

Truancy: Recommendations for Effective School Responses in Reducing Further Delinquency

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Truancy: Recommendations for Effective School Responses in Reducing Further Delinquency

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## **Abstract**

### **Purpose**

The purpose of the study is to provide recommendations for schools to implement or improve appropriate responses to truancy issues. Furthermore, this study reviews the connection between truancy, further delinquency, substance abuse, risky sexual behavior, teen pregnancy, and adult criminality to help identify which school responses to truancy are effective in reducing further delinquency, substance abuse, risky sexual behavior, teen pregnancy, and adult criminality. The information gathered will be valuable to schools, delinquency programs, and communities.

### **Methods**

The method of approach includes an extensive literature review of peer reviewed journals, textbooks, scholarly articles, and data from government websites. The literature consists of reviewing the connection of the variables of truancy, delinquency, substance abuse, risky sexual behavior, teen pregnancy, and adult criminality; school responses to truancy; and covid related truancy. Two theories will also be summarized, labeling and social control, to help ground recommendations.

### **Key Findings**

A tiered approach by schools and truancy being addressed at a scale by states can disrupt the pathway of truancy students and negative life outcomes. Action at the state level that includes the steps of making the case that early truancy matters, mapping early truancy, engaging partners in unpacking why early truancy occurs, learning from positive outliers, and inserting action into existing initiatives can ensure that schools address truancy appropriately. Using a tiered approach that starts with foundation supports for the whole school, followed by prevention-oriented supports for attendance (tier 1), more personalized outreach or early intervention (tier 2), and

intensive intervention (tier 3) allows for schools to target students' specific attendance barriers, resulting in a reduction of truancy rates.

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## **SECTION I: INTRODUCTION**

### **Statement of the Problem**

Truancy is a significant problem across the United States. Data from the U.S. Department of Education Civil Rights Data Collection indicates that in 2018, about 8 million students in the United States missed more than three weeks of school (Bauer et al., 2018). Post Covid and by the Spring of 2022, the number of students who missed more than three weeks of school doubled to about 16 million (Mehta, 2023). According to literature (Chou et al., 2006; Kearsse-McCastler, 2020; Rocque et al., 2016), evidence indicates that truancy is a risk factor for further delinquency, substance abuse, and adult criminality. Furthermore, a student's achievement and academic outcome is closely related to attendance. School absences lower achievement levels as early as kindergarten and students who are truant in kindergarten are more likely to fall behind in English Language Arts and experience poor testing scores when they enter the first grade (Bauer et al., 2018). Research also suggests that poor attendance in middle school and high school ultimately predicts if the student will drop out before obtaining a high school diploma (Bauer et al., 2018). Individuals who do not have a high school diploma are more likely to have limited employment prospects, low wages, experience poverty, and engage in criminal activities.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of the study is to review the connection between truancy, further delinquency, substance abuse, and adult criminality to be able to provide recommendations for schools and to identify which school responses to truancy are effective in reducing further delinquency, substance abuse, and adult criminality. The information gathered in this study will be valuable to schools, juvenile delinquency programs, and communities as they assess truancy problems in their area.

**Significance of the Study**

The findings of this research will provide a contribution to truancy and juvenile delinquency related matters. Better responses to truancy issues are needed because students are more likely to succeed in academics when they attend school and students who do not attend on a regular basis are more likely to get into trouble with the law, as well as cause problems in their communities (GreatSchools Staff, 2023). Additionally, since the Covid pandemic resulted in schools shutting down across the United States, the number of truant students doubled (Mehta, 2023). Therefore, more research is needed on the factors of truancy and effective school responses to reduce truancy issues.

**Method of Approach**

The method of approach includes an extensive literature review of peer reviewed journals, textbooks, scholarly articles, and data from government websites. The literature consists of reviewing the connection of the variables of truancy, delinquency, substance abuse, and adult criminality; school responses to truancy; and covid related truancy. Two theories will also be summarized, labeling and social control, to help ground recommendations.

**Limitations**

A limitation of this study includes the limited availability amount of truancy data and school response data across states. Only 22 states collect truancy data and only seven states collect data on school responses to truancy. Another limitation is that original data is not collected in this study, creating a restriction to using information that is only publicly available.

**SECTION II: LITERATURE REVIEW**

The following literature review is divided into six sections. It begins with a general definition of truancy. This is followed by a review of federal policies on truancy and state

legislation on truancy. The next section provides a review of factors correlated with truancy. This includes individual, school, and family factors that impacts students' truancy. This is followed by the effects of truancy, such as further delinquency, substance abuse, and adult criminality.

Finally, the last section reviews school approaches to truancy. This section includes school disciplinary responses, prevention and intervention programs, Truancy and Educational Neglect Court, and addressing truancy during and after the Covid pandemic. The state of Illinois will be highlighted for illustration purposes.

### **Definitions**

Truancy is defined as the unexcused absence from school. States and the school districts within a state ultimately decide what is considered excused and what is considered unexcused. For example, under Illinois law, a student is truant when they have been absent without a valid cause for more than 1% but less than 5% of the past 180 school days (105 ILCS 5/26-8). A valid cause for absences includes an illness (including mental and behavioral health) of the student, observance of a religious holiday, attendance at a civic event, a death in the immediate family, a family emergency, and other situations beyond the control of the student determined by the Board of Education in each district (105 ILCS 5/26-8). In contrast to Illinois truancy laws, under Wisconsin law, a student is considered truant when they are absent from school without an acceptable excuse for part or all of five or more days on which school is held during a semester (Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, 2020). Acceptable excuses for being absent from school includes the following: the student is temporarily not in proper physical or mental condition to attend school but who can be expected to return to school upon termination of the illness or condition; the student has written approval of the guardian and shall state the time period for which it is effective, which can not extend beyond the end of the current school year; and a student who has the excuse written by their guardian before the absence (cannot be



excused for more than 10 days) and the student must complete any course work missed during the absence (Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, 2020). More specifically, students are excused for a religious holiday, physical/mental conditions; non-emergency medical appointments with a verified appointment slip, a death in the immediate family, an illness in the immediate family, a court appearance or other legal procedures, quarantine by a public health official, school busing delays, a family trip with a completed 'pre-planned absence' form, and approved school activities in Wisconsin (Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, 2020).

### **Federal Policies on Truancy**

To address the truancy problem across the United States, policies at the federal level have been established. Federal policies include the No Child Left Behind Act and the Safe and Drug Free Schools Community Act. Signed by President Bush, the No Child Left Behind Act was designed to address the concern of America's K-12 education system failing to provide equal opportunities in education by holding schools responsible for boosting student academic performance through mandated standardized tests and minimum performance benchmarks (No Child Left Behind Act, 2001). The act is based on stronger accountability for results, more freedom for states, proven education methods, and more choices for parents. For example, under No Child Left Behind, school districts are required to submit attendance data to the government in order to receive federal money for education because students who are truant are at higher risk for falling behind academically or dropping out of school altogether (Bye et al., 2010). Further federal initiatives began during the Obama Administration and through the My Brother's Keeper Initiative, the White House coordinated federal, state, and local efforts to reduce truancy (Bauer et al., 2018). A joint letter sent by the Secretaries of Education, Health and Human Services, Housing and Urban Development, and the Attorney General to the states called for a cross-sector strategy to reduce truancy (Bauer et al., 2018). In 2015, President Obama signed Every Student

Succeeds Act, changing the national structure of the No Child Left Behind Act (Bauer et al., 2018). The structure change empowered states to design and implement their own accountability systems for truancy (Bauer et al., 2018).

The Safe and Drug Free Schools Act was created to help school districts create safe, disciplined, drug-free learning environments and it requires states to collect data on truancy, as well as data on suspension and expulsion (Bye et al., 2010). In Illinois, school officials report the data needed to the Illinois State Board of Education at the end of each school year and the data is available on Illinois State Board of Education's website for the public. The federal policies that require states to provide truancy data is essential in combating truancy across the United States. Data on students and families affected by truancy policies are key in the application of such policies and policymakers are unable to evaluate whether truancy policies reduce unlawful absences without the data provided by states (Weathers & Loeb, 2022). Furthermore, the truancy data collected is important in identifying potential disparities in education systems and using the federal required truancy data can assist in preventing negative outcomes for students who are already disregarded (Weathers & Loeb, 2022).

### **State Legislation on Truancy**

State statute determines what is considered unexcused and it determines the number of days a student can be absent before they are labeled as truant (Bye et al., 2010). At the state and local level, the purpose of truancy laws is meant to encourage caregivers to get kids to school, encourage student attendance, and deter skipping school (Student Services/Prevention & Wellness, 2021). State truancy laws determine three criteria: (1) the age a child is legally required to attend school, (2) the age a child is legally able to be dropped from school, and (3) the number of the child's unexcused absences to consider them legally truant (Bye et al., 2010). States vary in when children are legally required to attend school.

State Education Practices (2017) highlights these parameters, some of which are outlined before. Eleven states legally require children to attend school at the age of 5; 25 states require children to attend school at the age of 6; 13 states require children to attend school at the age of 7; and one state requires children to attend school at the age of 8. States also vary in when children are no longer legally obligated to attend school. In 15 states, students are not legally obligated to attend school when they turn 16 years old; in 10 states, students are not legally obligated to attend school when they turn 17 years old; and in 25 states, students are not legally obligated to attend school when they turn 18 years old. Just as states vary in the age a child is legally required to attend school and the age the child is legally able to be dropped from school, states vary in the number of unexcused absences a child can have to consider them legally truant. Several states, such as Delaware, Kentucky, and Kansas, a student is considered truant after 3 days of unexcused. In New Mexico, South Carolina, and Georgia, students are truant after five days of unexcused absences. However, in many states, the number of unexcused absences to consider a student truant is not defined in state statute and/or the number of unexcused absences is determined by each school district for a child to legally be considered truant. Each state has consequences outlined in their truancy laws. Consequences under truancy law typically include the following: student is placed in a juvenile facility or long-term residential care; parent may face misdemeanor charges and be fined and/or jailed; student loses their driving privileges; student is referred to juvenile court and required to pay a fine; student is referred to an intervention program and/or Family Court; parents receive a citation; and criminal prosecution.

For example, per Illinois' 105 ILCS 5/26-8 Compliance Law, three notices of the student's truancy must be given to the guardian. If truancy persists, a complaint against the guardian must be made to the state's attorney or in the circuit court and conduct a truancy mediation to encourage the student to enroll in a graduation incentive program. However, if the

truancy behavior is continued, a truancy petition shall be filed under the provisions of Article III of the Juvenile Court Act of 1987. If the guardian of the student knowingly and willfully continues to permit the student to persist in truancy, they are found guilty of a Class C misdemeanor, is subject to 30 days of imprisonment, and/or could receive a fine up to \$500.

### **Individual, School, and Family Factors Influencing Truancy**

A range of individual, school, and family factors have been identified as contributing to the problem of truancy.

#### **Individual**

Individual factors refer to the student and their sexual orientation, race/ethnicity, and disability (Bye et al., 2010). School climate has an impact on LGBTQ+ students and such individuals face victimization within the schools (Bye et al., 2010). When LGBTQ+ students do not feel safe in their school because of the victimization they face, they will become truant and in some instances, drop out of school as a result (Bye et al., 2010). Because LGBTQ+ students are a group at risk for increased truancy due to fear, avoidance, and depression/anxiety, a longitudinal study was conducted to compare school absenteeism and mental health among sexual minority youth (defined as students who are attracted to the same sex or endorse a gay, lesbian, or bisexual identity) and heterosexual youth (Burton et al., 2014). Data looked at excused and unexcused from school, using sexual minority as a facilitator to already established relations between mental health and school absences. Results of the study showed that sexual minority youth report more excused and unexcused absences from school than heterosexual youth. Additionally, results of the study indicated that depression/anxiety symptoms interacted with sexual minority status to predict unexcused absences.

As it relates to race and ethnicity and truancy, Blacks, Hispanics, and American Indians have generally been viewed negatively by schools and by society as a whole. After years of unequal and differential treatment, minority students begin to disengage from school because they feel unwanted and unwelcomed. The disengagement process in school includes not turning in assignments, skipping classes, becoming truant, and dropping out of school (Bye et al., 2010).

At the national level, American Indian students have the highest truancy rates. American Indian students are over 50% more likely to be absent for more than three weeks of school compared to their white peers and during the 2015-2016 school year, 138,789 (26%) American Indian students missed three or more weeks of school nationally (U.S. Department of Education, 2019). High truancy rates among American Indian students starts early in the education system, as they miss twice as many days as their white peers in kindergarten (Attendance Works, 2015). Such high truancy rates are linked to the common view among American Indians that the education system is trying to make them less Native and more like the mainstream, making for a complicated relationship. Although American Indian students have the highest truancy rates nationally, they have the third highest truancy rates in Illinois. In 2022, 28.8% of American Indian Students in the state of Illinois were absent for 5% or more of the school year without a valid excuse (ISBE, 2023).

Nationally, black students are 40% more likely to be absent from school for three or more weeks compared to their white peers and during the 2015-2016 school year 1,523,095 (20%) black students missed three or more weeks of school nationally (U.S. Department of Education, 2019). Again, this can be seen as early as kindergarten, as black students miss more days of school than their white peers (Attendance Works, 2015). In addition to facing unequal and differential treatment in schools resulting in truancy, the circumstances of a higher percentage of black students living in poverty, being more prone to negative health conditions, and

experiencing more disciplinary infractions compared to their peers result in the high truancy rate among black students. In Illinois, black students have the highest truancy rates. In 2022, 50.2% of black students in the state of Illinois were absent for 5% or more of the school year without a valid excuse (ISBE, 2023).

Hispanic students are 17% more likely to be absent from school for three or more weeks compared to their white peers on the national level and during the 2015-2016 school year, 2,120,547 (17%) Hispanic students missed three or more weeks of school nationally (U.S. Department of Education, 2019). Hispanic students are more likely to be exposed to certain health issues, such as severe asthma, and be suspended from school more often than their peers, leading to truancy problems (Attendance Works, 2015). Furthermore, Hispanic immigrant students face other challenges that contribute to high truancy rates, such as language difficulties, visits to home countries, and high mobility. Language barriers between Hispanic students and their teachers results in disengagement from school because the instruction does not meet their educational needs, leading to poor attendance and failure to graduate (Attendance Works, 2015). Many Hispanic families have the tradition of returning to their home countries for an extended period of time to make sure their children are connected to family and culture, resulting in taking a toll on their attendance and achievement in school. Hispanic students often experience disruptions in their education several times a year because their parents are migrant farmworkers who move frequently and Hispanic immigrant families without proper documentation move often or keep their children out of school to avoid detection. Hispanic students have the second highest truancy rates in Illinois. In 2022, 30.9% of Hispanic students in the state of Illinois were absent for 5% or more of the school year without a valid excuse (ISBE, 2023).

Additional individual factors can include physical and mental health issues and students that deal with fear, depression, social anxiety, and other mental health issues find it difficult to

attend school (Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, 2016). Significant health issues that lead to poor attendance typically includes poor dental health, diabetes, vision impairment, and obesity. Research suggests that students with these treatable health issues miss a combined 14 million days of school yearly and suggest that dental pain contributes to students missing almost two million missed days of school annually (Attendance Works, 2015).

Students with disabilities are 50% more likely to be truant than students without disabilities and during the 2015-2016 school year, 1,329,187 (22.5%) students with disabilities missed three or more weeks of school nationally (U.S. Department of Education, 2019). Nationally, data shows that students with disabilities in elementary school are 1.5 times more likely to be truant and students with disabilities in high school are 1.4 times more likely to be truant compared to students without disabilities (NCEO, 2018). These students are often absent from school due to chronic health conditions, fatigue and other side effects from medication, anxiety caused by bullying and harassment, inappropriate or inadequate special education services, food, housing insecurity, and trauma (NCEO, 2018). In 2022, 25.5% of students with disabilities in the state of Illinois were absent for 5% or more of the school year without a valid excuse (ISBE, 2023).

### **School Factors**

School factors that contribute to the problem of truancy includes stereotyping, low expectations, and poor school climate. According to Bye et al., (2010), negative stereotypes of students' race, sexual orientation, class, and ability can influence a teacher's perception of certain groups of students. This causes low teacher expectation, resulting in students feeling inferior or academically deficient. Parents also face negative stereotyping regarding their level of education, financial resources, sexual orientation, and racial identity, limiting their ability to advocate successfully for their student. The negative stereotyping that both students and their

parents face from schools result in them often being truant and ultimately dropping out of school. Bye et al. (2010) provides an example of a student becoming truant due to teacher negative stereotyping and low expectations: because the teacher formed a bias against the student based on stereotypes, she developed a low expectation of his academic abilities, causing her to show reluctance in taking the time to show the student how to master the schoolwork that he was struggling with. This resulted in the student becoming truant and eventually dropping out because he believed he could not complete the work, like his teacher stated he couldn't (Bye et al., 2010).

In addition to stereotyping and low expectations, the school's climate can contribute to high truancy rates. According to Bye et al. (2010), if students do not feel connected to their school and/or safe in their school, they are less likely to attend. Previous studies regarding the correlation between school climate and truancy rates have found the following: 7.1% of high school students were absent from school in the past 30 days because they were in fear of their safety either at school or traveling to school; students who feel more connected to their teachers and peers have better attendance; and ineffective school discipline and lack of appropriate or engaging instruction leads to high truancy rates (Van Eck et al., 2017). To further evaluate how school climate plays an important role in influencing truancy rates among schools, Van Eck et al., (2017) used a multilevel latent profile analysis to evaluate how profiles of student perceptions of school climate at both the school and student level differentiated school-level rates of truancy. The results of the study indicated two predominant patterns: (1) students reporting moderate and/or negative climates in their schools were more likely to attend schools with higher truancy rates, versus students reporting their school had a positive climate; and (2) climate challenged schools had significantly higher truancy rates than marginal climate schools.



The study further suggests that school climate plays an important role in truancy rates among schools.

### **Family Factors**

Family factors, such as socioeconomic status, parent's level of education, lack of parental supervision, and abuse and neglect have a large impact on truancy rates. Socioeconomic status refers to a family's income, education, and occupational status. There is a known link between a family's socioeconomic status and students' attendance (Sosu et al., 2021). For example, a 2018 study found that 23.2% of students eligible for free and reduced-price lunch were absent three or more times per month compared to 15.4% of students not eligible for free and reduced-price lunch (Garcia & Weiss, 2018). Additionally, the study found that students on the free and reduced-priced lunch program were more than twice as likely to be absent from school compared to student not on the free and reduced-price lunch program when looking at school absences of more than 10 days a month.

According to a 2021 systematic review study, certain theories provide insight into how a student's socioeconomic status leads to an increased risk of truancy (Sosu et al., 2021). Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model states that a child's developmental outcome is determined by their interactions with their environment, meaning that a family's socioeconomic status influences truancy by shaping the child's dispositions, resources, immediate and distal environments, and how they interact with said environments. Per the investment model, economic hardship restricts lower socioeconomic status families to invest in the proper health, housing, neighborhood, and nutrition, causing a student's attendance to decrease. Furthermore, the family stress model emphasizes the strain of having fewer resources available for day-to-day living, increasing distress among parents. The stressors that parents feel result in family contact,

separation, and unresponsive parenting styles, causing an inadequate monitoring of a child's school attendance.

In 2022, 36.1% of students with low socioeconomic status in the state of Illinois were absent for 5% or more of the school year without a valid excuse (ISBE, 2023). A family's low socioeconomic status can result in homelessness. The U.S. Department of Education published a brief in 2022 regarding truancy among students experiencing homelessness in the United States. The brief examines truancy among students experiencing homelessness using data from the school years of 2016-2017 through 2018-2019, the first three years that such data was collected. During the 2018-2019 school year, 1,429,100 students experienced homelessness nationally. Of those students experiencing homelessness, 37% (524,389) students experiencing homelessness were truant. In the state of Illinois during the 2018-2019 school year, 33.2% (19,602) students experiencing homelessness were truant.

In a study of 65 Los Angeles neighborhoods Lara-Cinisomo et al. (2003) found that parental educational level was extremely important in their children's academic achievement. It found that mothers with lower levels of education had children with lower levels of academic achievement, and when children do not do well in school, they are more likely to be truant.

Finally, high truancy rates are associated with child abuse. Armfield et al., (2020) studied the link of a student's Child Protection System involvement and school attendance. The study found that students with substantiated maltreatment had 4.1 more unexplained and problem absences compared to students with no child protection system involvement and found those students with substantiated maltreatment had significantly greater truancy rates. The study also found that greater absenteeism was seen for students with substantiated neglect.

### **Effects of Truancy**

Truancy has long-lasting negative effects on life outcomes and there is a considerable amount of research that links truancy to delinquent behavior, substance abuse, risky sexual behavior, teen pregnancy, and adult criminality (Kearse-McCastler, 2020; Rocque et al., 2016). In the early to mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, truancy was widely studied as a correlate of crime and associations between truancy and delinquency, or recidivism were found by the classic work by Shaw and McKay (1942), Glueck and Glueck (1950), and Reiss (1951) (Rocque et al., 2016). A more recent study found that truants are more likely to be referred to the juvenile justice system at an earlier age and the study found that truants had more incarcerations and more juvenile probation violations than other offenders (Dalun et al., 2010).

Several studies have explored the association of truancy and substance abuse. Chou et al., (2006) investigated adolescent's use of illicit drugs and surveyed 2126 adolescents in a street outreach program between the ages of 12 and 18 to investigate the association linking truancy and drug-related experiences. Results of the study showed that the lifetime prevalence of illicit drug use for truancy involved adolescents was 15.0-17.9% compared to 3.1-3.4% for non-truancy involved adolescents. Henry and Huizinga's (2007) longitudinal study indicated that truancy was a significant predictor of the onset of drug use, such as alcohol, tobacco, and marijuana use.

Truancy is associated with sexual risk among early adolescents and research has shown that teens who frequently skip school are more likely to engage in sexual activity (Rocque et al., 2016). One study indicated that teens who reported a history of skipping school compared had greater frequency of having engaged in oral, vaginal, anal sex, and non-intercourse sexual behaviors compared to those who did not skip school (Houck et al., 2012). Furthermore, research has identified an association with continual absenteeism and teenage pregnancy with findings

indicating a connection between truancy of 15-year-old students and teenage pregnancy before the age of 19 (Rocque et al., 2016). Evidence indicates that truancy leads to adult criminality.

The most extensive work on truancy and later life outcomes, such as adult criminality, was conducted with data from the Cambridge Study in Delinquent Development. Farrington (1996) completed the original analysis of data taken from the Cambridge Study in Delinquent Development study and indicated that truancy was associated with negative later outcomes at age 18 and found that those who were classified as truant at age 12 and 14 had poorer overall outcomes, such as low-status jobs, smoking, and increased rates of crime and delinquency. Farrington's original data analysis found that at the age of 32, past truants were more likely to use marijuana, be tattooed, have a child living elsewhere, to be heavy drinkers, to be involved in fights, and have more illnesses. Moreover, past truants were more likely to be convicted of crimes between the ages of 21 and 32.

To extend on Farrington's original analysis of the data from the Cambridge Study in Delinquent Development, Rocque et al. (2016) examined later life outcomes of truants compared to non-truants using the data from the Cambridge Study in Delinquent Development at ages 32, 48, and 50. Thus, evaluating the relationship between truancy and very long-term life outcomes into late middle adulthood for the first time. In comparison of truants and non-truants, truants differed significantly on all measures of convictions and eight of the 15 measures of negative life outcomes at age 32 and 48. Sixty-five percent of truants had been convicted by the age of 50 for any crime, compared to 30.3% of non-truants. Non-violent convictions in truants accounted for 65.1% compared to 29.2% convictions in non-truants and 16.5% truants were convicted of violent crimes, compared to 7.2% for non-truants by the age of 50. Truancy predicts any conviction up to age 50 with truants having about 2.5 greater odds of being convicted than non-

truants. Additionally, the research found that the truant group in the study had a much higher percentage of total life-failure or adjustment problems.

### **School Approaches to Truancy**

Schools across the United States vary in their approaches to truancy issues. Most states require school districts to notify parents when students have been absent from school for multiple days. To ensure student attendance, schools communicate with families in numerous ways to notify guardians of their student's truancy (Lasky-Fink et al., 2021). Notifications include warning letters, phone calls, emails, and home visits, and they typically emphasize parental liability and are punitive in nature. In Illinois, a school employee/volunteer is required to make a reasonable effort to notify the guardian of a student via telephone within two hours of the first-class period when the student is absent without notification of absence to the school (105 ILCS 5/26-3b.). Additionally, three letter notifications of truancy via mail is required in Illinois. The notices must state the dates of excused/unexcused absences, must state the attendance at school must begin, and state that such attendance must be continuous and consecutive in the district during the remainder of the school year (105 ILCS 5/26-7.).

A common school approach involves school disciplinary responses, such as the utilization of zero tolerance policies to address truancy issues. Introduced during the Reagan Administration's "War on Drugs" era, zero tolerance policies were initially utilized in schools as a response to drugs and violence (Boswell, 2018). However, these policies are now used in many schools to address unexcused absences too due to schools adopting such policies to establish a clear understanding regarding expectations for acceptable and unacceptable student behavior. Punishments for students under zero tolerance policies include suspensions and expulsions. Regarding zero tolerance policies and unexcused absences, some schools suspend students for frequent unexcused absences. This approach to truancy has led to truant students falling further

behind in school because they are forced to miss more days of instruction and it makes it difficult for students who need extra support with their school attendance (Boswell, 2018).

Another approach to address truancy is to implement truancy prevention and intervention programs. Such programs are designed to assist students and their families in re-establishing regular school attendance, academic success, and normal school habits. Truancy programs and truancy interventions that aim to reduce truancy and reengage students in school have the potential to improve the path of students and decrease chances of students participating in the criminal justice system (Decker-Woodrow et al., 2020). Based in Atlanta, Georgia, the Truancy Intervention Project (TIP) is an example of just one of the many programs utilized to combat high truancy rates. TIP pairs volunteers with students who aren't attending school and they provide the families with resources and services necessary to ensure good attendance (Skola & Williams, 2012). An aspect of TIP is the Early Intervention Initiative and they work with elementary schools to identify truant students and develop a plan to prevent future absences. The key to this aspect of TIP is to work with students to decrease absenteeism before they get to the level that requires involvement of the court system, diverting families from facing educational neglect or truancy charges in the future. Statistics show that TIP's early intervention has the desired effect of decreasing truancy rates, as truancy rates in Georgia fell from 13.8% in 2003 to 9.7% in 2010 (Skola & Williams, 2012).

Illinois has truancy prevention and intervention programs throughout the state and the programs are implemented through the Regional Office of Education in their perspective counties. For example, Boone County and Winnebago County schools in Illinois are served by the At-Risk Student Services Department at ROE4. The Truancy Prevention program is contracted through the schools and Attendance Interventionists provide interventions to combat truancy, once schools make referrals to the program. The goal of the program is to help students

achieve 90% attendance through the following interventions: student/parent interviews; creation of student service plans with input from parents and schools; monitoring student attendance; community resource referrals; advocating for students in schools; and assisting with educational neglect or truancy court involvement (Kehoe, 2021).

In most states, if truancy continues to be an issue, students and their families are petitioned to educational neglect court or truancy court. In an educational neglect case, the parent/guardian is charged for their child's violation of mandatory school attendance laws (Skola & Williams, 2012). Parents/guardians face the possibility of the removal of their children, misdemeanor charges, and fines (Bye et al., 2010). The court typically orders the parent/guardian to ensure the child attends school (Skola & Williams, 2012). In truancy cases, the student is charged with the crime of truancy (Skola & Williams, 2012). Across the United States, students that are involved in truancy court can face the suspension of their driving privileges, fines, and placement in a juvenile facility or long-term residential (Bye et al., 2010). The orders in truancy cases typically contain very specific conditions that the student must meet, such as perfect attendance in school going forward for a period of time, family counseling, engagement in school programs, etc. (Skola & Williams, 2012).

Per Illinois' truancy laws, if three notices of a student's truancy is given to their parent/guardian and the notices have not been complied with, a truancy petition shall be filed under the provisions of Article III of the Juvenile Court Act of 1987 (105 ILCS 5/26-8). The court petition must include the name of the truant or educationally neglected minor, the names and addresses of the person having custody or control of the student, the dates of the student's non-attendance, the dates and nature of contacts or conferences with the student and/or parents/guardians, and the nature of the supportive services the schools have provided in an effort to correct the student's truant behavior (105 ILCS 5/26- 8a). When the petition is filed, a

hearing is scheduled and the truancy is handled between the courts, schools, and appropriate caseworkers to assist in improving the student's attendance.

### **Covid-19 and Attendance**

The Covid-19 pandemic created nationwide school closures, resulting in schools adopting remote learning. Without the daily face-to-face interactions during the pandemic, monitoring student attendance via remote learning became a challenge. Varied family work schedules, unequal access to the Internet, lack of one-to-one devices for one or more students in a household, and general disruptions to home life due to the pandemic are among the many reasons it became difficult to measure attendance. Because of these challenges, questions about whether and how attendance should be taken and measured arose. To explore successful monitoring and promotion of attendance and engagement via remote learning during the pandemic, Chambers et al., (2020) reviewed existing literature of student attendance and engagement in online learning and interviewed with select districts regarding their remote learning and engagement plans. Their study found that there was limited existing research that focused on attendance or engagement in K-12 online settings and the study relied heavily on the interviews with select school districts and one accredited distance learning provider after they pivoted to remote learning. They asked school districts how they monitored attendance during remote learning and the following strategies emerged: scheduling a weekly touchpoint between the teacher and students as well as a wellness and attendance check; track student attendance during live instruction; track student attendance through submission of assignments; and prioritize wellness and social and emotional learning over participation in remote learning. To improve attendance and student engagement through remote learning, school districts contacted hard-to-reach students through their peers or friend groups, solicited feedback through virtual meetings/surveys, and communicated with families via email, phone, mail, and social media.



Post Covid-19 pandemic and returning to school in person, schools did not return to pre-pandemic levels of attendance (Mehta, 2023). Students had become used to learning from home, there was an increase in mental health concerns, and heightened caution around sending kids to school when they're sick contributed to the high truancy rates post pandemic. Additionally, students had lost a sense of belonging in the classroom due to being away from so long and students lost their connections to their peers and adults at their school (Mehta, 2023).

Students in Illinois were missing in masses during the Covid-19 pandemic- it had a significant impact on attendance and student performance. In addition to declining grades and attendance rates, Illinois saw a significant decline in public school enrollment during the pandemic. 70,000 fewer students were enrolled in public schools statewide, including more than 10,000 students who were missing from Chicago Public Schools (Andriesen, 2021). To address attendance and academic decline during the pandemic, more than \$7 billion in federal funding has been given to the schools in Illinois (Andriesen, 2021). Illinois State Board of Education officials directed the pandemic relief funding to provide mental health supports to students/educators, close the digital divide, and assist students transition to college after high school graduation (Andriesen, 2021). Additionally, funds were directed to encourage students to come to class every day by hiring more staff to connect with families through home visits and phone calls to avoid truancy (Smylie, 2022). Once the pandemic ended and students returned to in-person full time learning, schools reverted back to dealing with truancy as they did pre-Covid.

### SECTION III: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The application of the labeling theory and the social control theory to truancy is used to explain why students engage in such behavior. The labeling theory suggests that a student will be truant if they are labeled as deviant by their schools; the social control theory suggests that a student will be truant if they do not have a strong social bond with their school.

#### **Labeling Theory**

The labeling theory was developed by American Sociologist Howard Becker in 1963 who theorized once individuals have been labeled as deviants, they face further problems stemming from their reactions to themselves and others to the stereotypes of someone with the deviant label. Becker refers to individuals who create rules as moral entrepreneurs and they are those who take lead in labeling a particular behavior (Siegel & Welsh, 2012). Moral entrepreneurs fall into two categories, rule creators and rule enforcers. According to Becker, rule creators are often the self-righteous individuals who are interested in the context of rules and they frequently rely on expert advice when drawing up specific rules, while still having discretion in writing rules. Rule enforcers are individuals who have discretion in rule enforcement and implementation and they feel the need to enforce the rule because that is their job, not because they are really concerned with the content of the rule. Becker states that from moral entrepreneurs' point of view, deviance is not a quality of the act a person commits, but rather a consequence of the application by others of rules and sanctions to an offender. There are two types of labeling: formal and informal. Formal labeling comes from an individual who has the formal status and ability to discern deviant behavior, such as a police officer; informal labeling comes from an individual who does not have the official authority to label someone as deviant, such as a teacher (McLeod, 2023).

Derived from Becker's initial development of the labeling theory, social reaction theorists have developed concepts to better understand the labeling process and the consequences (Siegel & Welsh, 2012). Edwin Lemert's contribution to the labeling theory consists of primary deviance and secondary deviance. Primary deviance involves initial acts of deviance by an individual that have only minor consequences for that individual's status/relationship with society. These individuals engage in 'norm' violations that are quickly forgotten and/or overlooked. Secondary deviance involves deviance that occurs as a response to society's reaction and labeling of the individual that is engaging in the behavior as deviant. With secondary deviance, the individual's deviant act comes to the attention to significant others who then apply a negative label, resulting in the newly labeled offender reorganizing their behavior/personality around the consequences of the deviant act. Frank Tannenbaum's approach to the labeling theory, dramatization of evil, refers to the process of a stigmatizing label leading to an individual to start seeing themselves as a criminal. Another concept to better understand the labeling process and consequences is degradation ceremonies. According to sociologist Harold Garfinkel, this refers to public ceremonies that transform offenders by degrading their self-image. Offenders are shunned by society and thrust outside the social mainstream during the degradation ceremonies process.

### **Application of Labeling Theory to Truancy**

In a school setting, teachers and staff often label students as 'troublemakers' and treat them as such, creating an informal label for the student (Mcleod, 2023). Furthermore, in reference to the dramatization of evil concept of the labeling theory, the student is likely to misbehave to take on the role of a troublemaker because others perceive them as such. As stated earlier, Blacks, Hispanics, and American Indians are generally viewed negatively by schools, creating an informal label, and resulting in unequal and differential treatment. Such labeling

causes minority students to disengage from school because they feel unwanted and unwelcomed (Bye et al., 2010).

In applying primary and secondary deviance to truancy, skipping school once or twice would be considered primary deviance, whereas, skipping school for one or two weeks would be considered secondary deviance. If a student skips school once or twice, it is unlikely to go unnoticed; but if a student skips school for several weeks, it is brought to the attention of the appropriate staff and the student becomes truant. As stated in section I and section II, many states refer truancy students to Truancy/Education Neglect Court. At this point, the concept of degradation ceremonies can be applied: the student goes before the juvenile court, is scolded by the judge, has charges read, and is officially labeled a delinquent. This process contains all of the elements of Garfinkel's degradation ceremonies in terms of the labeling theory.

Additionally, with truancy punishments such as suspension, expulsion, and referral to juvenile courts, schools preserve the 'school-to-prison pipeline' concept. This concept refers to the act of students being funneled out of public schools and into the juvenile/criminal legal systems (ACLU, 2023). According to the American Civil Liberties Union, the path to incarceration for students includes 'stops': failing public schools, referring to inadequate resources in public schools and zero-tolerance policies; policing school hallways, referring to school-based arrests; disciplinary alternative schools, referring to students sent to alternative learning because they have been suspended/expelled; and court involvement and juvenile detention, referring to students being involved in the juvenile justice system for minor offences. Regarding the labeling theory, the 'school-to-prison pipeline' concept states that students being labeled deviant, causes them to act out, and results in pushing them out of the classroom and into the juvenile justice system. Students who have been given a label by their school are significantly less likely to attend school and graduate (Mcleod, 2023).

### **Social Control Theory**

Developed by American Criminologist Travis Hirschi, the social control theory states that an individual's behavior is bonded by society and the extent to the individual's feelings towards the bond to society determines their deviance from society's norms (McLeod, 2023). The concept of the social control theory is that an individual is less likely to commit a crime if they feel a strong bond with society and when the bond to society weakens, delinquent behaviors emerge. Individuals in society are involved in social networks starting from childhood, such as school, work, and family and their behavior conforms to what is expected based off the bond. There are four elements to Hirschi's bonds of attachment in relation to the social control theory: (1) attachment, (2) commitment, (3) involvement, and (4) beliefs.

### **Application of Social Control Theory to Truancy**

Attachment refers to the level of psychological affection one has for prosocial others and institutions and if an individual has no attachment/emotion to anyone in society and/or institutions, there is no reason for them to stop committing crimes (McLeod, 2023). If students do not feel connected to their school, they are less likely to attend (Bye et al., 2010). Numerous social bond theory research studies across the United States have indicated, as Hirschi predicts, that kids who are attached to their families, friends, and schools are less likely to get involved in a deviant peer group and less likely to engage in criminal activities. Furthermore, research suggests that students who are detached from the educational experience are at risk of criminality and detachment and alienation from school may be even more predictive of delinquency versus school failure and/or educational underachievement (Siegel & Welsh, 2012).

The element of commitment refers to the concept of individuals being less likely to commit crimes when they have something to lose- if an individual has certain accomplishments and goals, then they are less likely to engage in criminal activity (McLeod, 2023). With juveniles,

the element of commitment comes in the form of achievement and accomplishments in school academics, as well as school activities. As referenced earlier in section II, negative stereotyping of students in schools can lead to students feeling inferior and/or academically deficient, causing a lack of commitment in their academics. The lack of commitment to their academics in these students results in them becoming truant. As Hirschi predicted, researchers have found that students who are committed to school and educational achievement are less likely to become involved in delinquent behaviors, versus those who lack such commitment (Siegel & Welsh, 2012).

Involvement relates to how an individual spends their time-such as playing sports, doing homework, and going to school- and the concept is that if an individual is heavily involved in their activities, they have less time to commit delinquent acts. If a student is not attending school daily, they experience detachment from society, resulting in engaging in delinquent activities. Additionally, researchers have found that students who are involved in conventional leisure activities, such as social activities and sports, are less likely to engage in delinquency than those who are involved in unconventional leisure activities (Siegel & Welsh, 2012).

Finally, the element of belief refers to the degree to which an individual adheres to the values associated with behaviors that follow the law- the more important an individual's values are, the less likely they are to engage in deviant behavior (Mcleod, 2023). If beliefs allow deviant behavior, then the individual is likely to commit crime. The Los Angeles study completed by Lara-Cinisomo et al. (2003) referenced in section II relates to this element of social control theory and. It found that children had lower levels of academic achievement if their mothers had lower levels of academic achievement, drawing the assumption that this is because the mother's do not value education, resulting in the student becoming truant. Furthermore, research suggests

that students who are involved in religious activities and hold conventional religious beliefs are less likely to become involved in delinquency (Siegel & Welsh, 2012).

## **SECTION IV: RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS**

Truancy issues need to be addressed at both the state and school level in order to make a successful impact on reducing further delinquency in truant students. States can address truancy to help schools avoid labeling their truant students as troublemakers and avoid the ‘school-to-prison pipeline’. Schools can strengthen their bonds with their truant students and their families to improve their attendance.

### **Recommendations for States**

To ensure truancy is addressed at a scale, it is recommended that states take the following steps: (1) make the case that early truancy matters; (2) map early truancy; (3) engage partners in unpacking why early truancy occurs; (4) learn from positive outliers; and (5) insert action into existing initiatives.

### **Make the Case Truancy Matters**

To make the case that early truancy matters, it is recommended that states secure data to show the impact and scale of truancy. Utilizing general resources, such as attendance websites, is a simple way to access information regarding why early truancy matters because it provides research conducted with national data sets as well as from various states. Information and data on such websites often include what truancy is, average daily attendance figures, and what the consequences of truancy are from preschool through high school graduation. The websites are for the public to utilize, but because it is a general resource, there is no specific truancy numerical data for states/schools to refer to when attempting to make the case that truancy matters in their district. However, having state and local data to demonstrate the impact and scale of truancy solidifies the case that early truancy matters. For example, the Rhode Island Data Hub produced state-specific findings that show that students who were truant in kindergarten lagged



behind in later grades, compared to students who attended kindergarten regularly, thus, making the case to the state of Rhode Island that early truancy matters.

Additionally, it's important to identify key stakeholders, such as elected leaders, local school districts, and the juvenile justice system, to engage other important stakeholders in order to make the case that early truancy matters. Doing so generates attention and action to address truancy problems within the state. For example, elected officials can promote relevant legislation and call for a variety of stakeholders to work together to find solutions to truancy (Attendance Works, 2015).

### **Map Early Truancy**

It is important to understand where, when, and for whom truancy is a problem for because knowing who is affected allows states to promote more effective and efficient distribution of resources by monitoring which schools, grades, districts, and subpopulations have the highest truancy rates. Therefore, states should map early truancy by tracking it by grade level and student population and sharing the data collected to important stakeholders, such as school districts. It's important to monitor truancy by grade level and examine patterns of truancy by each student population because overall school or district truancy rates can hide high truancy rates in particular grades and can hide what student populations are affected the most. Furthermore, states should look at both the percentage and the number of truancy involved students because the truancy percentage can mask the high number of students absent from school. For example, during the 2014-2015 school year, Oakland examined both the truancy percentage and number of students who were absent from school by racial/ethnic groups. The percentages show that the racial/ethnic group of African American students had the highest truancy rate, followed by the racial/ethnic groups of other, Hispanic, White, and Asian. However, when looking at the actual number of students absent, the racial/ethnic group of African

Americans students had the highest number, followed by Hispanic students. If the truancy percentage was all that was looked at, then Oakland would have missed the large number of Hispanic students being absent from school. States should establish an online source so that information of overall truancy rates are easily accessible. Doing so allows for community partners to identify which schools and students could benefit from their support/programs. Additionally, the statewide approach to publishing truancy data annually would ensure that the metric is being calculated in a consistent manner for purposes of comparison and it would allow the tracking of truancy rates among high mobile students that are moving across school districts (Attendance Works, 2015).

### **Why Truancy Occurs**

States should engage partners in looking at why early truancy occurs. By finding the specific and unique barriers to why particular students are not attending school, interventions are most effective because they respond directly to the issues the truancy involved students and their families are facing. Many unexcused absences are due to health-related issues and by uncovering this issue, states can help in making sure that districts, schools, and communities understand the connection between attendance and student health and provide them with the necessary resources. States can support by offering guidance to help schools and districts partner with health professionals, ensuring they understand how to use education and health data to identify reasons for truancy, encouraging schools to offer school-based health resources, and by helping schools understand where to access resources to assist with truancy due to health problems. A school-based clinic in Baltimore decreased truancy from 17% to 11% because they were able to provide health plans and bring health services, such as immunizations and free dental services, to the school for students who were absent due to health-related problems. In addition to states providing support to school districts to reduce health related attendance barriers, they can also

support them in reducing attendance barriers for other factors that are contributing to truancy. As stated earlier, a student's socioeconomic status, their sexual orientation, disability, and child abuse can contribute to truancy. States should provide support to school districts to reduce all barriers to attendance. In Illinois, for example, there are laws that protect the educational rights of homeless children to assist in reducing low socioeconomic barriers that affect attendance. Under the McKinney-Vento Act, homeless students are provided a free, appropriate public education. This includes allowing school districts to give McKinney-Vento students the right to immediate enrollment, school choice, receive transportation to and from the school of origin, free lunches, and have school fees waved (Attendance Works, 2015).

### **Learn from Positive Outliers**

Another recommendation for states is to learn from positive outliers, such as schools with a high level of students at risk for truancy but maintain good attendance rates. State officials can find out what is happening in these schools that are having better-than-average results and invest in what's working in all schools, allowing for states to spot effective practices to replicate in other schools that need reformed. For example, a Los Angeles Unified School District conducted research to find out why some schools in the district's Attendance Improvement Program were more effective than others. They examined practices in six schools and three of the schools had better outcomes than the other three schools. When interviewing staff from the three schools who had better outcomes, she found that they had better outcomes because the school leaders made attendance a high priority. Uncovering this successful practice allowed the state to apply it to the three schools that did not have good outcomes, resulting in an improvement of attendance because staff then focused on student strengths, had more positive perceptions of parents, and expressed a deeper level of commitment to addressing the causes of truancy (Attendance Works, 2015).

**Insert Action into Existing Resources**

Finally, states should insert truancy action into existing initiatives. This can be done by tiered systems of support and school improvements. In Maryland, for example, truancy is being inserted into the state's efforts to improve school climate through adopting multi-tiered systems of supports (MTSS). In Connecticut, the work on truancy is inserted into its targeted investment in the state's 30 lowest performing school districts. Districts must submit plans to the State Department of Education on an annual basis to receive additional resources to improve their schools. The state then reviews the district's plan to ensure they align to the goals of the program and districts with higher than 10% of truancy levels must address how they will improve attendance in their plans (Attendance Works, 2015).

Action at the state level can ensure that local districts, schools, and communities are aware of what truancy is and why it matters, use their data to identify which students are most affected, and have access to effective tools and strategies.

**Recommendations for Schools**

It is recommended that schools use a tiered approach when addressing truancy. The approach starts with foundational supports for the whole school, followed by prevention-oriented supports for attendance (tier 1), more personalized outreach or early intervention (tier 2), and intensive intervention (tier 3).

Foundational supports refer to practices for the whole school that promote positive conditions for learning. Schools can achieve this by ensuring there is an interactive curriculum to maintain engagement of all students, by creating clear and concise communication with families about schedules and expectations, and by implementing social-emotional learning best practices around student achievement (Attendance Works, 2022; Chicago Public Schools, 2019). Students are more likely to attend and be engaged in school when positive conditions are in place. The

‘Get 2 School, You Can Make It!’ campaign in Cleveland, for example, increased the percentage of students with on-track attendance (missing ten or fewer days) from 43% to 58.6% and truancy rates fell from 44% to 30% by creating positive school conditions (Attendance Works, 2022).

Tier 1 practices are aimed at encouraging better attendance for all students and at preventing truancy before it affects achievement. Schools should aim interventions at all students and families within the school. An example of an intervention provided to those involved in tier 1 is the recognition of good/improved attendance. Schools should not just award perfect attendance for a semester/school year because the students who struggle the most will be left out. However, awarding good attendance for shorter periods of time allow students to feel successful, which in turn, encourages them to attend school (Attendance Works, 2022).

Tier 2 pertains to students that are absent for 10% of the school year (Attendance Works, 2022). Interventions are designed to remove barriers to attendance and schools should be giving tier 2 students and families personalized attention. Examples of interventions provided by schools for students is adding attendance strategies to their IEP, completing home visits, and establishing a check-in/check-out sheet. Stemler et al. (2022) evaluated the effectiveness of home visits for re-engaging students who were truant and found that students who received them showed a statistically significant increase in their rates of attendance. The study also found that certain characteristics of the home visits were related to increased student attendance. For example, home visitor fluency in the language used in the home had an important impact on increased student attendance. Therefore, schools need to be aware of positive characteristics of home visits when conducting them to reengage students in attending school.

Tier 3 practices are aimed to provide intensive support to students who are absent for 20% or more of the school year (Attendance Works, 2022). To accomplish this, schools should involve other agencies when a student is in tier 3. Interventions should include case management

customized to the students' challenges, referral to a truancy intervention program, referral to social services, and referral to Truancy Court. Truancy intervention programs can be very successful in reducing the students' truancy issues. In Washington D.C., for example, 73% of K-8 students who have persistent attendance problems increased their attendance while being involved in the truancy intervention program called the Stand Up, Show Out program. Additionally, 76% of the participants were not referred to the program again.

### **Conclusion**

Evidence indicates that truancy is a risk factor for further delinquency, substance abuse, risky sexual behavior, teen pregnancy, and adult criminality (Kearse-McCastler, 2020; Rocque et al., 2016). Evidence also indicates that poor attendance predicts if a student will drop out before obtaining their high school diploma and individuals without high school diplomas are more likely to experience poverty, low wages, have limited employment opportunities, and engage in criminal activities (Bauer et al., 2018). However, states and schools can disrupt such negative outcomes associated with truancy with the appropriate responses.

Because an array of individual, school, and family factors are identified as contributing to the problem of truancy, a tiered approach to address truancy is necessary for schools. Tiered practices allow schools to target students' specific attendance barriers and provide them with the necessary services to improve attendance. Furthermore, tiered practices promote positive learning and in applying Travis Hirschi's social control theory to truancy, students are more likely to attend school if they are connected to their school.

It is necessary for states to address truancy by making the cases that early truancy matters, mapping early truancy, engaging partners in unpacking why early truancy occurs, learning from positive outliers, and inserting action into existing initiatives. By doing so, states

can help schools avoid informal labeling of their truant students by making them aware of what truancy is and why it matters, and by giving them effective tools and strategies.

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