

Day 1

The Varied Causes and Consequences of Truancy

"Truancy is not the problem -- it's an indicator of other problems. When students aren't in school, we need to understand why they stay away before we can effect solutions."



- Safe Schools and Violence Prevention
Office, California Department of Education

Many students will skip either a single class or even a full day of school at least once during their academic career. They may want to attend a special event, prepare for prom night, or simply take what is known in the world of work as a "mental health day." These isolated incidents are quite typical and unlikely to create problems. However, when class-cutting or full-day absences begin to occur routinely and in response to one or more problems in a student's life, then there is great cause for concern. Truancy has become a very serious issue facing all of our schools, from elementary through high school, and all of our communities, regardless of income and social class. The fact is, truancy is an insidious problem for schools and communities because it stems from a such a broad range of risk factors and leads to an equally varied set of negative -- and even dangerous -- consequences.

Qualifying the Traditional Definition of Truancy

While truancy is frequently defined as an absence from school that is not excused by the parent(s)/legal guardian(s) or the school, there are other important factors to consider when trying to identify and address truant behavior among youth. Even excused absences can be problematic for students and schools if they are frequent. Truancy efforts are increasingly focusing on school attendance -- regardless of whether an absence is excused or not -- since chronic truancy and problems such as chronic health issues both result in the same outcome: numerous days out of school. When students miss extended periods of school, no matter the reason, they are likely to fall behind in their schoolwork, decline in their academic performance, and lose their attachment or positive attitudes toward school. It is also important to look at two dimensions of absenteeism: missing full days of school and missing some classes, but not others. While these two types of truant behavior may stem from different causes and require different types of intervention, they are both likely to create serious problems for young people. Click [here](#) for some brief illustrations of these different types of truant behavior.

Young people who routinely skip school represent a diverse group. Some have personal issues that make regular school

"Truancy may

attendance difficult for them, such as chronic physical or health problems; others face familial and economic challenges that pose obstacles to attendance, such as responsibilities for helping out with younger siblings or contributing extra income to the family. A third group of students are truant because of problems experienced within the school setting itself; for example, safety concerns or academic needs that are not being met. However, the causes of most truant behavior cannot be so neatly categorized; instead, students begin to miss individual classes and full days of school due to several interrelated problems that -- without intervention -- will likely become increasingly serious over time.

be the beginning of a lifetime of problems for students who routinely skip school."

- Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention

Click [here](#) to learn more about the specific risk factors associated with truancy among youth.



Truant students are more likely than their counterparts to engage in substance use and both delinquent and criminal activity. A report compiled by the Los Angeles County Department of Education concluded that chronic absenteeism is the most powerful predictor of delinquency among youth. Furthermore, a California deputy assistant attorney who handles truancy cases stated that he has "never seen a gang member who wasn't a truant first." Because they fall along the same continuum of behaviors, the most obvious potential outcome of truancy is school dropout -- the consequences of which are quite negative and far-reaching for young people and society. In fact, approximately 80 percent of dropouts were truant the year before leaving school.

Click [here](#) to learn more about the relationship between truancy and delinquency.

Click [here](#) to learn more about the relationship between truancy and school dropout.

In fact, researchers have linked low commitment to school to nearly all problem behaviors displayed during adolescence.

Click [here](#) to learn more about the risk factors for and relationships among various problem behaviors among youth.

And, on the flip side, a strong commitment to school has been cited by numerous researchers as a protective factor against risky behaviors among youth.

Click [here](#) for an overview of factors that are known to protect against problem behaviors.

Since substance use and school safety issues are so integrally connected to the problem of truancy, both as risk factors and resultant risk behaviors, it is clearly important to make sure that truancy is a high-priority item on your agenda as a National Drug Prevention and School Safety Program Coordinator. But do school and community members share this perspective? Please answer the following question, then click on "Current Results" to see how your fellow event participants responded.

Do most people in your schools and communities view truancy as a major problem on par with substance abuse and violence among youth?

Yes

No

Vote

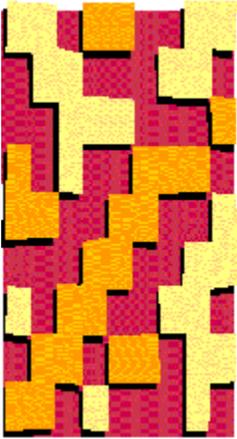
[Current Results](#)

[Free Web Polls](#)

If you have not already begun to address the problem of truancy in your work as a coordinator, then it should prove to be a very natural and comfortable next step.

"Because truancy often indicates bigger problems in a child's life, many communities are designing truancy reduction programs that involve schools, law enforcement, families, businesses, judicial and social service agencies, and community and youth service organizations."

- Office of Juvenile Justice and
Delinquency Prevention



Truancy is a community-wide issue, and resources from all parts of the community are needed to help young people overcome the many obstacles that can interfere with regular school attendance. Any successful antitrucancy initiative will require the formation and maintenance of solid partnerships among schools, families, law enforcement, courts, and other community institutions and services. This is not only the hallmark of an effective effort to address truancy problems among youth, but it is also a defining characteristic of your roles and responsibilities as a coordinator. These partnerships can help make every level of your antitrucancy initiative -- including prevention, early intervention, and legal intervention -- both possible and more successful.

Click [here](#) for some tips for collaborating with school and community partners to address truancy problems among youth.

In addition to collaborating with diverse school and community partners to curb truant behavior among youth, it is also critical to make sure that truancy prevention and intervention efforts span the K-12 grade range. While typically thought of as a problem among students in middle and high schools, many of the risk factors for truancy are likely to begin either before or during elementary school for students and their families. And truant behavior itself is often seen among very young students, as in the case of Jonathan -- from our earlier case study -- who, in third grade, began to experience extended absences from school because of his uncontrolled asthma. It is essential to begin thinking about and addressing the issue of truancy early on since: (1) even a few absences can negatively influence both academic performance and school attachment among students and (2) mild truant behavior can quickly progress to a more serious and chronic level.

"There are many things we can do that are far more cost-effective than waiting for the crisis of delinquency or crime to occur . . . Truancy prevention programs should be developed in every elementary school so that at the first sign of truancy, police, social service agencies, and the school can join together to identify the cases and do something about it before it is too late."

- Janet Reno, U.S. Attorney General (1993-2001)

Spotlight on Parents

As you will see in the days that follow, parents/guardians represent a particularly critical group to involve in your school's truancy prevention and intervention efforts. The following example of the San Juan Unified School System's attendance program illustrates the positive effects that can result when truancy prevention and intervention efforts directly involve and address the concerns of parents/guardians.

In three years, the San Juan Unified School System has reduced its school absentee rate by 41 percent and added four million dollars a year in school funding.

School officials attribute their success to raising expectations among students, parents, and teachers about the importance of attending school. When they started the program in 2000 as part of a federal Safe Schools Healthy Students grant, Joe Tucker, coordinator of attendance improvement at the San Juan Unified School System, and his staff talked to the attendance clerks at all 83 schools in the Sacramento, Calif. district. Clerks pointed out gaps in procedures that were allowing too many absences to go unnoticed. In response, school officials made two key changes.

In the past, students had been allowed anywhere from 20 to an unlimited number of excused absences, depending on the school. When officials looked further they learned that for some students and parents, the ability to call in sick was simply an easy solution to avoid school. Other students had medical problems that were not receiving proper care. According to Tucker, a third category of students had legitimate medical absences, but were being hounded by the school for their large number of absences.

School officials changed their procedures to allow parents up to ten discretionary days for their child's absence from school. Any absences beyond that would have to be covered by a note from a doctor. The new requirements mean that fewer parents are calling in sick for their teenager who simply does not want to get out of bed. School officials have also connected students who have more serious and untreated medical problems to free or low-cost health care that the family may not have known about.

Officials also realized that parents were not notified of their child's absences until a month or more after the fact. What's more, up to 40 percent of the notification letters never even got sent out, in part because some of the people responsible for sending them were "cherry-picking" to avoid dealing with difficult parents, Tucker said. The problem lay in a cumbersome procedure for sending out notices to parents. Officials streamlined that procedure so that parents now receive a first-class letter no more than a few days after their child meets thresholds for missing too much school.

"If I inform you about the problem in a timely fashion, there is a greater likelihood that you will take action," Tucker said. "If I'm going to hold your feet to the fire, I'm going to give you notice first."

The letters come from Tucker, rather than the school, to take pressure off school officials who want to maintain good relationships with their students' families. Tucker and his staff will field phone calls from angry parents. Officials have also fixed some bugs in the system so that students with legitimate medical absences are no longer receiving threatening letters from the school district.

The school district has widely publicized its new policies and the importance of attendance, according to Tucker. The improvement in attendance rates since the program began in 2000 has led to a school attendance rate of 96.78 percent and about four million dollars in increased school revenue each year, Tucker said. In California, schools are paid in large part on the basis of their average daily attendance -- so the more students who attend, the higher the revenue they will receive.



Truancy is a multifaceted problem with a wide range of causes and consequences; in fact, researchers have established a connection between truant behavior among youth and such problems in adulthood as violence, marital troubles, job problems, criminal behavior, and incarceration. As National Drug Prevention and School Safety Program Coordinators, you are well-situated to collaborate with diverse partners to establish a continuum of programs and services designed to promote student attendance and prevent risk behaviors among young people from elementary through high school. Establishing initiatives that allow schools and communities to both prevent and effectively cope with truancy will go a long way toward placing young people on a positive path throughout their school years and into adulthood.

Click [here](#) for a brief fact sheet that you can use to educate school and community members about truancy and related problems.

Looking Ahead

It is clear that truancy is a pressing problem for young people, schools, and society overall that can and must be addressed through a collaborative effort involving schools and a range of community partners. Now that we have reviewed the meaning of truancy, as well as some information about the varied problems associated with truancy, we will take the next few days to explore the three levels of a successful antitrucancy initiative: prevention, early intervention, and legal intervention. The fifth and final day of this event will be devoted to summarizing key points and helping you to reflect on the status of your school's antitrucancy initiative.



Click [HERE](#) to print today's materials in PDF format.



Discussion Questions

Please think about the questions below and share your responses, comments, and/or any questions about today's material in the [Discussion Area](#) .

- ◆ How does your school, district, or state define truancy?
- ◆ Can you share any tips or recommendations (including forms or other materials) with fellow coordinators for successfully tracking truant students?
- ◆ Do school and community members seem to understand the link between truancy and other problem behaviors? If not, how can you help them understand this connection?

This completes today's work.

Please visit the [Discussion Area](#) to share your responses to the discussion questions!

References for Day 1 materials:

Baker, M. L., Sigmon, J. N., & Nugent, M. E. (September 2001). Truancy reduction: Keeping students in school. *Juvenile Justice Bulletin*. Washington, DC: Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. Available on-line at: http://www.ncjrs.org/html/ojjdp/jjbul2001_9_1/contents.html.

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Habits hard to break: A new look at truancy in Chicago's public schools. (1997). Chicago: University of Chicago, School of Social Service Administration.

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Kaufman, P., Alt, M. N., & Chapman, C. (November 2001). *Dropout rates in the United States: 2000*. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics. Available on-line at:

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Loeber, R., Farrington, D. P., & Petechuk, D. (May 2003). Child delinquency: Early intervention and prevention. *Child Delinquency Bulletin Series*. Washington, DC: Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. Available on-line at: <http://www.ncjrs.org/html/ojjdp/186162/contents.html>.

National Center for School Engagement Web site: <http://www.truancy prevention.org/>.

Rudy, D. (April 2004). Personal communication.

Seeley, K. (May 2004). Personal communication.

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Barriers to School Attendance

In 1998, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, the Executive Office for Weed and Seed, and the Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools began collaborating on a broad-based initiative, the Truancy Reduction Demonstration Program (TRDP), intended to enhance our understanding of the nature and prevention of truant behavior among youth. According to the evaluation of the TRDP, the correlates of truancy fall into the following categories:

- ❖ **School factors** include issues related to the overall school climate, such as safety issues (e.g., bullying, gangs), school size, and attitudes of administrators, teachers, and other students, as well as the degree to which schools are flexible in meeting students' diverse cultural and learning styles. Another critical factor is the presence and consistent enforcement of clear procedures, with meaningful consequences, for dealing with truancy among students.
- ❖ **Family factors** include lack of parent supervision and/or guidance, poverty, substance abuse in the home, domestic violence or other familial conflicts, lack of familiarity with school attendance laws, and varied education priorities.
- ❖ **Economic factors** include employment among students as well as students who live in single-parent households, have parents with multiple jobs, and whose families lack affordable transportation and/or childcare.
- ❖ **Student factors** include substance use, limited social and emotional competence, mental health problems, poor physical health, lack of familiarity with school attendance laws, teen pregnancy, and friends who are engaging in truant or other problem behavior.

Rather than comprising a fifth category, community variables -- which are clearly important when looking at the problem of truancy among youth -- are reflected throughout the four categories above. For example, economic conditions and culturally based attitudes toward education (mentioned under family factors) could easily be considered community-related variables.

Return to [Day 1: The Varied Causes and Consequences of Truancy](#)

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Baker, M. L., Sigmon, J. N., & Nugent, M. E. (September 2001). Truancy reduction: Keeping students in school. *Juvenile Justice Bulletin*. Washington, DC: Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. Available on-line at:

http://www.ncjrs.org/html/ojjdp/jjbul2001_9_1/contents.html.

Risk Factors for Problem Behaviors Among Youth

Since truancy is largely an indicator of other problems that students may be experiencing or exhibiting, it is helpful to have a sense of how different risk factors contribute to various problem behaviors among youth.

	<i>Substance Use</i>	<i>Delinquency</i>	<i>Teenage Pregnancy</i>	<i>School Dropout</i>	<i>Violence</i>
Community					
Availability of drugs	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>				
Availability of firearms		<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>			<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Community laws and norms favorable toward drug use, firearms, and crime	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>			<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Media portrayals of violence					<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Transitions and mobility	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>		<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	
Low neighborhood attachment and community organization	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>			<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Extreme economic deprivation	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>				
Family					
Family history of the problem behavior	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	
Family management problems	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>				
Family conflict	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>				
Favorable parental attitudes toward and involvement in the problem behavior	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>			<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
School					
Early and persistent antisocial behavior	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>				
Academic failure beginning in elementary school	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>				
Lack of commitment to school	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	
Individual/Peer					
Rebelliousness	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>		<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	
Friends who engage in the problem behavior	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>				
Favorable attitudes toward the problem behavior	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	

Early initiation of the problem behavior	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>				
Constitutional factors	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>			<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>

Return to [Day 1: The Varied Causes and Consequences of Truancy](#)

From:

Catalano, R. & Hawkins, J. D. (1995). *Communities that care: Risk-focused prevention using the social development strategy*. Seattle, WA: Developmental Research and Programs, Inc.

Protective Factors Against Problem Behaviors Among Youth

While examining the risk factors for substance use, delinquency, teenage pregnancy, school dropout, and violence is a critical step toward understanding these problem behaviors, such knowledge does not reveal *how* to actually reduce a young person's risk in these areas. The key to effective risk reduction actually lies in the exploration and comprehension of protective factors among youth. The resiliency literature indicates that many young people who are exposed to multiple risk factors for problem behaviors manage to steer clear of them, and it seems that the following classes of protective factors are responsible:

- ◆ *Factors inherent in the individual:* These include female gender, high intelligence, a positive social orientation, and a resilient temperament.
- ◆ *Factors related to social bonding:* One of the most effective strategies for preventing problem behaviors among youth is to strengthen their bonds with positive, prosocial family members, adults outside of the family (e.g., teachers, coaches, youth leaders), and friends.

"Young people with strong, supportive relationships with families, friends, school, and community are invested in or committed to achieving the goals held by these groups. They are bonded to these groups. Young people who are bonded are less likely to do things that threaten that bond -- such as use drugs, become violent, or commit crimes."

- National Council on Crime and Delinquency & Developmental Research and Programs, Inc.,
Guide for Implementing the Comprehensive Strategy for Serious, Violent, and Chronic Juvenile Offenders

- ◆ *Healthy beliefs and clear standards for behavior:* Young people who consistently experience healthy attitudes and clear expectations for positive behavior within their families, schools, and communities are less likely to become involved in problem behaviors -- particularly if they have developed strong bonds to the individuals and social groups within these settings.

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From:

National Council on Crime and Delinquency & Developmental Research and Programs, Inc. (1995). *Guide for implementing the comprehensive strategy for serious, violent, and chronic juvenile offenders*. Washington, DC: Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention.

Fact Sheet: Truancy Rates and Related Problems

Please feel free to use this fact sheet to help educate people around you about the important problem of truancy. If you have or can locate information about truancy rates and related problems in your schools and districts, please adapt this fact sheet accordingly. It will pack a more powerful punch with school and community members if they see data that are specific to local youth. You may want to review the National Center's past event, *Using Existing Data in Your Needs Assessment*, for ideas about where and how to access such information.

Definition of Truancy

- ❖ Truancy is traditionally defined as an absence from school that is not excused by the parent/guardian or the school. The specific number of absences required before a student is labeled a truant varies according to state law.
- ❖ While the traditional definition emphasizes the unexcused nature of a student's absence, truancy prevention and intervention efforts are increasingly focusing more broadly on student attendance since numerous excused absences can result in a similar set of negative outcomes as numerous unexcused absences (e.g., poorer academic performance and decreased attachment to school).
- ❖ When trying to define truancy, it is important to look at two dimensions of absenteeism: missing full days of school and missing some classes, but not others. While many truant students miss numerous full days of school, other students have few full-day absences, but are frequently marked as absent from specific classes.

Local Scope of the Issue

As mentioned above, it would be very helpful if you could locate and add some information about truancy rates and related problems in your area.

National Scope of the Issue

- ❖ Between 1989 and 1998, the rate of petitioned truancy status offense cases handled by juvenile courts increased by 85 percent (from 22,200 to 41,000), representing a 61 percent increase in the rate of truancy cases.
- ❖ Truancy cases comprised 26 percent of all status offense cases handled in 1998.
- ❖ Some metropolitan areas report that thousands of students are absent without an excuse each day.
- ❖ In public schools, the absentee rate was highest in urban schools and lowest in

rural schools. Absentee rates generally increase with rates of student poverty as measured by the percentage of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch.

Factors that Contribute to Truancy:

School Factors:

- ◆ School safety
- ◆ School size
- ◆ Attitudes of school staff and fellow students
- ◆ Flexibility in meeting students' diverse learning styles
- ◆ Failure to successfully notify parents/guardians about each absence
- ◆ Lack of consistency and uniformity to attendance and attendance policy within schools and districts

Family Factors:

- ◆ Lack of parent supervision and/or guidance
- ◆ Poverty
- ◆ Substance abuse
- ◆ Domestic violence
- ◆ Lack of familiarity with school attendance laws
- ◆ Varied education priorities

Economic Factors:

- ◆ Student employment
- ◆ Single-parent households
- ◆ Parents with multiple jobs
- ◆ Families that lack affordable transportation and/or child care

Student Factors:

- ◆ Substance use
- ◆ Limited social and emotional competence
- ◆ Mental health problems
- ◆ Poor physical health
- ◆ Lack of familiarity with school attendance laws
- ◆ Teen pregnancy
- ◆ Truant friends

Truancy as a Predictor of Other Problems:

- ◆ Truancy has been clearly identified as an early warning sign that students are headed for potential delinquent activity, social isolation, or educational failure via suspension, expulsion, or dropping out.

- ◆ Truancy is connected to both lack of commitment to school and low achievement rates, which are clear risk factors for substance abuse, delinquency, teen pregnancy, and school dropout.
- ◆ High rates of truancy are linked to high rates of daytime burglary and vandalism.

The Financial Impact of Truancy:

- ◆ Children who are habitually truant are often placed in the custody of social services, which is traumatic for children and their families and expensive for taxpayers.
- ◆ Schools lose state education funding due to high rates of truancy and dropout since such funding is typically dependent on actual attendance rates.
- ◆ The financial impact of truancy is passed on to taxpayers through the cost of court time and personnel fees paid to attorneys identified to represent the school in truancy proceedings. There are also additional costs associated with arrest, prosecution, and incarceration when truant students engage in delinquent acts.
- ◆ Businesses must pay to train uneducated workers. Additionally, businesses and shopping centers in close proximity to schools experience a loss in business due to the number of youth "hanging out."
- ◆ Many students who are habitually truant end up dropping out of school, and the consequences of dropping out are well documented. For example, school dropouts:
 - ◆ Are more likely to be involved in problem behaviors such as delinquency, substance abuse, and early childbearing
 - ◆ Have significantly fewer job prospects
 - ◆ Make lower salaries
 - ◆ Are more often unemployed
 - ◆ Are more likely to be welfare-dependent
 - ◆ Experience unstable marriages more frequently
 - ◆ Are more likely to engage in criminal behavior

[Return to Day 1: The Varied Causes and Consequences of Truancy](#)

From:

National Center for School Engagement Web site: <http://www.truancy prevention.org/> and Day 1

materials.

Collaborating with Partners to Address Truancy Problems

As with all problem behaviors among young people, it is essential to collaborate with diverse school and community members when tackling the problem of truancy. For example:

- ◆ If you do not yet have a prevention planning team with a diverse range of school and community members, begin to put one together. Or, if you do have a solid team in place, consider creating a task force to work on the problem of truancy. Try to make sure that such a group includes school staff, parents, law enforcement, business leaders, the faith community, and students.

At Peninsula High School we have just this year started a Truancy Task Force. It is very new and still in the needs assessment period. Members of the task force include the following:

- ◆ Chair - Community Mobilization Specialist, works for Safe Streets, a local CBO (NB which means built-in sustainability since School Security Coordinator doesn't chair)
- ◆ School SRO
- ◆ Communities in Schools
- ◆ Youth Coach from city CBO serving our area
- ◆ Parent
- ◆ Cofounder of Ignite Mentoring Program
- ◆ Prevention Coordinator (that's yours truly, in second of three-year National Coord. Grant)
- ◆ Probation Officer
- ◆ Family Preservation Therapist from Catholic Community Services
- ◆ School Nurse
- ◆ Executive Director of Key Peninsula Community Services

- Marilyn R. Perks
Prevention Resource Coordinator
Puget Sound ESD at Peninsula HS

- ◆ Generate public discussion of truancy issues and policies with school staff at school board meetings, with parents and teachers at PTA meetings, and with diverse community members in other public forums.
- ◆ Consult with your district attorney about the link between truancy, substance

abuse, and crime in your area and how you might collaborate to address these problems.

- ❖ Collaborate with your police department on truancy prevention and intervention efforts. For example, start a "truancy patrol" and engage local businesses and residents to participate. When youth are caught skipping school, they can be reported to the school system and either returned to class or home to their families.
- ❖ Make sure that schools and social service agencies are working with at-risk students as well as their families, since truancy often stems from various challenges in students' homes.

To learn more about collaborating with school and community partners throughout the prevention planning and programming process, please visit the National Center's past on-line event [Promoting Prevention Through School-Community Partnerships](#).

[Return to Day 1: The Varied Causes and Consequences of Truancy](#)

From:

Join Together Online. (January 1998). *Keeping kids in school*. Boston, MA: Author. Available on-line at: <http://www.jointogether.org/sa/resources/database/reader/0,1884,256722,00.html>.

Different Dimensions of Truancy

While the traditional definition of truancy tends to emphasize the unexcused nature of a student's full-day absence from school, both excused absences as well as absences from particular classes are also important components of a more modern understanding of the truancy problem. Consider the following student:



Jonathan had always been a good student who enjoyed school and got along well with his peers and teachers. When he was diagnosed with asthma in the first grade, it was quickly brought under control and did not interfere with his school attendance or performance; however, shortly after he started third grade, Jonathan's teacher and friends noticed that he was wheezing and coughing much more regularly than ever before. He also seemed very tired during the day, and he began to miss school for long stretches of time due to his illness. Jonathan's grades started to decline, as did his once-positive attitude toward school.

Jonathan began to experience both trouble during the school day and extended absences from school due to uncontrolled asthma. While his absences were all excused, that did not prevent his academic performance from slipping nor his once-positive attitude toward school from becoming more and more negative. Now consider the following examples of unexcused absences:

Ella was bounced around from relative to relative after her mother lost custody, but none of them worked out. When her father gained custody, her situation failed to improve since he was struggling with drugs and debt. To buy her school uniform and other necessities, Ella began selling drugs the summer before she enrolled in high school. While her attendance in eighth grade was often spotty, it worsened throughout ninth grade. At the beginning of the year, she spent much of her time in the social worker's office. By the end of the semester, she had missed 27 out of 90 days. Ella then missed more than half of her second semester of ninth grade.



Jake was looking forward to high school. He enjoyed learning and was excited to play on the school football team. His parents valued education and encouraged him to do well, but Jake found that high school was more difficult than he had anticipated. When he met a couple of guys who were into skipping classes to read comic books in the cafeteria, Jake started to join them. He found his math class, which took place right after lunch, to be particularly difficult. So, he would simply read comics in the cafeteria until math was over. Despite missing only two full days of school during his first semester of ninth grade, he was absent from math class 20 times.



Ella's truancy is clearly based on missing full days of school due to problems at home, while Jake displayed truant behavior in only one class because he began to experience difficulties with that particular subject. While Ella will clearly require a significant amount of aid from various services if she is to surmount her very serious problems, Jake's situation will also require attention and intervention if he is to get back onto a positive path and have a successful school experience.

These are only a few examples of how truancy might play out, but they do reveal how it can stem from very different causes and manifest in a variety of ways. In a report examining truancy in Chicago's public high schools, students were characterized in the following ways:

- ❖ Moderate truants if they missed 11-20 classes or full days each semester (2-4 weeks)
- ❖ Extreme truants if they missed 21 or more classes or full days each semester (more than 4 weeks)

** Please note that there is no standard level of absenteeism that constitutes truancy. Instead, the definition varies from state to state, and even from district to district and school to school. This is just an example of one possible definition.*

These definitions focus only on the number of absences; they do not differentiate between class-cutting and full-day absences, nor do they require a student's absence to be unexcused to be considered truant behavior. By defining truancy broadly and focusing on the more general issue of school attendance, educators can gain a more accurate sense of which students are experiencing some sort of barrier to learning.

[Return to Day 1: The Varied Causes and Consequences of Truancy](#)

From:

Habits hard to break: A new look at truancy in Chicago's public schools. (1997). Chicago: University of Chicago, School of Social Service Administration.

Truancy and Delinquency

The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention's (OJJDP) Program of Research on the Causes and Correlates of Delinquency indicates that truancy is a likely precursor to serious nonviolent and violent offenses among youth, and that the connection between truancy and delinquency seems to be particularly strong among males. These and other important findings also emerged from the work of OJJDP Study Group on Very Young Offenders, which was established in 1998 to examine the research literature pertaining to three categories of children:

- ❖ **Serious child delinquents** who have committed one or more of the following acts: homicide, aggravated assault, robbery, rape, or serious arson.
- ❖ **Other child delinquents** (excluding serious delinquents).
- ❖ **Children showing persistent disruptive behavior** (including truancy and incorrigibility) who are at risk of offending.

In an OJJDP *Child Delinquency* bulletin on the findings of this Study Group, Rolf Loeber, David P. Farrington, and David Petechuk stated the following:

"Generations of studies in criminology show that the best predictor of future behavior is past behavior. Children showing persistent disruptive behavior are likely to become child delinquents and, in turn, child delinquents are likely to become serious, violent, or chronic juvenile offenders."

In many jurisdictions, law enforcement officials have documented a connection between higher truancy rates and higher rates of daytime crimes, including burglary and vandalism. For example, before the TRDP began, police in Tacoma, Wash. (one of the TRDP sites) reported that 20 percent of the aggravated assaults that took place between 8 a.m. and 1 p.m. on weekdays were committed by juveniles. In Contra Costa County, Calif. (another TRDP site), police reported that 60 percent of juvenile crime occurred between 8 a.m. and 3 p.m. on weekdays.



It is clear that not all disruptive children -- including truants -- will become delinquents, and not all delinquents will become serious, violent, or chronic juvenile offenders. However, the majority of serious, violent, and chronic juvenile

offenders did begin to display problem behaviors during childhood. Since truancy has been linked to delinquency, as well as to a range of additional risky behaviors that also correlate with delinquency, it is a critical issue to address as early and effectively as possible.

Return to [Day 1: The Varied Causes and Consequences of Truancy](#)

From:

Loeber, R., Farrington, D. P., & Petechuk, D. (May 2003). Child delinquency: Early intervention and prevention. *Child Delinquency Bulletin Series*. Washington, DC: Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. Available on-line at: <http://www.ncjrs.org/html/ojjdp/186162/contents.html>.

Truancy and School Dropout

When students are chronically truant from school, missing long stretches at a time, it seems like a tragically natural progression to -- at some point -- simply not return. Truancy is a well-established risk factor for school dropout, which is a very serious and all too common problem. Each year, approximately five out of every 100 high school students (five percent) drop out of school. Over the last decade, between 347,000 and 544,000 tenth- through twelfth-grade students left school each year without successfully completing a high school program. However, a substantially higher proportion of students quit school for some period of time during their educational careers. For example, one longitudinal study found that 21 percent of students who were in eighth grade in 1988 had dropped out at some point between eighth grade and high school graduation, even though only 12 percent of them had actually failed to graduate by 1994. It is difficult to draw a clear line between chronic or extended truancy and periodic school dropout. In fact, truants are the young people most likely to drop out of school. According to Guillermo Montes and Christine Lehmann from the Children's Institute in Rochester, N.Y.:

"Dropping out is better conceptualized as an evolving process rather than an event. It is a process that starts prior to the child entering school. Along the way the process manifests itself in a variety of forms. Truancy, disciplinary problems, and failing grades in high schools are late manifestations of the process and immediate markers of dropping out behavior, while behavior problems and low school achievement are midcourse markers that provide additional time for prevention and intervention strategies to work."

School dropouts have significantly fewer job prospects, make lower salaries, and are more often unemployed than youth who stay in school. In 1999, just over 14 percent of workers who had dropped out of school were poverty-stricken as compared with six percent of workers who had completed high school. The following are some powerful measures of the social and financial impact of truancy and the dropouts that result:

- ❖ Less educated workforce
- ❖ Business loss because of youth who "hang out" and/or shoplift during the day
- ❖ Higher daytime crime rates (in some cases)
- ❖ Cost of social services for families of children who are habitually truant



◆ Loss of federal and state education funding for schools

Return to [Day 1: The Varied Causes and Consequences of Truancy](#)

From:

Baker, M. L., Sigmon, J. N., & Nugent, M. E. (September 2001). Truancy reduction: Keeping students in school. *Juvenile Justice Bulletin*. Washington, DC: Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. Available on-line at:
http://www.ncjrs.org/html/ojjdp/jjbul2001_9_1/contents.html.

Kaufman, P., Alt, M. N., & Chapman, C. (November 2001). *Dropout rates in the United States: 2000*. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics. Available on-line at:
<http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2002114>.