



## Truancy: A Research Brief

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### What is Truancy?

Truancy is generally considered any unexcused or unverified absence from school. Because states enact their own school attendance laws, the legal definition of truancy may vary from state to state.

### Why this Issue Matters?

Every day, youth across the country enter or are at risk of entering the juvenile justice system because of behaviors that are problematic but noncriminal in nature. The most common of these behaviors—known as status offenses—is truancy. While missing or skipping school occasionally may not have a significant impact on students, parents and school systems often struggle to find effective ways to respond to chronic truancy—which is often both a symptom of and risk factor for more serious problems in the lives of young people.

Forty-three states include truancy as a status offense allegation in local statutes.<sup>1</sup> Over the last two decades, truancy violations have comprised the largest proportion of all status offense cases petitioned to juvenile courts nationwide. In 2010, truancy was the most serious offense in 36 percent of the 137,000 status offense court cases.<sup>2</sup> Once in the juvenile court system, young people in approximately 2,400 cases found themselves in detention and approximately 2,100 cases resulted in a court disposition (sentence) of out-of-home placement.<sup>3</sup> That same year, schools were the referral source in nearly half of all truancy petitions, followed by law enforcement (33 percent).<sup>4</sup>

This brief is based on a review of 53 empirical studies that focused on truancy through various lenses—from risk and protective factors and reasons why youth skip school to treatment and prevention. Most articles were obtained from peer reviewed journals, and a small number were reports produced by nonprofit research organizations.

### What we Know

The consequences of truancy extend beyond court involvement. Research has shown that failure to address chronic truancy can result in a host of problems for youth. Truancy has been linked to school dropout and poor academic performance and increases the likelihood that youth

#### RESEARCH BRIEFS

A product of the Status Offense Reform Center (SORC), the Research Brief series presents information on key status offense behaviors, focusing on their prevalence and scope, as well as what we know and don't know based on the available research.

#### *What is a status offense?*

Status offenses are behaviors that are prohibited under law only because of an individual's status as a minor, including running away from home, skipping school, violating a curfew, drinking under age, and acting "incorrigibly." They are problematic, but noncriminal in nature.

#### *What is SORC?*

SORC provides policymakers and practitioners with tools and information to create effective, community-based responses for keeping young people who engage in noncriminal behavior out of the juvenile justice system. The Center is a project of the Vera Institute of Justice and is supported by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation's *Models for Change* Resource Center Partnership.

will engage in drug and alcohol use, fighting, theft, and more serious forms of delinquency.<sup>5</sup> Over the long term, adults who were chronically truant as adolescents are more likely to have poorer health outcomes, lower paying jobs, and a greater chance of being incarcerated during their lifetime.<sup>6</sup>

*Who Skips School.* Research has shown that gender and age are correlated with truancy, and that relationships with parents and peers also influence students' decisions to skip school. Specifically, studies have found that:

- Males are more likely to skip school than females.<sup>7</sup>
- The frequency and severity of truant behavior increases as young people get older. Researchers exploring the prevalence of truancy among elementary, middle, and high school students found that truancy increased with age, peaking among 16 year olds.<sup>8</sup>
- Youth who associate with peers engaged in problem behaviors are more likely to skip school than those who associate with peers engaged in pro-social activities.<sup>9</sup>
- Low levels of parental control and monitoring have been associated with truancy.<sup>10</sup> Conversely, parental involvement (i.e., discussions with children about school, assisting with homework, participation in parent-teacher organizations) has been shown to have positive effects on school performance and reduce the likelihood of future truancy.<sup>11</sup>

Digging deeper into the trends, studies have found differences among truant students, identifying characteristics that distinguish youth who skip school occasionally from those who are chronically absent.

- School performance, attachment, and engagement distinguish occasionally truant students from chronically truant students. One study found that chronically truant students had poorer grades, were not engaged in school activities, and generally had poorer attitudes about their school environment.<sup>12</sup>
- In addition, chronically truant students were more likely to engage in substance use and delinquency.<sup>13</sup>

*Why Young People Skip School.* The reasons why students skip school are complex and diverse. Among them, researchers have focused particular attention on the effects of mental health, school climate, and relationships with peers.<sup>14</sup> Research suggests that truancy serves a functional purpose for many students, enabling them to avoid anxiety producing situations at school or to gain social acceptance among peers.

There is also evidence that, in addition to anxiety and depression, many students skip school because of fear and concern for their safety.<sup>15</sup>

- A descriptive study exploring the prevalence of truancy reported that most students interviewed said they skipped school because they missed the bus or because they did not feel like going to school.<sup>16</sup>
- There is evidence that anxiety about transitioning to a new school may explain school absences. Results from a recent study indicate that the greatest increases in truancy occurred between 5th and 6th graders and 8th and 9th graders, key points when most students are transitioning from elementary to middle school and from middle to high school.<sup>17</sup>
- Results from research examining the relationship between victimization (i.e., teasing, physical victimization, and sexual harassment) at school and truancy indicate that young people who report having been victimized by classmates also report a higher frequency of truancy. Students who reported that they were sexually harassed by their peers skipped school more frequently than both students who experienced other forms of victimization and those who reported never having been victimized at school. White females were the most likely to report being victimized at school.<sup>18</sup>
- Taking a closer look at the relationship between victimization and truancy, other research suggests that being victimized at school negatively affects students' emotional well-being and sense of belonging, leading young people to skip school to escape antagonism from peers.<sup>19</sup> There is evidence that this is particularly the case among lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth, who report more truancy than young people who identify as straight.<sup>20</sup>

*Truancy Interventions.* Interventions occur in a variety of settings, including schools, courts and community organizations, and can employ a variety of strategies (such as counseling, tutoring, and disciplinary measures). Evidence from a recent meta-analysis of 15 interventions suggests that on average truancy interventions, regardless of setting and strategy used, are effective at improving school attendance by almost five days. However, none improved attendance enough to bring chronically truant youth into compliance with school attendance standards.<sup>21</sup> To date, there are few studies that evaluate the effects of program characteristics on truancy. Qualitative studies of truancy interventions, however, suggest that case management style, incentive structures, and program curricula are factors that contribute to program success.<sup>22</sup>

There is some evidence that truancy interventions differentially affect youth based on the severity of truant behavior and age.<sup>23</sup>

- The evaluation of the Truancy Assessment and Service Centers (TASCs)—a Louisiana state initiative for elementary schools struggling with high rates of school absences—found that participation in the initiative resulted in improvements in school attendance for youth assessed as low risk for future truant behavior, but had no effect on school attendance for chronically truant students at high risk for continued truancy.<sup>24</sup>
- On the other hand, an evaluation of a truancy court program in Springfield, Missouri’s public school system found that chronically truant students who completed the program saw improvements in attendance and a decrease in the number of school discipline offenses. Participation in the truancy court, however, had no significant effect on the truant behavior of youth who were classified as occasionally truant at the start of the study.<sup>25</sup>
- A study looking at the effect of the use of educational neglect petitions (i.e., court petitions alleging that parents have failed to comply with state law requiring students under the age of 16 to attend school) on school attendance found that age had an effect on outcomes. For example, youth under the age of eight at the time of the petition experienced greater improvement in school attendance than youth over the age of 11. This study suggests that educational neglect petitions may be effective at improving attendance when parents’ behaviors are responsible for students’ absences from school, but are less effective when youth are older, skipping school, and otherwise acting out for reasons associated with adolescence.<sup>26</sup>

Studies suggest that interventions’ effects on attendance diminish over time.

- The evaluation of the Early Truancy Intervention (ETI) program—a school-based program using a case conferencing model to address chronic school absenteeism—found that schools participating in the program only experienced temporary improvements in the rates of chronic truancy among their students.<sup>27</sup>
- Youth who participated in the Springfield, Missouri truancy court program saw significant improvements in school attendance during the intervention period. Reductions in school absences, however, were not sustained after the intervention ended.<sup>28</sup>
- A quasi-experimental study in a large, urban school district examined the effects of a traditional court referral, a court referral supplemented with community-based services, and no court intervention on reductions in truancy. The authors found that truancy dropped in the short-term among youth who received traditional court referrals and court referrals with community-based

services but did not change among those who were not petitioned to court. However, one year later, truancy increased for all groups. For youth who received traditional court referrals or no court intervention at all truancy worsened; and truancy among students who received court referrals with community-based services returned to initial levels.<sup>29</sup>

### Gaps in the Research

While current research explores a cross-section of issues related to truancy, there remains much to be learned.

First, there is a need for more research on demographic and other characteristics of truant students. Although research has shown that age and gender are correlated with truancy, much more needs to be known about the impact of race and ethnicity, immigration status, socio-economic background, special needs, and family structure on truancy severity. For example, there are significant concerns about school disengagement (i.e., dropping out of school) among immigrant students, but studies of truancy among this population are limited, despite that truancy is often a precursor to dropping out of school.<sup>30</sup> Research suggests that English language ability, difficulty adjusting to the school environment, and employment needs contribute to immigrant students leaving school.<sup>31</sup> These same factors may very well contribute to truancy, but without data, risk and protective factors for truancy among this population remain unclear. By looking more closely at how immigration status, as well as other demographic and background characteristics, influences truant behavior, research stands to provide policymakers and practitioners with information they need to develop truancy interventions attuned to students' particular needs and risk factors.

Second, evaluations of truancy interventions should employ more sophisticated—experimental and quasi-experimental—designs that yield more reliable findings of program impacts. Currently, the majority of evaluations rely on descriptive analyses of program outcomes, such as changes over time in the percentage of chronically truant students in a school, average improvements in attendance, and percentages of students who successfully complete program requirements. Although this information is important, these analyses fail to show how effective interventions are in comparison to other interventions or no intervention at all when factors, such as demographic characteristics, are controlled for.<sup>32</sup> In other words, experimental and quasi-experimental designs allow researchers to isolate the effects of an intervention by accounting for individual and environmental factors that could influence program outcomes.

These types of studies would be especially useful in determining how effective the traditional court model is at improving school attendance compared to non-court based models. A study out of Washington State using a quasi-experimental design in which truant students who were petitioned to court were compared to non-petitioned truant students from similar backgrounds found that truancy petitions had no effect on students' future school attendance and grade point average, concluding that the juvenile court process in Washington State is not effective at deterring truancy.<sup>33</sup> Other research has shown that court temporarily improved truant behavior, but this effect disappeared over time.<sup>34</sup> These results suggest more research is needed to unpack the effects of juvenile court on school attendance. Furthermore, because few evaluations of truancy interventions employ experimental or quasi-experimental designs, there is limited knowledge about “what works” in truancy prevention. More research like this is needed to understand which intervention models and strategies are best at improving school attendance and engagement.

In addition, more evaluations should consider how specific program components contribute to student success. Most research focuses on the macro-level: does the program work? But research is needed to identify whether certain intervention components facilitate success more than others. A recent report on the effectiveness of New York City's Truancy Task Force highlights the importance of research of this kind. Out of all of the components of this initiative, the use of “Success Mentors” was found to be most effective at improving attendance among chronically truant students.<sup>35</sup> Research such as this moves beyond whether or not an intervention “works” and helps pinpoint what makes programs work, enabling practitioners in the field to design programs composed of elements shown to be effective at advancing goals of reducing chronic truancy.

## Endnotes

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