

Truancy Prevention

Habitual truancy can be defined as unexcused absences from school by a minor that exceed the number of such absences allowed under state law. Each state has its own school attendance laws, which specify

- The age at which a child must begin school
- The age at which a youth can legally drop out of school
- The number of unexcused absences that constitute truancy under the law (National Center for School Engagement N.d.)

There are variations across the states in the mandatory starting age for school and the legal dropout age and variations across jurisdictions in the legally permissible number of unexcused absences from school (Education Commission of the States 2007)

While truancy is widely acknowledged to be a nationwide problem, data collection and reporting issues at the school, local, and state levels make it difficult to find data that delineates the full extent of the problem (Heilbrunn 2007). Data is available from petitioned truancy cases, but since most truancy cases never reach a petition status this data can only suggest the breadth of the truancy problem. Between 1995 and 2005, the number of petitioned truancy cases increased from 32,800 to 52,400, an increase of 60 percent (Puzzanchera and Sickmund 2008). The largest relative increases were seen for 16- and 17-year-olds.

Chronic truancy and absence (which includes excused and unexcused absences) often start early. Nauer, White, and Yerneni (2008), for instance, reported that 20 percent of elementary school students (90,000) in New York City schools missed at least a month of school during the 2007–08 school year. There were five districts where 30 percent or more of the elementary school students were chronically absent. Data from the Baltimore (Md.) Education Research Project showed that more than one third of the first grade cohort was chronically absent (that is, missed 1 or more months of schooling in 1 year) during at least 1 of the first 5 years in school (Balfanz et al. 2008). This early pattern lays the groundwork for the poor graduation rates from high school.

The costs of truancy are high. Truancy has been clearly identified as one of the early warning signs that youths potentially are headed for delinquent activity, social isolation, or educational failure. Research has shown that truancy is related to delinquency, substance use and abuse, high school dropout, suicidal thoughts and attempts, and early sexual intercourse (Chang and Romero 2008; Henry and Huizinga 2005, as reported in Heilbrunn 2007; Henry and Huizinga 2007; Kelley et al. 1997; Loeber and Farrington 2000; Seeley 2008a). For instance, recent research shows that truancy is

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not only the most significant risk factor for predicting first-time marijuana use, but it also predicts 97 percent of first-time drug use (Seeley 2008a). These early patterns have long-term costs for both the individual and society at large: according to the 2000 census, while 83 percent of college graduates and 71 percent of high school graduates were employed, high school dropouts had an employment rate of only 52 percent (Walker 2007). In addition, decades of research have also identified a link between truancy and later problems in marriage, in jobs, and with violence, adult criminality, and incarceration (Dryfoos 1990; Catalano et al. 1998; Robins and Ratcliff 1978; Snyder and Sickmund 1995).

Truancy reduction can also save public monies. Dropouts are poorly prepared to enter the workforce and require greater expenditures for social services and criminal justice processes than do graduates (Heilbrunn 2007). Unemployment rates for dropouts are generally almost 20 percent higher than for high school graduates. Employed male dropouts earn about 75 percent of what graduates earns, females only 60 percent (Heilbrunn 2003). The RAND Corporation estimated that each high school dropout costs society between \$188,086 and \$297,188 (Vernez, Krop, and Rydell 2000). Truancy's high societal costs are evident in studies of adults who were frequent truants as adolescents. According to Baker, Sigmon, and Nugent (2001), such adults are more likely than others to

- Have poor physical and mental health
- Work in low-paying jobs
- Live in poverty
- Utilize the welfare system extensively
- Have children with problem behaviors
- Be incarcerated

Theoretical Foundation

Much research on truancy and most interventions to reduce truancy have drawn on a risk/protective factors framework. While generally the literature on truancy is in its infancy (Heilbrunn 2007), a variety of school, family, community, and individual characteristics have been identified that can contribute to the problem of truancy (Baker, Sigmon, and Nugent 2001; Heilbrunn 2007; Hammond, Smink, and Drew 2007).

School factors include

- Inconsistent and ineffective school attendance policies
- Poor record keeping
- Not notifying parents/guardians of absences
- Unsafe school environment
- Poor school climate
- Poor relations with teachers
- Inadequate identification of special education needs

Family and community factors include

- Negative peer influences, such as other truant youth
- Financial, social, medical, or other programs that pressure students to stay home to help with family
- Child abuse and neglect
- Family disorganization

- Teen pregnancy or parenthood
- Lack of family support for educational and other goals
- Violence in or near the home or school
- Differing culturally based attitudes toward education

Student factors include

- A lack of personal and educational ambition
- Poor academic performance
- Low school attachment
- Retention/overage for grade
- Poor relationships with other students
- Gang involvement
- Lack of self-esteem
- Unmet mental health needs
- Alcohol and drug use and abuse

Barriers facing truant youth are significant and often multifaceted. Data from the federal Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention's Truancy Reduction Demonstration Programs showed that of the 634 students participating

- 87 percent qualified for free or reduced-price lunch
- 36 percent lived with only one adult in the home
- 20 percent lived with no working adult in the home
- 19 percent had individual education plans
- 15 percent had school discipline problems at program intake
- 13 percent had juvenile justice involvement (Finlay 2006b)

In one informal tally carried out in a truancy court in Denver in 2003, of the 40 truancy cases heard that 1 day, only 3 cases involved no major, identifiable issue other than truancy; more than half had prior referrals to the Department of Human Services; and approximately 30 percent were classified as incorrigible/ungovernable (Heilbrunn 2004).

The self-reported reasons for truancy vary considerably, and studies show that dropouts are not a homogenous group (Hammond et al. 2007). According to focus groups at truancy reduction sites, youths reported various reasons for their truancy, including getting behind in school and work, which often initiated a cycle of chronic absenteeism; being bored; a school environment with uncaring adults and teachers; poor relationships with teachers; bullying; and disrespect from staff (Attwood and Croll 2006; Gonzales, Richards, and Seeley 2002). Students and school staff often disagree on the reasons for truancy. In one survey, students cited boredom, loss of interest in school, irrelevant courses, suspensions, and bad relationships with teachers as major factors leading to the decision to skip school. In contrast, school staff believed truancy to be related to students' problems with their families and peers (DeKalb 1999).

Given the multifaceted issues that can lead to truancy, prevention programs need to:

- "Be comprehensive, flexible, responsive, and persevering
- "View children in the context of their families

- “Deal with families as parts of neighborhoods and communities
- “Have a long-term, preventive orientation and a clear mission and continue to evolve over time
- “Be well managed by competent and committed individuals who have clearly identifiable skills
- “Have staff who are trained and supported to provide high-quality, responsive services
- “Operate in settings that encourage practitioners to build strong relationships based on mutual trust and respect” (Schorr 1997, as quoted in Baker, Sigmon, and Nugent 2001, 7)

Engagement has been identified as one key element in preventing truancy. According to Fredricks, Blumenfeld, and Paris (2004), engagement can be usefully conceptualized along three dimensions: behavioral engagement (e.g., doing school work, following the rules), cognitive engagement (e.g., level of effort and motivation), and emotional engagement (e.g., emotions, values). These three dimensions interact synergistically, and research suggests varying degrees of engagement’s impact on achievement and dropping out (Finlay 2006a). It is critically important to identify those who have disengaged and provide support for reengagement. This process includes clarifying and bringing into the open the negative perceptions of school that youths hold, reframing school learning in a meaningful and concrete way for the youths, renegotiating their involvement in school learning, and establishing a productive working relationship (Center for Mental Health in Schools 2006).

Truancy Prevention and Intervention Programs

All programs have a short-term goal of improving attendance in the short run; many have longer-term goals of raising grades and improving graduation rates. Given the multiple factors that can lie at the root of truancy, prevention and intervention programs need to integrate both school and community resources to best address these factors.

According to Baker, Sigmon, and Nugent (2001), programs that show the most promise in reducing truancy and other risk factors have several key elements:

- Parental involvement
- Meaningful sanctions or consequences for truancy
- Meaningful incentives for attendance
- Ongoing school-based truancy-reduction programs
- Involvement of community resources

Truancy-prevention programs are designed to promote regular school attendance through one or more strategies, including the following:

- Court alternatives
- Mentoring programs
- Law enforcement participation
- Increasing parental involvement
- Truancy awareness campaigns
- Other strategies, such as improving parent–teacher communication and drawing on community resources

There are many different types of interventions, settings, and approaches/strategies for truancy reduction. Broad categories include systems change, court-based programs, and school-based programs. At the same time, many programs include elements from different types of programs to successfully meet the needs of local communities.

Systems Change/School Policies

Policies and procedures can create barriers to addressing absenteeism and truancy. For instance, many districts specify suspension as a punishment for truancy, which ends up “pushing out” students. One study found that, in Colorado, 70 percent of the students suspended were chronically truant in the 6 months leading up to the suspension, while 80 percent of dropouts were chronically truant the year before (Gonzales, Richards, and Seeley 2002). This suspension model fails to address the underlying causes of truancy and can exacerbate the disengagement from school on the part of the youth (Gonzales, Richards, and Seeley 2002). Certain procedures allow the problem to go unaddressed, such as automated phone calls that can be ignored or erased by students at home (Gonzales, Richards, and Seeley 2002). Policies that tie grading or participation in athletics to attendance can similarly be counterproductive.

Such policies, when changed, can support truancy-reduction programs to achieve positive outcomes. For instance, in-school suspension policies, detention, and use of alternative school programs each allow students to continue academic progress in the school setting rather than having unsupervised time outside of it (Seeley and MacGillivray 2006). Currently, 27 states allow young people to withdraw at age 16 (Smink and Heilbrunn 2005); a recommendation would be to require attendance until 18 (Seeley 2008b). Changing policies that link grades to attendance may encourage continued engagement rather than dropping out (Seeley and MacGillivray 2006).

Court-Based and Court Diversion Programs

Court-based programs leverage the power of the court to coordinate and oversee the delivery of services that are identified for the truant youth, and often for the family as well. Programs can differ in how long they run, the number of times the youth/family appears before the judge, the role of a social worker or case manager, the representatives included, and the types of services overseen by the court. Many systems have established diversion programs that offer services after a petition has been received but before a youth is adjudicated. These programs have various levels of connection to the court, some even being labeled “truancy courts.”

Some programs are connected to the court but are designed primarily to divert youth from court before adjudication. The Independence Youth Court (IYC) was established in 1985 as a partnership between the local bar association, the Juvenile Division of the Jackson County (Mo.) Family Court, the city of Independence (Mo.), and the Independence Police Department. The youth court receives hundreds of referrals a year, with most of them coming from the Independence Police Department. Shoplifting, truancy, and vandalism make up the vast majority of cases, but the court may also hear cases involving status offenses, third-degree assaults, and minor drug and alcohol violations. The IYC uses the youth judge model, in which there are no jurors, the case is argued by youths volunteering as defense attorneys and prosecutors, and youth volunteer judges are responsible for all proceedings and for making the sentencing decision. Because the IYC is a diversion program, the youth still must comply with the initial diversion agreement. If not, the defendant may be referred back to the Jackson County Family Court.

School-Based Programs

Many programs are based in schools, especially when they aim to identify truancy and absence problems before they reach a chronic level and before patterns become entrenched and harder to reverse. School-based mentoring differs from the more traditional community-based mentoring approach in several important ways. Mentors in school-based programs spend more time working on academics or doing homework with their mentees, and they also have more contact with teachers, and

feel more effective in influencing their mentees' educational achievement. The goal of virtually all mentoring programs is to support the development of healthy youth by addressing the need for positive adult contact, thereby reducing risk factors for negative behavior and enhancing protective factors for positive behavior.

Community-Based Programs

Some communities address truancy through community-based programs. These programs recognize that truancy is not an individual or family problem alone, but that chronic truancy is a community problem that can best be addressed by collaboration among various systems in the community. The following are just a few examples of programs that have been implemented and evaluated for truancy reduction.

The Truant Recovery Program is one example of a community-based approach. It is a collaborative effort between the school district and all community police jurisdictions within its boundaries. The program is preventive rather than punitive. Its primary task is to return truant students to school as soon as possible. The program operates under the authority of the Student Welfare and Attendance (SWAT) office. The program authorizes the local police jurisdictions to make contact with students on the streets during school hours. Students without a valid excuse slip are taken into temporary custody and transported to the SWAT office for processing. SWAT personnel attempt to contact the youth's parents for a face-to-face meeting, in which both can be counseled and the parent can return the child to school. If a parent cannot be reached, SWAT personnel return the youth to school. The school site is also contacted, and both the school and the SWAT office closely monitor the student's attendance in the future.

Outcome Evidence

Rigorous data on the effectiveness of dropout programs has been lacking to a large degree, but there is a growing body of evidence regarding truancy reduction programs. Numerous programs have been found either to be effective for prevention of or intervention with truancy or to have promising or emerging evidence of programmatic effectiveness. Additionally, many programs that address multiple risk factors may have positive outcomes in regard to truancy reduction, although that may not be the primary goal of the program.

There are also multiple programs that lack sufficient evidence to be classified as effective or ineffective. Strategies shown to be ineffective at reducing truancy include solution-oriented group interventions for at-risk students (Newsome 2004) and financial sanctions (Gandy and Schultz 2007).

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