



AN ANALYSIS OF CHARACTERISTICS OF
YOUTH REFERRED TO THE CLARK
COUNTY TRUANCY PROJECT, 2007-2008
Results from Vera/WSU Data Collection
and Analysis

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To work toward goals listed under the Alternative to Formal Processing Targeted Area of Improvement in Clark County's Models for Change Work Plan, Vera has collaborated with the Clark County Juvenile Court, the Clark County Truancy Project, and research partners from Washington State University¹ to catalog and develop data capacity, as well as to examine current data processes. This involved creating a standardized process for collecting and codifying data from open-ended case notes in an effort to quantify demographics, truancy specifics, youth needs, and experiences with the program.

The Clark County Truancy Project (CCTP) was developed in 1997, in partnership with Educational Service District 112, to intervene with youth and families referred for truancy petitions under the Washington State Becca Law. It was designed to effectively deal with truancy while reducing the need for formal court hearings and judicial action. The program's goal is to use educational and support services in a graduated response plan to increase school attendance and reduce the need for the court to invoke contempt proceedings except in those rare cases where alternative interventions have failed to address persistent truant behavior². The program administrators state that there are no exclusion criteria for clients and that most case referrals are accepted. However, program admission does require completion of a series of steps, some of which vary by school district across the county. Generally, according to program staff and written policies, youth are referred to the program once they reach the threshold for absences, are petitioned, make an initial court appearance, and continue to be truant. In practice, therefore, the program serves clients with the wide range of demographic characteristics and needs that may be found among persistent truants.

This assessment aims to describe the program's intake population using results from an analysis of 249 youth referred to CCTP in the 2007-2008 academic year. The goals of this memo, and the accompanying analysis, are as follows:

1. Describe how Clark County refers and processes truancy petitions, and highlight some inter-district discrepancies in procedures;
2. Provide a demographic and academic profile of youth admitted to CCTP, compared to the general population of youth in Clark County, in the prior school year;
3. Understand why and how these youth were referred to the program;
4. Describe the academic, family, and mental health needs of youth admitted to CCTP in the prior school year; and
5. Assess the youth's experiences in CCTP and their outcomes related to the program.

Key Findings

- Truancy processes vary by school district; this affects petition volume and rates, as well as reasons for discharge.
- Hispanic/Latino youth may be overrepresented in the population of youth referred to CCTP, relative to the population of school-aged children in general.
- Youth from Evergreen School District are overrepresented in CCTP, relative to the general population. This is expected due to differences in the way petitions are processed by different school districts.
- Limited English proficiency appears to be more common in CCTP youth and their families than in the general public.
- The most common type of needs indicated among CCTP youth had to do with their parents.
- While many understood the value of education, parents most commonly cited fear of court action as the main reason for their involvement with CCTP.

¹ We collaborated with researchers from WSU to standardize data collection and design a set of indicator variables that could be reliably pulled out of text-based case notes. Andy Olds from WSU reviewed all relevant case files and performed data collection, entry and cleaning.

² Ernie Veach-White, "Clark County Washington State Models for Change Proposal", October 2007.

Data and Analysis

The data analyzed were drawn from the paper case files, including intake questionnaires and supplemental open-ended case management notes from the 249 young people referred to the program from June 2007 through May 2008. The data were collected from questionnaires and narrative notes rather than standardized data collection instruments. Also, they were originally gathered for the purposes of case management and service planning, not for data analysis. This suggests that the measures may not be completely reliable or valid, and there is a high likelihood that most of the measures discussed are undercounted.

Truancy Processes by School District

Truancy processing and petitioning procedures in Clark County vary widely between school districts, and even between schools within the same district. While some districts' policies reflect a more literal approach to the Becca Law, others, specifically Vancouver school district, use more discretion in dealing with youth with complex issues, of which truancy may just be a symptom. These differences are also due in part to the number of staff and other types of resources available to the district. Understanding these variations is imperative in interpreting school district-level data; these policies affect all points in the truancy system, including petitioning, program enrollment, and discharge from the program. In addition, the fact that these procedures are so distinct points to important policy issues, suggesting a need for standardized attendance oversight and referral processes that are mindful of local cultures and practices.

The policies and procedures in Vancouver School District allow for a great deal of discretion in deciding how to work with truant youth. They employ a comprehensive process of assessing youth needs and connecting them with services. Truancy referrals are screened by three school employees and then go to an administrative-level staff member for final approval. For cases that are petitioned, truancy is generally the most serious issue. Youth with more serious issues, of which truancy is just a symptom, are dealt with outside of the truancy system. In addition, schools intervene in minor truancy cases in lieu of filing a petition. This model is resource-intensive, and difficult to replicate county-wide. Thus, petitioned youth in Vancouver do not represent all youth who meet legislative criteria for a Becca petition; they are more serious, high-end truants, and do not include youth with more complex social, emotional or academic issues.

The more common response to truancy in the County involves a more literal interpretation of the Becca Law. Evergreen School District's policies provide a good example of this type of approach. In Evergreen, petitions for all youth who meet the threshold for absences are sent directly from the schools to a clerical-level staff member and are then processed. This approach is consistent with the statutory processes established in the Becca Law.

These district-by-district differences help to explain many of the demographic and processing variations among CCTP's referred and completed cases.

Demographic and Academic Profile

According to 2006 data from the American Community Survey, there are just over 400,000 residents in Clark County; approximately 26% could be considered school-age (under age 18)³. Roughly 20% of the total population was actually enrolled in kindergarten, elementary school, or high school at that time. Exactly half of all residents are male and half are female. The majority of the population (87%) is White, while smaller proportions of residents are of Asian (four percent), Black or African-American (two percent), and Native American (one percent) descent. About six percent of the overall population is Hispanic or Latino.

A total of 249 youth were referred to the Clark County Truancy Project during the one-year study period (June 2007 through May 2008). Just over half (52%) were male. The majority (73%) were White/non-Hispanic (see figure 1), 17% were Hispanic, and four percent were Black/African-American. Data on youth enrolled in school in Clark County in 2007-2008, gathered from the website of the Office of the Superintendent of Public

³ 2006 American Community Survey, online at <http://factfinder.census.gov>

Instruction,⁴ show a slightly different racial breakdown (see figure 2). The proportion of White youth in the program was slightly lower than in the enrolled population (by 7 percentage points), while the proportion of Hispanic/Latino youth was somewhat higher in the program (by 9 percentage points). This comparison suggests that Hispanic/Latino youth are somewhat overrepresented in the population of youth referred to and serviced by CCTP, relative to the population of school-aged children in general.

Figure 1. Race/Ethnicity of Youth in CCTP, 2007-2008

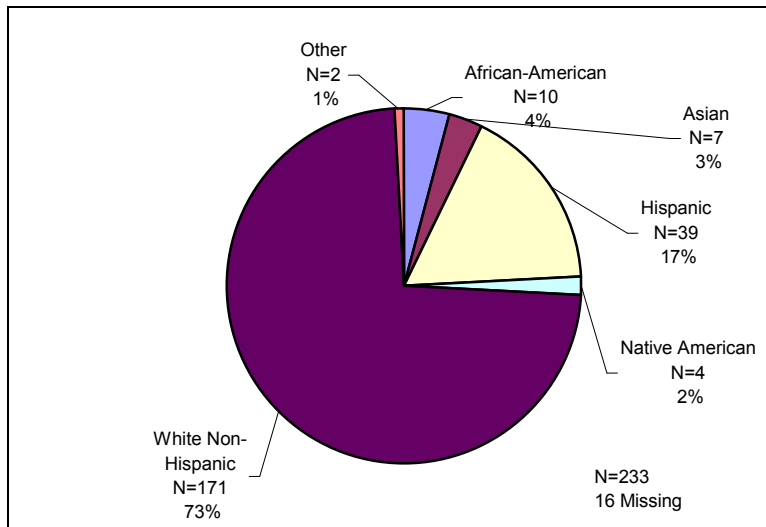
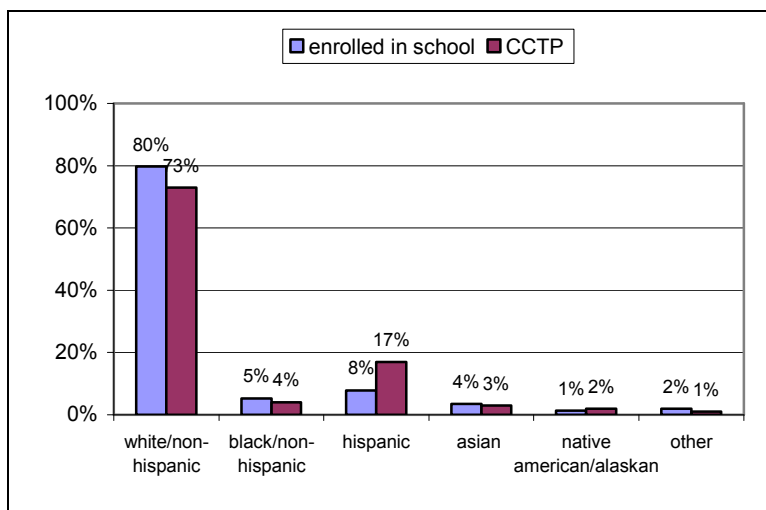


Figure 2. Race/Ethnicity of Youth in CCTP Compared to Clark County School-Enrolled Population, 2007-2008



⁴ Washington State Report Card website, online at <http://reportcard.ospi.k12.wa.us/summary.aspx?year=2007-08>.

According to census data from the 2006 American Community Survey, about 10% of the overall population in Clark County is foreign-born, though country of origin estimates were unavailable. About two percent of the population primarily speaks Spanish and two percent primarily speak another European language (while speaking English less than “very well”). The majority of program clients’ families primarily spoke English at home (84%). Twenty-two families spoke Spanish, ten Russian, two Ukrainian, and one Korean. The data indicate that 12% (N=31) of the families overall needed a translator: Seventeen for Spanish translations, nine for Russian, and three for Ukrainian. These figures suggest that language barriers might present additional obstacles in families of truant youth.

According to the Superintendent’s website, youth from the Evergreen School District comprise about 38% of the enrolled population in Clark County, while youth from Vancouver comprise about 33% of the county’s enrolled population. Almost 60% (N=145) of the study sample came from the Evergreen School District. Twenty percent (N=48) attended school in the Vancouver School District, and 12% (N=29) went to school in the Battleground School District. This analysis suggests that youth from Evergreen School District are overrepresented in the program (60% of program population compared to 38% of enrolled population) and youth from Vancouver are slightly underrepresented (20% of program population compared to 33% of enrolled population). Given what we know about the different ways in which youth are referred for truancy petitions in Vancouver and Evergreen school districts, this difference is to be expected. Specifically, while youth from Evergreen are overrepresented in CCTP relative to the general population, this is most likely explained by referral processes that go back to the point of petition, where all truant youth are petitioned regardless of other presenting issues.

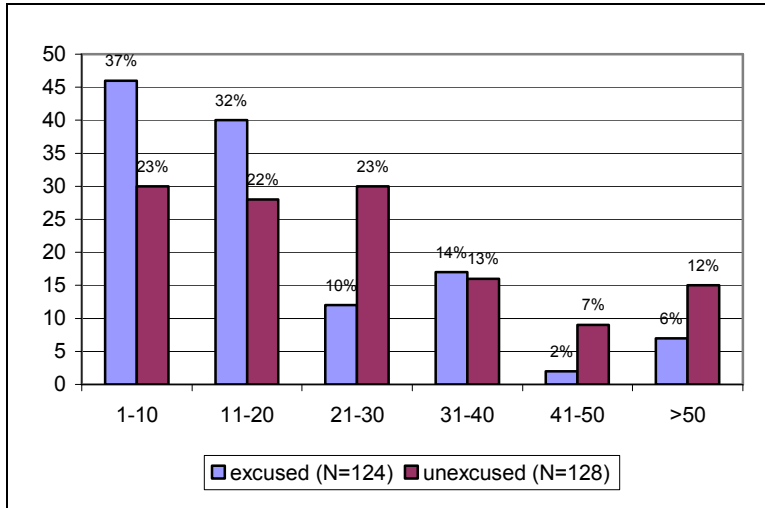
In addition, our analysis shows that most cases in CCTP were in high school, with the majority (35%) in tenth grade, followed by 17% each in ninth or eleventh grade. Thirteen percent of cases were in sixth grade, and 13% were in seventh. Seventeen percent of cases overall were identified as having special education needs (compared to 11% of the population enrolled in school, according to the Superintendent’s website).

Reasons for Referral

Youth are referred to CCTP if they continue to be truant after a truancy petition has been filed. According to Becca legislation, this initial petition will be filed when a student has either seven unexcused absences in one month or 10 unexcused absences in one school year. Thus, we can reasonably assume that youth who reach the point of referral to CCTP have already missed a substantial amount of school. Delays in court processing may allow a truancy issue to progress even further by the time a youth reaches CCTP. It should be pointed out that although there are legislative guidelines guiding these thresholds, school districts and even schools within districts vary in their policies and procedures, meaning that some youth are much further along in the truancy process and may be much higher-end cases, depending on their school of origin.

CCTP collected data on the number of times a youth had missed school by the time they were referred to the program. Attendance data were only available for the 145 cases from the Evergreen School District (with small numbers of missing data within Evergreen). Of those cases, youth had an average of 18 excused absences and 26 unexcused absences at the point of referral to the program. The range was wide, from one to 72 excused absences, and from one and 89 unexcused absences. Over two thirds (69%) of youth had between one and 20 excused absences, and over two thirds (68%) of cases had between one and 30 unexcused absences (see figure 3).

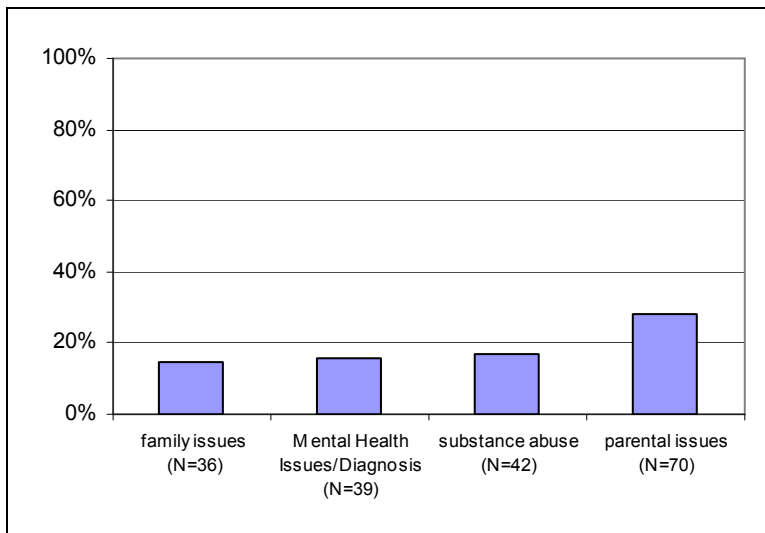
Figure 3. Absences at Referral, Evergreen School District Only (N=145)



Needs of CCTP Youth

Youth needs identified through the data collected fit into four broad categories (from most to least common): issues related to the youth’s parents, substance abuse, mental health diagnoses or issues, and problems generally related to the youth’s family (see figure 4).

Figure 4. General Needs of CCTP Youth



Parental Issues. Seventy cases (29% of the total) had some indication of needs related to the youth's parents, specifically parental drug abuse, parental criminal justice involvement, single-parent household, divorce, parental unemployment, or a parent having prior truancy issues. The data show that there is a variety of issues pertaining to the students' parents, which appear to take one of two forms: Either a lack of resources and/or supervision, or more social, contextual and/or historical problems within the family. Fifteen percent of cases had divorced parents, and twelve percent lived in single-parent households. Eight percent of the parents indicated that they had truancy problems themselves when they were in school, and four percent of parents have been involved with the criminal justice system. There was evidence of parental substance abuse in about seven percent of cases.

Substance Use. There was some evidence of drug abuse and drug/alcohol/tobacco use in 42 (17%) CCTP youth. In eight percent of cases (N=21), there was some indication of drug use that would be categorized as "abuse," and an additional eight percent had some indication of any drug or alcohol use. In a smaller percentage (two percent, or 6 cases) it was indicated that the youth smokes cigarettes.

Mental Health. In 15% of cases (N=39), there was some indication of either a mental health diagnosis or underlying mental health issues. Of those, 34 youth had an actual mental health diagnosis; twelve were diagnosed with depression, ten with Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder, and six with anxiety.

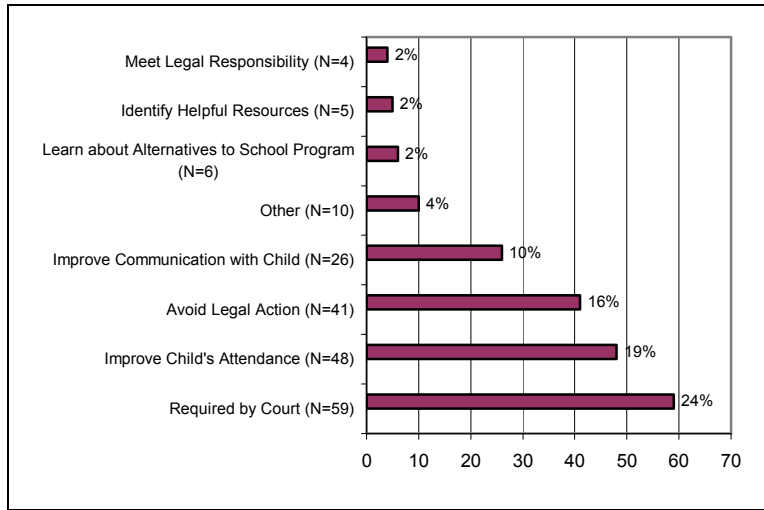
Family Issues. A variety of larger family problems also presented difficulties for many of these youth. There was a substantial prevalence of mental health problems (11%) and substance abuse (10%) within the family. Eight percent of families had a history of physical, sexual or emotional abuse; seven percent of cases were from families where other children had truancy problems as well.

Experiences with the Program

Parents are typically sent letters inviting them to the truancy orientation, which is generally held at Educational Service District 112, in the initial phase of the truancy process. Seventy-five percent of cases (N=187) had been sent at least one letter. Receipt of more than one letter likely indicates that the family did not show up for the initial orientation as scheduled, which may be considered a very early sign of parental non-compliance with the truancy process. Twenty percent (N=49) of cases had two letters sent, and 25% (N=61) had three; in other words, 60% of the families who received letters apparently did not respond or comply after the first letter.

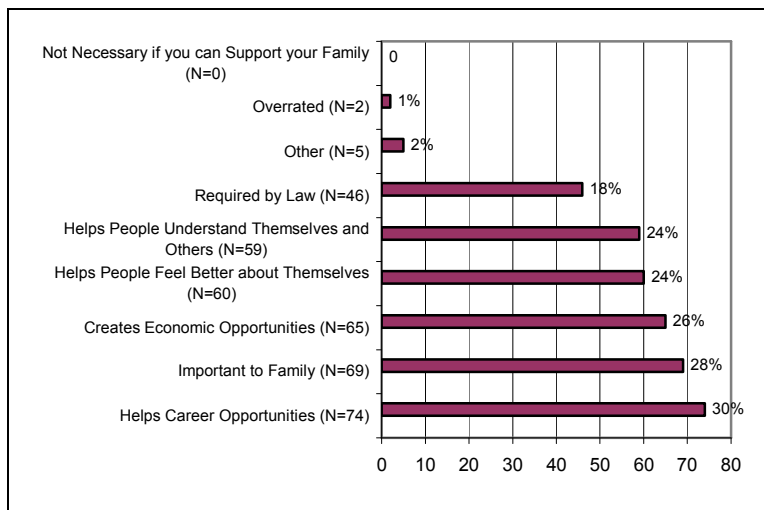
In the truancy orientation meeting attended by the families, parents are asked to indicate their reasons for attending (they can give more than one answer). Most parents attended because they had to; the top answer was that it's required by the court (30% of parents who responded), and 21% said they attended in order to avoid legal action. Some parents indicated reasons for attending that were unrelated to the legal system: Twenty-four percent wanted to improve their child's attendance, and 13% wanted to improve communication with their child (see figure 5).

Figure 5. Parents' Stated Reasons for Attending Orientation



Parents were also asked to share their attitudes toward school. Almost a third indicated that school was important because it creates career opportunities, and about a quarter said that it creates economic opportunities (see figure 6). Other common answers were that it is important to family (28%), it helps people feel better about themselves (24%) and it helps people understand themselves and others (24%). Very few thought that school was overrated or not necessary.

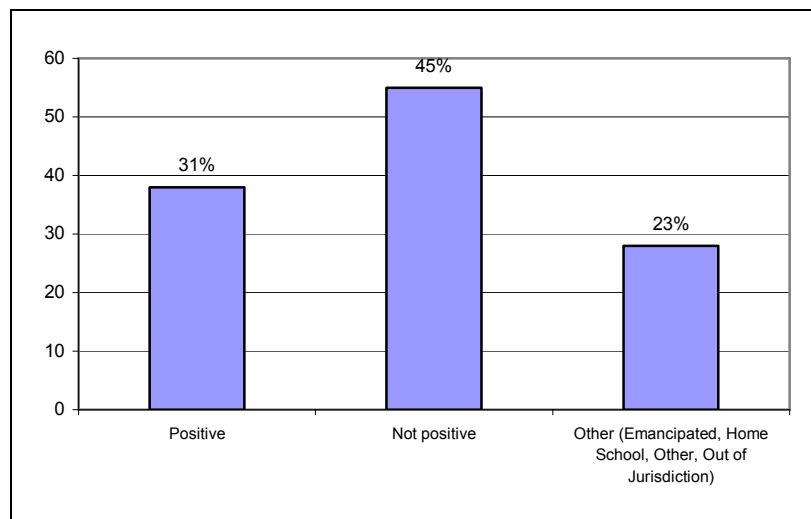
Figure 6. Parents' Stated Attitudes Toward School



Cases are exited (or discharged) from CCTP for a variety of reasons, which are complex and difficult to categorize as negative or positive based on the data that currently exist. In addition, we know that this process also varies by both school district and truancy specialist. Many cases (N=116, or 49%) were not actually terminated or discharged at the end of the academic year, but were instead “carryovers.” These cases are not actually exited, but are in fact carried over to the next fall, at which point they continue to remain active. Those

cases that were not carried over were exited for a variety of reasons (see figure 7). Forty-five percent were exited for factors that were coded by case managers as unfavorable in some way (e.g., coded as either negative, contempt, no-reply, parent non-compliant, probation, or runaway), and 31% were exited in a way suggesting successful or positive outcomes. Twenty-three percent were exited for some other reason, including emancipation, moving out of district, or home schooling. Non-positive exit reasons are not necessarily indicative of CCTP’s inability to successfully intervene with a truancy issue. If a youth has a variety of complex issues besides truancy, and CCTP has intervened and exhausted all its available resources, the case will be exited negatively and referred on to receive more appropriate services. Similarly, some students exit as negative but have long-term success, ultimately going back to school and graduating on time, just in a different venue. Because cases’ presenting problems and levels of seriousness tend to differ by school district, so will exit reasons. These exit reasons should be interpreted with caution; a forthcoming outcome evaluation will provide more reliable measures of behavioral change in youth who are enrolled in CCTP.

Figure 7. Exit Reasons for Non-Carried Over Cases



Conclusion

As stated by program administrators, the Clark County Truancy Project accepts all youth referred to them by the court, on the basis of failing to attend school even after a court order has been attached to the original truancy petition. As expected, these youth have missed substantial amounts of school at this point and are likely to be behind academically. However, presenting issues of these youth vary widely by school district, with one district petitioning only high-end truant youth with less complex needs, and others petitioning all truant youth referred by the schools. While district policies need to be mindful of local cultures and values, there are considerably disparate practices by which youth enter the truancy system at the front end or petitioning phase. Hence, similar youth in different school districts do not necessarily have the same likelihood of being petitioned and having the court intervene as a result of their truancy. While the current data available make it difficult to assess levels of success in the program with any degree of certainty, it is clear that the Clark County Truancy Project is considered a valuable resource for the Juvenile Court, schools, families, and youth who may be dealing with a variety of issues, including truancy. A forthcoming outcome evaluation will allow us to quantify the program’s ability to have a positive impact on youth behavior. We look forward to learning more about this population of youth and how they are served by CCTP as we continue to assess and help to develop the program.