short questionnaire (inspired by the life history calendars method) about the parameters of their past criminal careers.

The objective of the larger project was to explore whether specific aspects of the criminal career (e.g., having had more criminal success) played a role in the process of desistance and social reintegration. The project targeted people who had desisted from crime residing in Quebec (Canada). In addition, the participants must have been involved in profit-driven criminality monthly for at least two years at least at some point throughout their career. Of the 28 participants, one was still criminally active but was kept in the sample used in the present study. Multiple recruitment strategies were used. The research project was announced on social networks, the School of Criminology of the University of Montreal through its contacts with practice settings has also been called upon to find participants (e.g., lecturers who give the internship courses in intervention, former students who are now probation officers, social workers, halfway house workers). In addition, a snowball sampling technique was employed in which participants were used as a source of identification to find additional participants (for further information on recruitment strategies, see Vidal, Ouellet & Dubois, 2020). So, the current study is a secondary use of these data. Having a mentor in the criminal career was not a central theme

in the original project, but it was part of the interview grid used as a possible follow-up question. 22 of the 28 participants were asked directly about the mentor, while the six others brought it up without being prompted.

### Procedures and Instruments

The primary source of data used in this study comes from life story narratives<sup>2</sup>. The study of narrative life stories is a qualitative method aimed at reconstructing the participant's subjective experience around a narrative identity (Josselson and Lieblich, 1993; Maruna, 2001; McAdams, 1985). The life story narratives of the participants allow a retrospective look back at the life course and the meaning attributed to past events. Thereby, each participant was asked to "tell their story":

*During the interview, I would like us to address the following topics: your life history/trajectory, your criminal path, your criminal achievement, your desistance, maintaining your desistance, and changes in your life. With these areas in mind, can you tell me about your life up until you stopped criminal activities?*

The interview process was guided by a grid that set out the themes and subtopics to be addressed. Six themes were covered in this project: life course in general, criminal path, criminal achievement, desistance from crime, maintenance of desistance, and changes in identity (if mentioned during the interview). These interviews were conducted by two trained research assistants and one of the authors.

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<sup>2</sup> Before beginning the interviews, a short face-to-face questionnaire based on the method of life history calendars was used to collect detailed information on the entire criminal career and living circumstances. This method improves data quality by helping participants visually and mentally synchronize several types of events (Freedman, Thornton, Camburn, Alwin & Young-DeMarco, 1988). Although initially developed within the framework of quantitative studies, there are adaptations of life history calendars for qualitative research. For example, Vidal and colleagues (2020) show that describing different trajectories and locating important life events along a timeline allowed participants to visualize benchmarks, making it possible to provide richer life stories (see also Ouellet & Dubois, 2020). However, this study only uses life history calendar data for secondary descriptive purposes.

## Participants

The participants in this study are predominantly Canadian-born males (92.9%) with a mean age of 39.4 years old. All are French-speaking. In this sample, 60.7% of the participants have a post-high school diploma, of which 25.0% have a university degree. At the interview, participants mainly were single (70.4%) and held legal employment (67.9%).

As for the criminal path, the participants have extensive experience in crime. Their criminal activities extended over a long period, with an average start at 17.5 years old and a mean career length of just under 17 years (ranging between 2 and 39 years). They committed an average of 2.5 different types of criminal activity during their criminal career, and a significant proportion of participants (32.4%) had specialized in one type of crime. Most interviewees (64.3%) had committed both acquisitive (e.g., theft, fraud, burglary) and market crimes (e.g., drug trafficking) during their criminal career. The most frequent crimes in these criminal paths were drug trafficking (85.7%), theft (39.3%), burglary (28.6%), armed robbery (25.0%), and fraud (21.4%).

INSERT TABLE 1 APPROXIMATELY HERE

Life history calendars have also been used to collect information on objective indicators of criminal achievement like criminal earnings (Table 1). On average, our participants reported an average annual criminal income of \$123 429.96 — slightly higher than general samples of incarcerated offenders but comparable to drug traffickers subsamples met in comparative studies (Bouchard and Ouellet, 2011; Morselli and Tremblay, 2004). All but two participants had been arrested at least once (range: 1–25 career arrests). The majority (75%) of participants had been incarcerated, and the number of years of incarceration varied from 1 to 31 years.

### Mentorship within the study sample

Half (n = 14) of the offenders interviewed revealed the presence of a mentor in their criminal career. The prevalence of mentoring (50%) within the criminal careers of offenders involved predominantly in profit-driven crimes is quite close to the prevalence obtained (39%) by Morselli et al. (2006) with a sample that shares several characteristics.

Yet, not all 14 participants' descriptions of the mentorship they received met with our definition. In this study, mentoring is defined as a reciprocal relationship that develops over a certain period in which a more competent or experienced person (the mentor) guides and advises a novice person (the mentee). This relationship is beneficial to the mentee, who can benefit from the mentor's knowledge passed on to him. The mentor is perceived as more competent than the mentee while not his immediate superior (e.g., if both were members of a criminal organization). When applying this definition to the study sample, four of the 14 cases do not meet the criteria for mentorship. In two cases, there is an absence of reciprocity in the exchanges. We wanted to avoid exploitative relationships (e.g., McLean, Robinson, and Densley, 2020) or purely instrumental boss-employee contexts. In one of these two cases, the boss of a criminal enterprise is identified and perceived as a model. Although admiring his superior, the interaction between the two is strictly business-oriented (participant 3), no insights are being shared. In the other case (participant 6), knowledge transfer is limited over a concise period of time, so short that their paths never crossed again. Although the presence of a mentor is admitted, two other cases were excluded (participant 25 and 26) because of the lack of information contained in the self-narratives on the mentor or the relationship maintained with the mentee. Following this step, 10 mentor/mentee relationships can be examined in more depth for the purpose of this study.

### Coding strategy

A thematic analysis of the transcripts of life story narratives was carried out to code interesting features of the data relevant to the study objectives (Braun & Clarke, 2014). Data were analyzed manually by reading and simultaneously coding the transcripts. The goal was to identify and extract all the material relating to the mentor itself as well as everything surrounding the mentoring process (to proceed to the contextualizing condensation of each source; Gaudet & Robert, 2018). Initially, the interviews were analyzed individually to detect the presence or absence of mentor-related themes in each participant's pathway. This vertical analysis was complemented by a horizontal analysis of the links between the experiences of all the participants (to look at sources as a collective; Gaudet & Robert, 2018). The themes that emerged from this coding fell into narratives surrounding the circumstances associated with meeting the mentor and the immediate, often intangible benefits that participants reported acquiring from the mentor.

### **Results**

To better understand how the role of mentoring in the development of criminal skills, it is essential to first describe the selection process of mentors and mentees. Once this process is described, we proceed to describe the nature of what is transmitted by the mentors.

#### **Mentors often select protégés**

To document the selection process of mentors and mentees, it is important to know the circumstances under which mentors came into the life of our participants. Our participants described meeting their

mentor in one of two ways. In the first, they had known these individuals all their lives (n=5). These criminal mentors are family members or childhood friends. When they have known them for that long, the participants are often seen more passively receiving support from the mentor. It is more the mentor who came to them (than the reverse) and helped ignite or actualize their criminal motivation. As revealed by participant 24, it can happen organically, within the family:

**Participant 24**

Then, since I was smart, my older brother decided to teach me and introduce me to crime. I kind of got the baggage easily and without really asking for it.

In the second case (n=5), mentors were encountered through criminal activities (e.g., criminal networks or prison) or through fortuitous circumstances (e.g., neighbor or at a bar).

**Participant 17**

I was in contact with the top executives [of a big criminal organization] in bars, I mixed with the DJs and it was kind of the same crowd from night to night. You recruit the one who wants to play this game and I clearly wanted. You want to stand out, show that you can do it.

It is clear that in most of the stories examined, it was the mentor who initiated the selection process (70% of cases). Mentors may recruit young talent when they see it, especially if they work on behalf of a criminal organization:

**Participant 14**

Because I was young, well-spoken, and had ambition, I was noticed by a prominent member of a criminal organization. These are kind of criminal multinationals. Initially, he recruited and trained me so I could, perhaps, take over some operations.

Yet, a few participants were keen on getting noticed by someone they perceived to be more successful. When participants testify in their self-narratives having more actively sought a mentor in crime, they evoke the desire to improve themselves to be more successful, be recognized, avoid sanctions, or increase the profits generated through crimes. This quote illustrates the strategy deployed in prison by a participant, which allowed him to get in touch with his mentor:

**Participant 16**

Often in prison, we share knowledge, we also say what we want, where we want to go, and what do we have the guts to do once free. Then we hope it doesn't fall on deaf ears, that we make a good impression on competent co-offenders. Once noticed, all that remains is to prove yourself and then see each other outside.

Our data do not allow us to examine whether passively or actively seeking a mentor made a difference in the strength of the relationship or its relative impact on the criminal career. However, the encounter may occur before the career is activated and still impact the rest of the career. Two participants reported that the mentor was present as a guide prior to them starting their career, setting them for long-term success right from the initiation stages<sup>3</sup>, as illustrated by participant 24:

**Participant 24**

Because of what he taught me, I was kind of wiser. I kind of had the baggage to start well. He [the mentor] thought that what he showed me would help me avoid risks, which was not always the case.

**The intangible benefits of criminal mentorship**

Most of the participants met their mentor after their criminal career was already underway, making it possible for them to reflect on their mentor's impact on them. When conceptualizing the effect of mentoring, many studies assume that the mentor transmits knowledge, and the learning that results from this transmission will be transposed or observable in the mentee's success, such as the money they earn from crime. Yet, what we are most interested in, here, is the substance of what is transmitted by the mentor, what we refer to as the intangible benefits of mentoring.

Our results show that mentors provide mentees with two general types of intangible benefits. The first type focuses on the transmission of knowledge or advice, which we consider criminal capital — the ensemble of skills, knowledge, and experience that offenders have. We distinguish between high-

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<sup>3</sup> It is possible (but impossible to conclude with our data firmly) that some of the early onset trajectories described by these participants match what McLean et al. (2020) described contexts in which children are initiated to criminality and "groomed" into taking on drug selling roles in criminal networks.

level advising that focuses on how mentees should approach the management of their careers, often to increase longevity, and to advise on specific types of crimes or practical knowledge. The second type focuses on resources that belong to the social realm — social capital. Here we distinguish between three types of social capital benefits acquired via mentors: criminal partnership, reputation/protection, and independence.

## **1. Criminal capital**

### **a. High-level criminal career advice**

As the transmission of knowledge, is central in the definition used of mentorship, the transmission of knowledge is therefore observed in each of the relationships examined. The first form is more oriented towards generic guidelines. Referring to their own experience, the mentors share some knowledge and advice they have acquired with the mentees, which help guide the criminal career. Because this type of knowledge transmission is not immediately applied in action, we refer to it as "high-level" advice.

The transmission of a generic, high-level knowledge is present in half of the interviews carried out. In relationships where this type of transmission is noted, the lessons provided aim to acquire general criminal know-how but also to transmit an approach (e.g., mindset, attitudes, motives) to crime. For example, one participant mentions how he learned a variety of rules that he tries to integrate into his career more generally:

#### **Participant 16**

He gave me the tools and the desire to always go higher in crime. Because he is extremely intelligent, he had this ingenuity to plan and execute all kinds of crimes, but also smart enough not to get caught. These little rules he taught me, I tried to apply them often.

High-level criminal career advice is a way of adapting to the hardships experienced in the criminal lifestyle; it is intended to provide the mindset and attitudes required in this context. The participants



perceive the lessons learned as promoting continuity and success in this kind of environment. For example, a participant reported learning about self-defense to gain respect and how to maintain a good reputation in these networks:

**Participant 1**

Then he will teach me to endure pain, he will teach me to defend myself... From there everyone respects me, life changes.

b. Practical skills for specific crimes

In the second form, the knowledge passed on to mentees is of the applied kind. The transmission of practical know-how is present in all the mentor/mentee dyads. In more than half of the cases (60%), this applied knowledge is specific to a single type of crime, while in the other cases, mentors have accompanied their protégé in a multitude of crimes. The mentees sometimes learn from the mentors in action when they are co-offending. This type of learning in action that develops criminal skills is often very technical, and their acquisition gives access to new criminal opportunities. So much so that for some, the knowledge received from the mentor made a difference between committing a certain type of crime, and never attempting it in the first place:

**Participant 22**

For fraud yes. Not for the rest. For the fraud yes, because he was the one who initiated me, he showed me everything. I didn't know anything about it before he showed me.

Adding a mentor is recognized by all participants as having impacted criminal diversification; the additional knowledge gained in the relationship gave our participants access to new criminal opportunities. Although it still has a practical component, some of the knowledge is passed to the mentee also influences their mindset. Participant 16, for instance, said that all the different skills that he learned through his mentor helped him to elevate his crime and to have the desire always to do better:

**Participant 16**

[About the mentoring effect] I would say the effect is in heightening my crimes. With him and with what he showed me, I started doing different types of thefts. We always steal bigger. We could steal vans, we did hold-ups... We were rock and roll.

**2. Social capital**

a. Criminal partnership

In many cases, our participants described the benefits they received in social terms. Mentors helped them grow their social network or get invited to participate in group activities that would typically not be accessible to them. Yet, the first social resource participants received in this dyad is access to the mentors themselves for co-offending purposes. Among all the participants, the mentors were recognized as partners in crime. In some cases, they were also granted a role of protector (50%), of suppliers (40%), but also of intermediary allowing access to numerous contacts in criminal circles (40%). The various functions served by the mentors do not seem to be conditioned by the way in which they have been met, if they had known their mentor forever or if they had met them through crime. Participants made the difference between pure partnerships and partnerships with a mentorship component.

**Participant 2**

You know he was making money with us, he was making money with me, so he was very happy. You know he was also my supplier, and he had no reason to help me so much... You know there was a certain protection that came with it, so you see it was really fun there, especially in this kind of business... You know if we go out somewhere and that we meet new people, well he introduced me... He helped me a lot.

Note that mentorship dyads of the kind described by participant 2 would be impossible to detect in police co-offending data; only through qualitative work can partnerships be differentiated in this way.

The relationship between the mentor and the mentee is sometimes defined by an exclusive collaboration, the mentor taking part in all crimes committed by the mentee. Although the relationship

goes beyond criminal activity, the fact remains that it is very close to a boss/employee dynamic. In these cases, the mentor has recruited his protégé to occupy a specific position in the criminal organization. Having a mentor—or someone who vouches for you—is often necessary for recruitment and advancement. For instance, participant 14 spoke of the mentor's motivation for recruiting him, recognizing that both parties benefitted from the relationship even if he was a subordinate:

**Participant 14**

For those who make a living from this, it's a business... So there is no fooling around when they take you under their wings it is not out of charity. It's because you're capable and it's good for them.

b. Reputation and protection

The connection with a mentor often provided our participants with an extra layer of prestige, an enhancement to their reputation. It is intangible in the sense that this is a benefit acquired not through anything other than a social tie. This is not to say that this enhancement in reputation may not in itself produce tangible benefits of its own; it usually does. Participant 28, for instance, describes a special connection to his mentor, but also one that is not overbearing or controlling. The mentor/mentee relationship is best represented by a door that opens on occasion, rather than a symbiotic, co-living arrangement:

**Participant 28**

I'm glad I had access to this person and had a special connection with him in terms of reputation. He is an extremely intelligent person. At first glance, he really won't give you much, he'll just give you the essentials to be left alone, but you know when he opens the door a little wider, there's something special that can happen. Because of my connection to him, I was self-employed and could stop or resume whenever I wanted, I had no obligation as such.

A better reputation in the criminal milieu may also bring a certain amount of respect from other criminals. Our participants reported getting an extra layer of confidence from their relationship to the mentor, a concept they sometimes expressed in terms of the protection they were getting from it.

Mentors sometimes fill expressive needs like security and protection we can only get from powerful, intimate social connections. Participant 1, for instance, expressed this feeling of protection he received from his relationship with his mentor as another benefit that existed on top of the knowledge he received from him:

**Participant 1**

My mentor taught me a lot of nasty, disgusting, crazy things, but at the same time, he was trying to protect me all the time. It's weird, he showed me how to defend myself, he showed me how to steal, he showed me how ... but at the same time, he always tried to protect me... If I had problems, he was always there.

c. Independence

The third way in which the mentor tries to promote the criminal career of their protégé is by showing how to build an effective network of their own. Mentors gave privileged access to their network of contacts, which in turn progressively promotes a relative independence from the mentor. Given the power dynamics and relative dependence that run through some of these dyads, we were not expecting our participants to describe so many of these relationships with their mentor as providing them with the opposite — freedom, and independence.

This freedom can manifest itself in different ways. For example, independence is reflected in the freedom of choice given to the mentee when it comes to criminal involvement, but also where and with whom he will do business with.

**Participant 10**

He offered to leave me some marijuana and send me his customers who buy in small quantities. I started selling like that. I wasn't selling for him, he was helping me, but it was my own business. He gave me clients and everything, but it was my business.

**Participant 17**

My mentor has allowed me to be independent. To do what I wanted with whom I wanted. I didn't have to worry about the affiliations of others with whom I did business. To be able to work freely. It's because of the mentor I had.

Of interest, this independence offered to mentees also made it possible for some to leave the criminal lifestyle and desist from crime without any consequences.

**Participant 28**

... but you know I must have stopped 5–6 times. When I stop the customers texted me and I was just "oh no, forget me" and when I was motivated to come back, I just had to warn him [the mentor] before and I went back. I had no obligation; I could stop whenever I wanted. It was possible because of him.

In short, the mentorship ties described by these participants were not binding or restricting; instead, they are freeing. The mentorship was not in a context of dependence of the mentee to the mentor. Instead, mentors lifted their protégés, allowing them to fly on their own.

**Discussion**

The initial motivation for this study was to continue the work started by Morselli, Tremblay, and McCarthy (2006) who tested some of Sutherland's (1937) ideas on tutelage as a necessary way to learn criminal skills and achieve higher status in a criminal subculture. This innovative contribution made it possible to learn about the characteristics of the mentors, their experience, their role, their competence level, and their uniqueness in criminal networks. In addition, by showing mentors' direct and indirect effects on the criminal career, they positioned the study of mentoring as a central theme in understanding criminal achievement. The purpose of our study was to examine more closely the immediate transmission of knowledge and attitudes that occur inside these relationships. Focus on the learning, on the intangibles, rather than how this knowledge may later lead to higher tangible outcomes, like criminal earnings.

From a broader perspective, it was about gaining a better understanding of how criminal skills can be acquired, a concept central to success in criminal networks, but relatively absent from research (Nguyen, 2020). There is sometimes conflation between the outcome measured (e.g., criminal

earnings), the means (competence, skills, and abilities), and the process (the acquisition of competence). In the context of our study, mentoring is seen as a potential vector for the acquisition of knowledge to develop criminal competence, not as a factor that can replace the notion of competence itself.

One of the study's contributions was to use a specific conceptual definition of mentoring as a criterion in assessing suitability for inclusion in the study. Inspired by studies on mentoring in a legitimate context (e.g., education, management) (Becker, 1996; Gagnon & Duchesne, 2018; Haggard et al., 2011; Ng, Eby, Sorensen & Feldman, 2005; Perrier et al., 2015; Seibert, Kraimer & Liden, 2001; Tenner, 2004; Topping & Ehly, 2001), the definition used considered the reciprocity, the duration of the relationship, but also the experience and skill level of the mentor. These parameters of mentoring echo the results obtained by Morselli, Tremblay, and McCarthy (2006) that mentors are strong ties that are perceived as being more experienced, more competent, and more successful in crime than their protégés. The definition we used provided clarity to our study, excluding four relationships that our participants described as mentoring ties. Mentors are neither distant role models nor immediate superiors with whom potential mentees have little to no consequential interactions.

Several studies point out that many offenders do not have access or benefit from social capital resources (Morselli & Tremblay, 2004; Morselli et al., 2006; Nguyen & Bouchard, 2013; Ouellet et al., 2016; Sutherland, 1937), and that the selection process behind the mentor/mentee dyad required more research (Sutherland, 1937). Our results support these prior studies in that only half of the participants reported having had a mentor, with a little over one-third (10/28) matching the definition used in the study for further analysis. The nature of the data used in our study made it possible to examine the process that leads to this type of association. The results show that the mentor often takes the first steps in his relationship with their protégé. Half had been recruited from an intimate social network (e.g.,

family member, family friend, childhood friend), and the other half in settings where the mentor and the mentee tended to converge. Although the mentee is often believed to be passive in the recruitment phase, several participants reported that the mentors came to them after a period of observation because they had specific characteristics or abilities ("I had proven myself, I was wise"). This selection, therefore, does not appear to be random and the mentees, in the discourse maintained, give themselves some credit for the encounter and the relationship that unfolded.

The bulk of the results presented what was generally considered to be intangible benefits of mentorship — knowledge transmission, advice, and general support that was sometimes meant to enrich mentees' criminal skill set, sometimes their social network. This prompted us to classify these intangible benefits into two general categories, those that pertained to individuals' criminal capital and those that improved their social capital. In all cases, of course, the nature of the dyad itself already framed any knowledge transmission as "social capital in the creation of human (criminal) capital" (Coleman, 1988; p.109). However, in our view, some of the benefits remained tied to the social aspect of the relationship. Counting on the mentor as an experienced co-offender is a social benefit, so are the benefits tied to the enhanced reputation that the tie to the mentor gave our participants. Independence, the third type of benefit classified under the social capital category, is more of a hybrid case. On the one hand, the relationship with the mentor pushes the mentee to pursue independence as a way of approaching their criminal career. As such, it may be framed as an intangible benefit in the social capital category. On the other hand, the independence acquired may also be viewed from the perspective of a tangible outcome that the mentees created for themselves, just like criminal earnings. Independence is at times very tangible ("I don't have a boss telling me what to do") but can also be framed as a mindset ("I don't owe anything to anyone"). Therefore, our sub-categorization in five types is neither final nor free of overlaps. We hope that it drives further research into the finer mechanisms involved in transmitting and learning criminal knowledge for various samples and participants.

Limitations related to this study's data and analyses must be taken into account when interpreting the results of our study. The scope of the results is limited by the small number of participants with distinct characteristics (e.g., most participants were male, educated, and employed) — a small subsample of an already small sample, making the results not generalizable to other contexts and places. In addition, as the larger project of which this study was a part was not specifically oriented towards mentoring, the data may underestimate mentorship, as well as its relative impact on criminal trajectories. Moreover, as this is a sample admitting to having succeeded in crime, it is possible that some of the participants deliberately decided to omit the contribution of a mentor in their criminal career, to take more ownership of their success. As stated by Ng et al. (2005) on predictors of objective and subjective career success, "*people have the tendency to attribute successes to internal causes and failures to external factors*" (p. 375). Finally, the data analyzed depend on participants' memory who are asked to report on events that have sometimes occurred a long time ago. It is reasonable to assume that the ability to recall the details, circumstances and turning points of a criminal career vary from one individual to another. However, none of the participants included in this sample appeared to have significant challenges in completing the interview.

## **Conclusion**

This study brings forward the concept of criminal mentoring to identify the direct yet intangible benefits obtained by mentees and to study the circumstances surrounding the initial encounter between the mentor and their protégé. First, we find that not all participants who describe having had a mentor describe relationships and interactions that match existing definitions of mentorship. Second, the analysis of life story narratives suggests that the mentors often take the first steps in the relationship and that these encounters may occur at any stage of the criminal career. Third, the mentors provide



mentees with two general types of intangible benefits. The first type is focused on the transmission of knowledge. In this type, we see mentors sharing either high-level advising that focuses on how mentees should approach the management of their careers, or instead, they share practical skills for specific crimes. The second type is focused on resources transferred that belong to the social realm — social capital. Mentors can serve as criminal partners or share some of their contacts who can act as co-offenders. The connection with a mentor can also provide the mentee a better reputation or some protection. Finally, the mentor can help the mentee be independent in their careers and even quit the crime without consequences. The results help further refine the mechanism linking mentorship to higher criminal achievement by focusing on the intervening factors — the transmission of knowledge and other resources that help build the skillset and network necessary to achieve criminal success. While research on criminal achievement has started to take hold in criminology, research on the development of criminal competence is only beginning (Loughran et al., 2013; Nguyen, 2020; Ouellet & Bouchard, 2017). We are starting to understand where criminal knowledge comes from, as well as its impact on criminal careers. Next, we need to pay more attention to the process by which criminal knowledge is transformed into action and becomes actual criminal competence.

Our study highlights a variety of mechanisms that show the long-lasting importance of mentors beyond the immediate criminal events. Knowledge of these mechanisms may help in clinical interventions that target criminal motivations; questions about the presence of criminal role models like mentors in the more extensive social networks of clients should be integrated into clinical practice. We also believe that a more significant focus on the intangible benefits of criminal involvement may provide new pathways for better-tailored interventions to what clients actually get out of crime.

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Table 1: Descriptive statistics of the characteristics of the criminal career (c.c.) of the participants

<b>ID #</b>	<b>Offending onset</b>	<b>Age at last crime</b>	<b>Length c.c.</b>	<b>Nature of the crimes committed</b>	<b>Number of arrests</b>	<b>Incarceration</b>	<b>Criminal earnings c.c.</b>	<b>Mentor</b>
1	7 y/o	46 y/o	39 yrs	robbery, burglary, vehicle theft, drug trafficking	1	no	Missing value	yes
2	18 y/o	23 y/o	5 yrs	theft	0	no	2 400 000.00 \$	yes
3	14 y/o	28 y/o	14 yrs	robbery, burglary, theft, fraud, drug trafficking	8	yes (9 yrs)	2 700 000.00 \$	no
4	16 y/o	30 y/o	14 yrs	fraud, drug trafficking	2	yes (2 yrs)	600 000.00 \$	no
5	11 y/o	51 y/o	40 yrs	robbery, theft, drug trafficking	7	yes (25 yrs)	500 000.00 \$	no
6	21 y/o	23 y/o	2 yrs	burglary, drug trafficking	1	yes (-1 yr)	390 000.00 \$	no
7	28 y/o	34 y/o	6 yrs	drug trafficking	4	yes (4 yrs)	676 000.00 \$	no
8	16 y/o	20 y/o	4 yrs	burglary, theft, drug trafficking	1	no	62 400.00 \$	no
9	18 y/o	29 y/o	11 yrs	burglary, drug trafficking, identity theft	5	yes (4 yrs)	480 000.00 \$	no
10	19 y/o	29 y/o	10 yrs	theft, drug trafficking	8	yes (-1 yr)	970 700.00 \$	yes
11	16 y/o	31 y/o	15 yrs	theft, drug trafficking	3	yes (4 yrs)	720 000.00 \$	no
12	20 y/o	29 y/o	9 yrs	drug trafficking	2	yes (5 yrs)	1 363 200.00 \$	no
13	16 y/o	35 y/o	19 yrs	burglary, vehicle theft, drug trafficking	7	yes (11 yrs)	1 056 000.00 \$	no
14	14 y/o	31 y/o	17 yrs	robbery	7	yes (14 yrs)	300 000.00 \$	yes
15	29 y/o	49 y/o	20 yrs	fence	3	yes (11 yrs)	1 400 000.00 \$	no
16	18 y/o	45 y/o	27 yrs	theft, drug trafficking	15	yes (23 yrs)	576 000.00 \$	yes
17	17 y/o	23 y/o	6 yrs	drug trafficking, sex market	1	no	686 000.00 \$	yes
18	16 y/o	23 y/o	7 yrs	theft, drug trafficking	3	yes (-1 yr)	257 200.00 \$	no
19	16 y/o	20 y/o	4 yrs	drug trafficking	1	no	108 000.00 \$	yes
20	35 y/o	50 y/o	15 yrs	drug trafficking	3	yes (-1 yr)	8 400 000.00 \$	no
21	15 y/o	31 y/o	16 yrs	drug trafficking	5	yes (3 yrs)	1 574 400.00 \$	no
22	13 y/o	39 y/o	26 yrs	robbery, burglary, vehicle theft, theft, fraud, drug trafficking	25	yes (23 yrs)	Missing value	yes
23	18 y/o	51 y/o	33 yrs	theft, fraud, drug trafficking	3	yes (4 yrs)	2 419 200.00 \$	no
24	15 y/o	51 y/o	36 yrs	robbery, burglary	3	yes (31 yrs)	258 970.00 \$	yes
25	28 y/o	50 y/o	22 yrs	theft, drug trafficking	2	no	411 840.00 \$	no
26	17 y/o	43 y/o	26 yrs	robbery, drug trafficking, sex market	25	yes (6 yrs)	2 140 800.00 \$	no
27	12 y/o	25 y/o	13 yrs	fraud, drug trafficking, fence	3	yes (-1 yr)	7 872 000.00 \$	no
28	21 y/o	24 y/o	3 yrs	drug trafficking	0	no	154 800.00 \$	yes

