


FINN

THE JOHN F. FINN INSTITUTE
FOR PUBLIC SAFETY, INC.

Truancy Reduction: A Synopsis

**Sarah J. McLean, Ph.D.
Heidi S. Bonner
Robert E. Worden, Ph.D.**

April, 2010

423 New Karner Rd
Suite 5
Albany, NY 12205
PH: 518-456-6323
FAX: 518-456-6312
<http://finninstitute.org>

**Robert E. Worden, Ph.D.
Director**

**Sarah J. McLean, Ph.D.
Associate Director**

Introduction

No national data exists on truancy rates (in part because there is no universal definition of truancy), thus putting a firm number on the problem is impossible. However, a national survey of public school principals identified absenteeism as one of the top problems in their schools. Additionally, a number of larger cities note that unexpected absences can number in the thousands on certain days.¹ High rates of absenteeism are problematic because truancy is a risk factor for serious juvenile delinquency. In fact, a number of studies have identified truancy as the *strongest* predictor of delinquency.² According to the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) truancy is related to a number of delinquent behaviors including substance abuse, gang activity, and involvement in criminal activities such as auto theft and vandalism.³ It is also linked to teen pregnancy and, not surprisingly, dropping out of school. Truancy serves as a “gateway” problem, one that, left unaddressed, can develop into serious problems in the teen and adult years.

Truancy is a symptom of many larger social problems, making it a difficult problem to address. The OJJDP, in its review of the research, identified four broad correlates of truancy.⁴ They are:

- Family factors (lack of supervision, domestic violence, poverty, drug or alcohol abuse at home, alternative attitudes toward education)
- School factors (school/class size, inconsistent procedures for chronic absenteeism, lack of meaningful consequences for truant behavior)
- Economic influences (single-parent homes, parents who hold multiple jobs, lack of affordable transportation and childcare)
- Student variables (drug and alcohol abuse, lack of social competence, mental or physical health issues)

We draw upon available studies that include, at a minimum, program descriptions and emphasized those that included impact evaluations (the rigorousness of which varied). We look at several programs and first describe their principal components and then summarize the evidence on program effectiveness. The programs from which we drew include: Ada County, Idaho’s Attendance Court; Pima County, Arizona’s Abolish Chronic Truancy (ACT) Now program; Multnomah County, Oregon’s School Attendance Initiative (SAI); the Youth Opportunities United (YOU) program in Corpus Christi County and Nueces County, Texas; the Truancy Interdiction Program (TIP) in Jacksonville, Florida; the Police Eliminating Truancy (PET) program in North Miami Beach, Florida; Project PACT (Partnering to Assess and Counteract Truancy) in Waianae, Hawaii; the Discovery Program in Dorchester County, South Carolina; Richmond, CA’s Truant Recovery Program, and New Jersey’s Behavioral Monitoring and Reinforcement Program. We also examine three programs in unspecified locations: the Southeastern County Truancy Intervention Initiative, Project START (Stop Truancy and

¹ Heaviside, S., Rowand, C., Williams, C. and E. Farris., *Violence and Discipline Problems in U.S. Public Schools: 1996-97* (Washington: National Center for Education Statistics, 1998).

² Bell, A.J., Rosen, L.A., and Dynlacht, D. (1994). “Truancy intervention,” *The Journal of Research and Development in Education*, 57: 203-211.

³ Baker, M.L., Sigmon, J.N., and Nugent, M.E. (2001). *Truancy Reduction: Keeping Students in School*. Washington, DC: OJJDP. References cited include: Bell, A.J., Rosen, L.A., and Dynlacht, D. (1994). “Truancy intervention,” *The Journal of Research and Development in Education*, 57: 203-211.; Dryfoos, J.G. (1990). *Adolescents at Risk: Prevalence and Prevention*. New York: Oxford University Press.; Garry, E.M. (1996). *Truancy: First Step to a Lifetime of Problems*. Washington, DC: OJJDP.; Huizinga, D., Loeber, R. & Thornberry, T. (1995). *Urban Delinquency and Substance Abuse: Initial Findings*. Washington, DC: OJJDP.; Rohrman, D. (1993). “Combating Truancy in Our Schools – A Community Effort,” *Bulletin*, 76: 40-51.

⁴ Baker et al., *op. cit.*, p. 2

Recommend Treatment) in a Northeastern city, and the Chronic Truancy Initiative in a Midwestern community.⁵

Program Components

While there is no universal definition of truancy it can be generally defined as an unexcused absence from school or class.⁶ Definitions of truancy are established by state law and school district policy and include many considerations such as 1) age at which a child is required to start attending school, 2) age at which a child may legally drop out of school, and 3) the number of unexcused absences required before a student is considered truant.^{7,8} Truancy programs vary in a number of ways, which we have organized in terms of: the lead agency for the intervention, the population of students targeted by the intervention, point of entry into the program, key elements of the intervention, and the services that are provided.

⁵ Mueller, D., Giacomazzi, A., and Stoddard, C. (2006). "Dealing with chronic absenteeism and its related consequences: The process and short-term effects of a diversionary juvenile court intervention." *Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk*, 11(2): 199-219. For information on Pima County's program see Baker, M.L., Sigmon, J.N., and Nugent, M.E. (2001). *Truancy Reduction: Keeping Students in School*. Washington, DC: OJJDP. For information on Jacksonville's, Multnomah County's, and Corpus Christi and Nueces County's programs see Cash, T. and Duttweiler, P.C. (2005). *Planning, Collaboration, and Implementation Strategies for Truancy Programs*. Clemson, SC: National Dropout Prevention Center, Clemson University. For Jacksonville's program, also see The National Center for School Engagement. (2005). *Jacksonville, FL Case Study: Evidence of Effectiveness in Reducing Truancy*. Denver, CO: The Colorado Foundation for Families and Children. For information on North Miami Beach's program see Berger, W.S. and Wind, S. (2000 Feb). "Police eliminating truancy: A PET project." *FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin*, pp. 16-19. For information on Waianae's program see The National Center for School Engagement. (2005). *Project PACT: Partnering to Assess and Counteract Truancy Program and Student Success Stories*. Denver, CO: The Colorado Foundation for Families and Children. For information on Dorchester County's program see Ventura, H. and Miller, J.M. (2005). "Finding hidden value through mixed-methodology: Lessons from the Discovery Program's holistic approach to truancy abatement." *American Journal of Criminal Justice*, 30(1): 99-120. For information on Richmond's program see White, M., Fyfe, J., Campbell, S., and Goldkamp, J. (2001). "The school-police partnership: Identifying at-risk youth through a truant recovery program." *Evaluation Review*, 25(5): 507-532. For information on New Jersey's program see Bry, B.H. (1982). "Reducing the incidence of adolescent problems through preventive intervention: One- and five-year follow-up," *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 10: 265-276. Also see Bry, B.H. and George, F.E. (1980) "The preventive effects of early intervention on the attendance and grades of urban adolescents." *Professional Psychology*, 11: 252-260. For information on the Southeastern County Truancy Intervention Initiative see Bazemore, G., Stinchcomb, J.B., and Leip, L.A. (2004). "Scared smart or bored straight? Testing deterrence logic in an evaluation of police-led truancy intervention." *Justice Quarterly*, 21(2): 269-299. For information on Project START see Fantuzzo, J., Grim, S., and Hazan, H. (2005). "Project START: An evaluation of a community-wide school-based intervention to reduce truancy." *Psychology in the Schools*, 42(6): 657-667. For information on the Chronic Truancy Initiative see McCluskey, C.P., Bynum, T.S., and Patchin, J.W. (2004). "Reducing chronic absenteeism: An assessment of an early truancy initiative." *Crime and Delinquency*, 50(2): 214-234.

⁶ Baker et al., *op. cit.*, p. 13

⁷ National Center for School Engagement, "Tool Kit for Creating Your Own Truancy Reduction Program"

⁸ The National Center for School Engagement provides "Guidelines for a National Definition of Truancy and Calculating Rates," August 2006 available as part of the "Tool Kit for Creating Your Own Truancy Reduction Program"

Variation in Program Components

Target Population		Program Operation		Program Specifics			
Geographic Area	Target Grades	Entry into Program	Funding Sources	Program Type	Lead Agency	Target Issues	Program Focus
Citywide	All	School-based (nominated by principal)	Federal (direct grant, pass-through)	Court-based	Court	Truancy, tardiness	Student only
School(s) but not full district	Elementary only	Law enforcement (picked up in sweeps)	State (budget, grant)	School-based	School / School District	At-risk youth	Family-based
School District-wide	Elementary/ Middle School	Juvenile justice (court-ordered)	County (budget, grant)	Community-based	Government (city, county, or state)	Dropout	
Judicial District	Middle School only		Private foundation	Law enforcement-based	Law Enforcement	Suspended/ expelled youth	
Countywide	Middle School/ High School		School district	Combination	Private / Nonprofit	Juvenile justice involvement	
Multi-county	High School only		Fees		Community-based Organization	Multiple	
Statewide			In-kind		Multiple		
			Multiple				

Lead Agency

The lead agency can influence both how the problem is defined and the prescribed solution. Research suggests that police agencies lean toward increased enforcement, juvenile justice agencies toward additional treatment or remedial services, and those involved in the court system may advocate for specialized courts.⁹ It was impossible to determine a lead agency for some of the programs reviewed for this synopsis. For those in which a lead agency could be identified: three were spearheaded by local law enforcement (the Truancy Intervention Initiative, the Truant Recovery Program, and Police Eliminating Truancy), two were implemented by school districts (Project PACT and the Discovery Program), one was led by a County Attorney’s Office (Abolish Chronic Truancy), and one, the Truancy Interdiction Program, was organized by a social service agency.

Target Population

Programs differ greatly in terms of how wide a net they cast for truants. Some, such as ACT and TIP, are available county-wide. Others focus on juveniles already involved in the juvenile justice system. For example, the Truant Recovery Program focuses on juveniles picked up in truancy sweeps, the YOU program focuses on juveniles arrested for violation of curfew or for truancy and Project START is for all students referred to truancy court. Programs also differ in terms of how old the student must be in order to participate. For some, such as Project PACT and the Ada County Attendance Court, the primary target is elementary school-age children. Many

⁹ Bazemore et al., *op cit.*, p. 270

programs focus on elementary-aged students guided by research indicating that early intervention is preferred. Some focus on a wider range of grades (for example, the SAI program targets K-8 students) while others focus on a specific subset. For example, the Discovery Program limits its services to at-risk students between the ages of 13-16 and the Behavioral Monitoring and Reinforcement Program is designed for students aged 12-14.

Entry into Program

The point of entry into programs varies across the programs reviewed here. Oftentimes, law enforcement picks up truants on the street and transports them to a central truancy center (after verifying with the school that the student has not been granted an excused absence). In other cases, such as with SAI, the Discovery Program, and the Ada County Attendance Court, students are referred by their principal based on academic, discipline, and attendance records. Project PACT works in reverse – program staff identify truants and the school is responsible for contacting parents. The ACT Now program also serves as the first step in identifying truants – after three unexcused absences the youth is referred by the school to the Center for Juvenile Alternatives (CJA), a nonprofit that provides case management and services to youth and family in ACT Now.

Key Elements of the Intervention

Programs vary widely in their goals and the means they use to attain them. For example, the Truancy Intervention Initiative operates under the premise of specific deterrence. The processing experience is similar to being arrested – there is a basic assessment, an interview, and then enforced silence (during their time at the center the students are not allowed to speak). Thus, “the common dominant intervention experience became one of imposed restrictions, causing inconvenience and some discomfort by virtue of the hours spent at the center, and posing a threat to students that future truancy would result in similar or greater punishments – essentially, a deterrence model.”¹⁰

Court-based programs generally offer a deferred prosecution diversion component. In addition to providing services to address the risk factors that underlie the truancy, the ACT Now program also has sanctions for parents and youth for continued truancy or failure to successfully complete the diversion program. The same was true for the YOU program – during its first year of operation, it was evident that those families of students most at risk were generally unwilling to participate in the program. Thus, a Juvenile Court was established next to the Juvenile Assessment Center (the temporary holding facility for juveniles arrested for violations of curfews or for truancy) and judges began ordering offenders to take part in case management services as either their sentence or as a condition of deferred adjudication. Another example is Project START, a community-based family court. Under the program, family courtrooms were created in designated school buildings and caseworkers from local service providers are present during proceedings to provide referrals to any needed services.¹¹

Some programs have options for students who are suspended from school. The PET program offers the Alternative to Suspension Program (ASP) program and the Truant Recovery Program (TRP) takes the unique step of offering an in-school suspension program. Suspended students

¹⁰ Bazemore et al., *op cit.*, p. 279

¹¹ A number of programs provide services and/or sanctions to the entire family. The link between family involvement and delinquency has been well established in the juvenile justice literature, so family-based programs may prove to be a significant factor in reducing both delinquency and truancy. See Hollist, D.R., Hughes, L.A., and Schaible, L.M. (2009). “Adolescent maltreatment, negative emotion, and delinquency: An assessment of general strain theory and family-based strain.” *Journal of Criminal Justice*, 37:379-387; Kierkus, C.A., and Hewitt, J.D. (2009). “The contextual nature of the family structure/delinquency relationship.” *Journal of Criminal Justice*, 37:123-132.

in the TRP are not allowed to attend regular classes but the goal is to reintegrate truants rather than punish (or reward) them with more time away from school. Unique components for other programs include a hotline that allows community members to notify police when they see truants on the street (PET program) and a required community service component for students in the Discovery Program.

Services

Truancy programs do not generally provide services themselves. Rather, they provide a case management function and serve as a clearinghouse for access to other service providers.¹² It is often difficult to ascertain whether or not students and families take advantage of the services available to them through truancy abatement programs since evaluations either do not report such data or are unable to obtain it. However, an evaluation of the Truancy Intervention Initiative noted that while staff claimed that half of youth received referrals, only about eight percent of youth were confirmed to have received follow-up services.

In addition to case management services, truancy abatement programs provide (either directly or indirectly) counseling services, living assistance, support groups, medical assessment, tutoring, mentoring, and drug/alcohol services. One program, TIP, has a Youth Crisis Center that provides short-term shelter care. Many also provide life skills training for students (such as classes on group skills and team building, anger management, communication skills, assertiveness training, problem solving, and conflict resolution) and classes on drug and alcohol awareness and gang prevention. A number (such as ACT Now, SAI, and the Discovery Program) also provide parenting skills classes. The Discovery Program hosts a “Parent University” – successful completion of the program results in a certificate of completion.

Program Funding

Truancy abatement programs are funded in a variety of ways and most secure multiple funding sources. Like many social service programs, the majority are grant-funded (federal, state, and county) and/or receive money from private foundations. A number of programs are funded by the school district in which they operate, and a smaller number are part of their state, county, or city budgets. Finally, a smaller number of programs are fee-based, while others require no external funding (because they are either staffed with volunteers or operating via in-kind contributions).

Outcomes

It is difficult to draw any uniform conclusions on the effectiveness of truancy abatement programs because of the wide variety in the types of programs evaluated and the varying levels of quality in the evaluations conducted. Program evaluation is often hampered by data collection problems. Often, certain key outcomes are not measured because data is not readily available. Most program evaluations consider direct measures of school success such as attendance rates, the number of trancies and dropouts, graduation rates, and GPAs. Evaluators also track program and process success measures, such as the number of referrals, the services provided, successful program completion or case disposition rate, and subsequent involvement in the juvenile justice system. Relatively few evaluations consider the effect of truancy abatement programs on crime.

¹² The SAI program is an exception. Budget cuts in 2001 led to a decrease in staff and services, including case management services. Since many families were receiving services from other agencies, they were already involved in case management elsewhere and it was not seen as an essential component of SAI.

While many have not been rigorously evaluated, some have achieved “model program” distinction. The Behavioral Monitoring and Reinforcement Program is classified as a Blueprints for Violence Prevention Promising Program¹³ and has also been designated as “promising” and “effective” by two independent researchers, as well as “promising” by the Surgeon General.¹⁴ Both the Chronic Truancy Initiative and the Truant Recovery Program are OJJDP “promising” model programs.¹⁵ We now turn to specific findings regarding the effect of truancy abatement programs on both academic and crime indicators.

Academic

Many program evaluators reported a positive impact on attendance rates. School districts participating in the ACT Now program showed a decrease in the number of truantries in a two-year period (ranging from a decrease of 64 percent to 4 percent). For TIP the truancy recidivism rate dropped from 14.2% in 1999 to 4.8% in 2002 and an evaluation of SAI showed improved attendance rates for both elementary and middle school following referral. For the Chronic Truancy Initiative, aggregate attendance significantly improved among all truants during the first two intervention stages. For stage 1 (letter sent to parent), the rate of absences went from 18.1 to 13.8 percent; for stage 2 (student referred to student attendance officer), the rate of absences decreased from 24.7 to 18.6 percent. Further, hierarchical linear modeling analysis (used to estimate change in individuals over time) revealed that the intervention was successful in improving attendance for all included in the program, and was particularly beneficial to chronic truants (as opposed to those only marginally truant).¹⁶ Evaluators for Project START divided students into two experimental groups (referred to community-based family court – Project START – or traditional family court) and a control group (nonreferred). Thirty days after the court process both experimental groups had a significant drop in rates of unexcused absences while the control group showed no change. Further, the community-based court group maintained reduced truancy rates while the family-based court group did not. A matched-pairs evaluation of the Behavioral Monitoring and Reinforcement Program indicated that students who received intervention services had significant improvements in grades and attendance while grades and attendance for the control group did not improve. Finally, an evaluation of the Ada County Attendance Court revealed that the program had an effect on the number of tardies and absences in the academic year coinciding with the first court appearance (an evaluation of longer-term effects was not possible due to data availability).

¹³The Blueprints for Violence Prevention Program- a project of the Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence at the University of Colorado- continuously reviews the research on violence and drug abuse programs to assess program effectiveness. To date, program staff has assessed over 800 programs. To achieve distinction as a promising program, a program must show evidence of a deterrent effect for one (or more) of three key indicators – violence, delinquency, and/or drug use – with a strong research design.

¹⁴ Elliott, D.S. (series editor). (1997). *Blueprints for Violence Prevention* (Vols 1-11), Boulder, CO: Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence, Institute of Behavioral Science, University of Colorado. Refer to www.colorado.edu/cspv/blueprints. Program rated as “promising” by Mihalic, S. and Aultman-Bettridge, T. (2004). “A Guide to Effective School-based Prevention Programs,” in William L. Tulk (Ed.) *Policing and School Crime*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall Publishers. Program rated as “effective” by Sherman et al. (1997). *What Works, What Doesn't, What's Promising*. College Park: University of Maryland Department of Criminology and Criminal Justice. Program rated as “promising level 2” by U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (2001). *Youth Violence: A Report of the Surgeon General*, Rockville, MD: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

¹⁵ Programs rated as promising by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, *Training and Technical Assistance Programs for State and Local Government: Model Programs Guide*. Washington, DC: Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice.

¹⁶ However, as the evaluators note, all chronically truant students were included in the program so it was not possible to compare students receiving treatment to a matched control group. As such, the effects found on levels of truancy cannot be unequivocally attributed to the program.

Not every program evidenced success in improving attendance rates. Results for the Truancy Intervention Initiative were equivocal - one measure of attendance (30 days) showed that processing appeared to decrease subsequent truancy but another measure (entire year) indicated that being processed appeared to increase truancy in the longer term.

Crime

Those program evaluators who have addressed effects on crime (and most have not) reported mixed findings regarding the effect of truancy abatement programs on crime. After the introduction of TIP the number of juveniles arrested for residential burglary (the study did not distinguish crimes committed during school hours on school days from other times of day) dropped by 47 percent and the number of truants on the street wanted for crimes or probation violations dropped by more than 50 percent (from 877 in 1999 to 415 in 2002). For the YOU program, the majority of the students processed committed no additional offenses. An evaluation of the Behavioral Monitoring and Reinforcement Program indicated that one year following the end of the program, intervention youth were significantly less likely to be involved in criminal behavior. Five years after program completion, intervention youth were 66 percent less likely to have a juvenile record than control youth.

However, an evaluation of the Truancy Intervention Initiative indicated that processing had no impact on delinquency. An 18-21 month follow-up of the Truant Recovery Program indicated that contacts with local police departments (particularly arrests) *increased* considerably. The authors speculate that this negative effect might be due to truants' progression into a more crime-prone age during the evaluation period.

Implementing a Truancy Abatement Program

The extant research makes clear that truancy reduction programs can vary in structure and processes. Before implementing a truancy reduction program it is important, we believe, to resolve a number of key factors:

- 1) What is the goal of the program? Is it primarily to reduce absenteeism, to improve the graduation rate, to reduce student involvement in juvenile crime, or all of the above?
- 2) What is the scope of the program? How big of a geographic range will it cover (e.g. one school, a school district, a county)? What is the target student population (e.g. all truants, only chronic truants, justice-involved truants)?
- 3) Who will take the lead on program implementation? Will the program be organized by a school, a court, a community coalition, or law enforcement?
- 4) What services will be offered? By whom? How will services be documented? What types of records will be kept?

Additionally, program developers should, to the extent possible, adopt scientifically validated approaches to effectively addressing truancy. The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) synthesized the literature and outlined the following components of promising truancy reduction efforts¹⁷:

- 1) Consistent attendance policy and practice, known to all students, parents, staff, and community agencies
- 2) A continuum of prevention and intervention services, along with incentives and graduated sanctions for students and parents

¹⁷ Flores, J.K. (January/February 2004). "Truancy reduction: Keeping youth in school and out of trouble." *OJJDP news @ a glance*, 3(1): 1-6. Retrieved on August 5, 2008 from <http://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/ojjdp/203557.pdf>

- 3) Meaningful parental involvement
- 4) Special attention to health (e.g., providing onsite responses for asthmatic children, meeting special education needs)
- 5) Data-driven decision making
- 6) Student attendance review boards
- 7) Quasi-judicial proceedings
- 8) Business involvement
- 9) Focus on school transition years
- 10) Public awareness campaigns

It should be clear that truancy programs come in all shapes and sizes. Before implementing a program, program developers should explicitly state the program goals, program components, and how the latter are expected to achieve the former.