

The State of Truancy: Our lost kids

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Abstract

One in every 100 US students is truant. Among students ages 14-17, the number of truants is one in 10. In one township in Indiana one in every three students is a chronic truant. No longer is the family the only unit of care for children; schools are now the primary units of education and are responsible for at least 6-8 hours of student connectedness and social bonding. Thus, truancy prevention and school engagement is a shared responsibility. This study focused on the school environment as a key factor in school disengagement. The results give some indication of what should be done when advocating for programs and activities in middle schools that would positively impact rates of chronic truancy.

The State of Truancy: Our lost kids

Chronic truancy is one of the top five major problems, in US middle schools (Garry, 1996) and is a precursor to dropping out and an early sign of students being at-risk (Abbott & Breckinridge, 1917). Annually, thousands of students are missing from schools and often go unnoticed. One Federal census report recorded that there were over 1,572,179 unaccounted children in the US in one academic year (Center for School Improvement and Policy Studies at Boise State University, 2006). This number represents the amount of students denied an opportunity to learn and suggests that for various reasons, students do not feel engaged in their schools. These numbers also represent a substantial group of minors who are not attached, committed, or involved in school or who do not believe in the value of school. Reid (2000) reports that two-thirds of youthful offenders start their delinquency while truanting. Richart, Brooks, and Soler (2003) assert that beyond permanently withdrawing, chronic truancy is the first stage of the “school to prison pipeline” (p. 4). This pipeline is created through the substitution of school values with unconventional values of crime and delinquency (Catalano & Hawkins, 1996).

In August 2008, Ron Pagliarini, President of the National Truancy Prevention Association (NTPA) announced that the United States Senate passed a resolution declaring *August as National Truancy Prevention Month. This is a testament to the need for work in this area.* The current consequences of chronic truancy have sparked the need for this and many other studies. This article reports on the current state of chronic truancy in the literature and highlights general finding from a recent study in 99 public schools in Indiana.

Defining Chronic Truancy

There is no nationally accepted definition of chronic truancy, making it difficult to keep accurate accounts of the total number of chronic truants throughout the US or in each state (Baker, et al., 2001). For instance, using Federal Census data, the Center for School Improvement and Policy Studies at Boise State University (2006) reported that truancy rates for unaccounted children in 27 states in the US ranged from a low of 3% in Utah to a high of 18% in Hawaii. The 27 states show a total 1,572,179 unaccounted children in the US in 2006 (See Table 1).

Table 1 – Compulsory Education Population – Unaccounted for Students

States	Compulsory Education Population	Children unaccounted in all schools	Percent of Comp. Ed. Population
Hawaii	224,147	39,142	17.5%
Virginia	1,422,261	217,611	15.3%
Missouri	818,295	112,559	13.8%
Oklahoma	701,435	96,472	13.8%
New Mexico	408,478	48,699	11.9%
Delaware	136,663	15,239	11.2%
Oregon	593,197	54,843	9.2%
Kentucky	620,697	57,187	9.2%
South Carolina	699,724	61,399	8.8%
Texas	4,515,918	364,889	8.1%
Alabama	639,026	49,465	7.7%
Wyoming	77,902	5,780	7.4%
Maryland	958,200	66,829	7.0%
Vermont	86,076	5,985	7.0%
Arkansas	499,209	33,663	6.7%
Idaho	215,042	13,954	6.5%
Arizona	921,317	43,038	4.7%
North Dakota	87,388	4,065	4.7%
Washington	985,071	43,448	4.4%
Tennessee	966,431	40,691	4.2%
Montana	130,245	5,408	4.2%
Colorado	653,308	24,989	3.8%
New Hampshire	203,296	7,696	3.8%
Kansas	485,657	17,899	3.7%
Ohio	2,129,724	73,891	3.5%
Illinois	1,872,478	52,580	2.8%
Utah	532,226	14,758	2.8%

Table 1 - Reprinted from Center for School Improvement & Policy Studies at Boise State University (2006), p.18

However, we are uncertain as to whether a standard definition was used in all states or by the authors of the study despite the use of Census data. More so, the California Youth Authority noted on their website (<http://da.co.la.us/cpys/act.htm>) that of those youth committed to their

facilities in 1997, 76% reported not being in school or not attending school as early as the 5th and 6th grades. This is an example of self-report of truancy which does not require a definition.

However, if comparisons are to be made across states, within a state, or across countries, the data may be flawed because of a lack of a standard definition.

Despite this challenge, several definitions continue to be used. For instance, one definition is that truancy involves “consistently skipping off ... having fun, avoiding formal lessons and doing what you like rather than sitting inside a classroom and learning” (Reid, 2000, p. 1). Another definition identifies students “who, have been registered with a school, [but] have been identified as not attending when it, and the law says that they should” (Collins, 1998, p. 2). The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) (2006) defines a chronic truant as any student “who misses 20% or more of school days within a 6-week period” (p. 1). The OJJDP’s definition spots, tracks, and responds to truancy much earlier than other definitions. Due to the location of this study and a state definition already in existence, the definition adopted for use in this study is that offered by the Indiana Department of Education (IDOE). This definition suggests that students who are absent for ten accumulated days of unexcused absences without a medical reason are chronic truants. The Indiana Code refers to chronic truancy as habitual truancy; therefore, these terms are used interchangeably in this document. More specifically, the IDOE’s definition spelled out in the Indiana Code suggests that

Each governing body shall establish and include as part of the written copy of its discipline rules described in IC 20-33-8-12: (1) a definition of a child who is designated as a habitual truant, which must, at a minimum, define the term as a student who is chronically absent, by having unexcused absences from school for more than ten (10) days of school in one (1) school year; (d) An individual described in subsection (a) who is at least thirteen (13) years of age ... (Personal Communication, State Attendance Officer, Gaylon Nettles, March 26, 2007).

With a definition agreed upon it was important to learn about the history of this social problem. The history explores the context of the school environment chosen for the study – middle schools – and reasons for students’ disengagement at this stage in their academic career.

Consequences of Chronic Truancy

Chronic truancy research is gaining leverage because of the increased number of children unaccounted for in the educational system (Montecel, et al., 2004). A major concern of current scholars is that many chronic truants often end their school career with limited means or opportunities to return to school (Eith, 2005; Garry, 1996). In his article *Crisis Deepens among Young African American Men*, Phillips (2006) writes that of every 10 Black men in prison in 2004, 6 were school dropouts.

The effects of truancy and school dropout are far-reaching. The Colorado Foundation for Families and Children (2001) reports that 75 to 85 percent of juvenile offenders were formerly chronic truants. What is the cost of this to the government, schools, and society? The United States Department of Education estimates that the financial impact to the government exceeds \$25 billion annually because of students’ decisions to drop out (Alt, Choy, & Hammer, 2000). For schools, chronic truancy results in loss of State and Federal education funding (Baker, et al., 2001). Although the problem of chronic truancy manifests itself in the school, it impacts the entire community. In their study on “Very Young Offenders,” Loeber and Farrington (2000) point out that the result is a burden on local social services, a commercial loss because of students who loiter and shoplift, a decrease in the knowledgeable workforce, and an increase in rates of daytime crime. Baker and colleagues (2001) reported that over 60% of daytime crimes are committed between 8am and 3pm. Police claim that young students absent from classes commit an astounding number of daytime crimes (Garry, 1996). Reid (2000) reports that in

London, in one year, “40% of all street robberies, 33% of car thefts, 25% of burglaries, and 20% of criminal damage cases were committed by 10- to 16-year-olds and blamed on truants” (p. 3). Miami reported that over 71% of their daytime status offenses -- acts committed by children that if committed by adults would not be considered punishable by law, i.e., running away -- including chronic truancy, were by young people ranging in age from 13 to 16 years old (Bartollas & Miller, 2005; Garry, 1996). Montecel, Cortez, and Cortez (2004) report that in Texas over 2 million students over a 16-year period were said to be unaccounted for in the education system, a loss to the state of over \$488 billion. On average, Texas loses track of 6 students every hour, losing over 140,000 students to truancy or drop out in a year (Montecel, et al., 2004). New York sets record high numbers per day for students unaccounted for in the state’s education system. Garry (1996) reports, that on average, of the one million students enrolled daily in all public schools in New York City, over 150,000 go missing -- meaning authorities are unsure of their whereabouts during the school day. Los Angeles, on the other hand, loses track of over 62,000 students daily who are enrolled in the public school system. Other cities like Detroit have an average chronic truancy investigation rate of over 66,440 students in one year (Garry, 1996). The OJJDP and OESE (1996) report that Pittsburgh is unable to account for the whereabouts of over 3,500 public school students per day in their school systems. Milwaukee and Philadelphia cannot account for the whereabouts of 4,000 and 2,500 students, respectively, during a regular school day. In Indiana 16,000 middle school children or 13% of registered middle school students, were recorded to have 10 or more unexcused absences in the 2005-2006 school year. In one Indiana Township, one in three students was considered a chronic truant (*Indianapolis Star*, April 2007). More so, nationally, the number of status offenses cases increased from 22,200 in 1989 to 41,000 in 1998, an 85% increase (Puzzanchera, et al., 2002).

In light of such numbers, some cities, like Minneapolis, have instituted crack downs on truancy to curb daytime crime. The Office of Juvenile Justice Delinquency and Prevention and the Office of Education (1996) report that because of truancy crackdowns Minneapolis police have shown a 68% decrease in daytime crime (e.g., purse snatching, shoplifting, vandalism of cars) (OJJDP & OESE, 1996).

The impact to society is evident -- making chronic truancy a real social problem. Other evidence of this is cited in Barton's (2005) report entitled *One-Third of a Nation: Rising Dropout Rates and Declining Opportunities*, where he identified that the timing of children leaving school "has shifted from ... between grades 11 and 12, to between grades 9 and 10. ... a significant shift, making dropouts younger and less educated than in the past" (Barton, 2005, p. 13). In addition, opportunities for middle school students to get back into the academic system after leaving have been far fewer than those for high schoolers (Barton, 2005). The Indiana Education Roundtable (2003) reported that early dropouts are in need of "far more knowledge and skill than ever before for them to make sense of the world around them and to make reasoned judgments about their lives and contribute to society" (p. 2). Richart and colleagues (2003) report that chronic truancy is the most frequent offense for which students are court-referred compared to other offenses such as disorderly conduct, abuse of teachers, possession of marijuana, assault, harassment, public intoxication or possession of alcoholic beverages (See Figure 1).

Figure 1 –Allegations of Types of School-Related Incidents (2001-02) in Kentucky

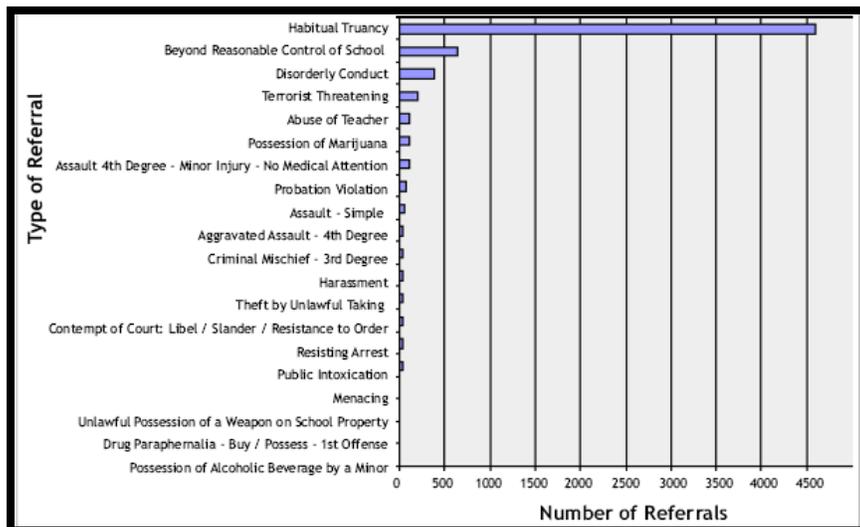


Figure 1 - Printed with permission. Richart, D., Brooks, K. & Soler, M. (2003). Unintended consequences: The impact of zero tolerance and other exclusionary policies on Kentucky students. *Building Blocks for Youth*. Retrieved from: www.buildingblocksforyouth.org. p.10

Baker and colleagues (2001) and Roderick (1993) warn that chronic truancy is a significant predicting factor in students dropping out or permanently withdrawing from school. Therefore, the profile of chronic truants includes them being more academically, socially, and psychologically ill-prepared. They lack the competence, skills, and foundation knowledge to competently participate in the fast-paced technologically driven US society. We cannot wait until students withdraw to make efforts to provide them with the foundational knowledge they need to function well in society. Though one may be alarmed by the percentage of unaccounted for children and the challenges chronic truants will and continue to face, the literature rarely reports what percent of crimes are committed by juveniles or chronic truants alone. Thus, the numbers presented herein were for illustration of the scope of the problem of chronic truancy only, rather than for making accurate comparisons. Each author used different tracking methods and definitions of truancy.

Types and Categories of Truancy

According to Reid (1999), there are at least three types of truancy: *specific lesson absence* – those students who skip a particular class, such as Math, English, or PE, *post registration truancy* – those students who register for class as present and then leave, and *parental-condoned truancy* – those students whose parents agree that they can miss school for various reasons (Reid, 1999). In addition to the types of truancy, Reid (1999) offers a list of possible categories for truants (See Table 2).

Categories of Truants. Having researched and studied truancy extensively, Reid (2000) believes that there are four major categories of truants: traditional, psychological, institutional, and generic. The *traditional truant* is often shy, has a low self-concept, and removes him or herself from unaccommodating surroundings, therefore missing school primarily for social conditions or difficulties. The *psychological truant* more typically shows behavioral manifestations of laziness, illness, fear of a person or thing, or other issues, thus missing school for emotional factors (Reid, 1999). Third, the *institutional truants* are often leaders. They head their own peer groups and are generally not physically absent from school – often engaged in bullying and harassment. Institutional truants are withdrawn from lessons and skip school mainly for reasons related to the school itself or contextual school factors. Lastly, the *generic truant* is absent from school haphazardly for various reasons and shows evidence of many of the other categories of truants (Reid, 1999).

The studies reviewed did not do much to delineate between the three types of truants and four categories of truants, nor is it the purpose of this study to do so. In the future, this type of delineation may produce a more accurate account of the problem and direction about where

intervention is necessary. Chronic truants are not a homogenous group and we must ascertain the ones that need and can benefit the most from school interventions.

Contributory Factors to Chronic Truancy

Some contributory factors help us understand what may affect the decision to become and continue to be a truant. Rumberger's (1987) early work on truancy is noteworthy. He found that two major influences, categorized as either *push* or *pull* effects, may explain the choice to engage in truancy.

Push Effects. Rumberger (1987) defined *push effects* as factors present within the child's school environment that harm or impede the relationship-forming patterns with and within the school. Push effects are school factors that influence a student's feelings of belonging in and to the school. Push effects eventually present themselves in the guise of unruly or disruptive discipline problems, later resulting in consecutive absences, low grades, and an unwillingness to work towards doing well in school (Rumberger, 1987). The factors driving these new negative feelings towards school and school authorities or of being estranged from the school are often internal to the school and not evident externally. Rumberger (1987) explains that these internal school factors become unwelcoming to the student and may be related to the climate of the school, its structure, or even the context that has been created by the school. These factors influence how the student personally responds to the school environment and decides to disengage. Realizing they are too deep to escape their fate on their own, many students simply give up and drop out. Push effects, according to various researchers, may include low intelligence (West & Farrington, 1973), poor test performance (Farmer & Payne, 1992), poor study habits (Titone, 1982), level of achievement up to grade six (Wolfgang, Figlio & Sellin, 1972), dislike of school, lack of interest in school or schoolwork, seeing no relation of current

classes to future work, lack of suitable subjects offered, feeling too old for a particular grade (Titone, 1982), lack of success in school (Rumberger, 1995), school failure (Loeber & Dishion, 1983), or unpopularity in school (Bonikowske, 1987; Conger & Miller, 1966).

Pull Effects. The second influence Rumberger (1987) defined as *pull effects* are external factors beyond the child's internal feelings and views. These effects are based on the dynamic and ever-changing milieu of the child and his or her environment (Rumberger, 1987) of which the school is a key component. Social work views this as the ecosystems perspective. This perspective suggests that "people are thought of as being involved in constant interaction with various systems in the environment including family, friends, work, social services, neighborhoods, community, government, employment, religion, goods and services, and the educational systems among others" (Zastrow & Kirst-Ashman, 2003, p. 5). In each system people vigorously and constantly participate in making and amending each system's boundaries, roles, relationships, input, output, feedback, energy, and transactions in search of a sense of balance (Schriver, 2005). These systems play a critical role in a child's ability to find balance and stability, thereby developing feelings of purpose especially pertaining to school and his or her role in it. These external factors are often overwhelming. Sometimes it is as if they are compelling or pulling students to engage in behaviors such as truancy, especially when they are in conflict (Rumberger, 1987). For instance, the school's objective of a compulsory education may be warranted but when a child is forced to stay home to baby-sit, or to help the family with financial duties, or even if the student is pregnant, external factors create more of a conflict. Eventually, missing more than the required school days may lead to disengagement from school, truancy, and early dropout (Rumberger, 1987). These external effects are supposed to be support systems and safety nets for children. Yet, they may become a huge burden if they are out of

balance, in disarray, or simply non-functioning (Fraser, 2004). Examples of pull effects may include separation from parents, a broken home (McCord, 1982), crime in the family (Robins, 1979), parental neglect (Garry, 1996), parental child-rearing behaviors or techniques, socioeconomic status or poverty, poor housing, excessive reliance on welfare (Loeber & Dishion, 1983), or negative peer group influence or bonding (Bonikowske, 1987; Conger & Miller, 1966).

These examples of push and pull effects have been used to help explain chronic truancy. However, the list is not exhaustive. Reid (2000) adds that contributing factors to chronic truancy may also include a child having any one or a combination of the following factors that are also considered push or pull factors:

- been severely punished;
- been excluded;
- gone up or down a year in school;
- transferred to a new school in the middle of a year;
- have divorced or separated parents;
- been or is currently in foster care;
- have siblings who are truant;
- squabbles or confrontations with teachers;
- a drop in grades; low academic self-concepts;
- conflicts or fall-out with peer group;
- teasing or other classroom situations;
- being bullied; or
- parents with criminal convictions (p. 7)

The categorization of push and pull factors makes it clear that contributing factors to students' disengagement from school can be extensive. According to the National Education Longitudinal Study, the reasons students gave for becoming truant or for leaving school before the compulsory school age varied (Rumberger, 2004). The study found that "77% of students cited school-related experiences, 34% family-related issues, and 32% suggested work-related concerns" (p. 131) contributed to their decision to be truant. In addition, 46% specifically cited

not liking school and 29% stated that it was because they could not get along with their teachers (Rumberger, 2004). These are among the many reasons students decide to truant.

The results of truanting hit many communities very hard especially if they have invested in the student. Yet if the school has not made strides to cater to the needs of the student, irrespective of familial investments, students may still be pushed to disengage from school. Research suggests that in the middle years of schooling, when children are still maturing, the school is expected to make structural and programmatic changes to aid in students adjusting to their developing cognitive, physiological, and psychosocial bodies and minds (Dorman, 1983).

Methods

A cross-sectional online survey consisting of 81 items was administered using Survey Monkey™. The list of participants was generated from the Indiana Department of Education's online database of middle and junior high schools in Indiana. Of the 429 principals invited to participate, 144 responded. The final sample consisted of 99 public schools. Secondary data was used to compare school demographic characteristics.

Results

Due to space only the specific findings in regards to truancy is presented.

The middle school principals that responded to the survey (N = 144) were mainly from rural (57%) Indiana; 23% were from urban communities, and 19% from suburban public schools; very similar to the population from which the sample was derived. Based on data reported by the Indiana Department of Education (IDOE) for 2005-2006, of the schools that responded, over 85% of their student body was white. Again, using IDOE data, the attendance rate (percent of the student body that has attended 180 school days within a one year period) for the respondents was 83% or higher. Academically, on average, the public middle schools invited to participate (N =

428) scored relatively low on the ISTEP scores for Math and English. The highest scores were evident for grade six with the average pass rate in this grade being 66% and gradually decreasing as students progressed in grades – grade 9 had an average 58% pass rate (See Table 5).

Table 5 – ISTEP Scores for Public Middle Schools (n = 529)

Variable	Minimum	Maximum	Average
% Pass Rate for ISTEP Score 6	18%	92%	66%
% Pass Rate for ISTEP Score 7	27%	93%	65%
% Pass Rate for ISTEP Score 8	14%	90%	61%
% Pass Rate for ISTEP Score 9	47%	73%	58%

Class Sizes

Class size was examined using the responses to the questionnaire item 5 that asked principals to report, “On average, how many students are in a classroom in your school?” Frequencies were calculated on the responses resulting in over 50% of the principals’ responding that on average they had a class size of 25 students. The mean was 24 students. The range, however, was a minimum of 12 students per class to a maximum of 40 students in a classroom. However, these numbers do not represent the public school system in its entirety. In general, smaller class sizes are considered to be better for enhancing student – teacher relationships (Ogden & Germinario, 1994).

Between Groups Comparison

For this study the comparison group consisted of those public schools who were invited to participate and did not respond (non-respondents =203). The results were compared with the average of the data available for the non-response schools using the data from the Indiana Department of Education for 2005-2006. Of these schools, on average 84% of their student bodies were White, 6% were Black, and 5% were Hispanic (See Table 6).

Table 6 – Response and Non-Response Comparisons

School Characteristics	Study Sample <i>N=99</i>	Non-Response Sample <i>Averages reported</i> <i>N=203</i>	Universe/ Population <i>N=302</i>	t-test of difference
%Black	6	13	11	2.78*
%White	85	76	79	.830
%Hispanic	5	6	6	1.066

*p<.01

Compared to the typical Indiana public middle school, the study sample (n = 99) tended to have larger percentages of White students and smaller percentages of Black students. In fact, the difference in proportion of Black students between the study sample and the non-response sample (n = 203) was statistically significant. To the extent that rates of chronic truancy are related to the percentages of Black students in the school, (which may also point to differences in poverty or urban location), then the study sample is perhaps under-representing the extent of the relationship to rates of chronic truancy. This has implications for the study results as the literature has identified that struggling schools often have high percentages of African American students (Skiba, 2004). There were no statistically significant differences for Hispanic and White students. Future research should reexamine these same questions with more representative samples.

Definition of Chronic Truancy.

The study sample seemed to have varied definitions of chronic or habitual truancy irrespective of the fact that the State has a standard definition. The IDOE definition states that any student who misses 10 or more unexcused days of school within the school year would be considered a habitual truant. The absences do not have to be consecutive. This definition was not widely adopted by all public schools. Some schools had their own definitions viewing habitual or chronic truancy as one or more of the following ...

- 1) The act of unauthorized absence from school or class for any period of time or leaving school without proper permission,
- 2) Multiple unverified absences,
- 3) Repeated absences without parent notification to the school,
- 4) Failure to report to assigned classes,
- 5) Willful refusal to attend school in defiance of parental authority,
- 6) Absence without just cause,
- 7) Being somewhere other than directed by school personnel, or
- 8) Student who repeatedly misses school.

In addition to these qualitative definitions of chronic truancy, many of the public middle school principals reported a numerical number of absences that were used to determine and define chronic truancy (See Table 1).

Table 1 – Reported Numerical Definitions Used to Determine Chronic Truancy

Percent of schools (N=99)	Numerical # of Absences reported to determine truancy
39	0-5
26	6-10
9	11-14
1	15-20
1	Other/No definition
24	Only use Narrative definition

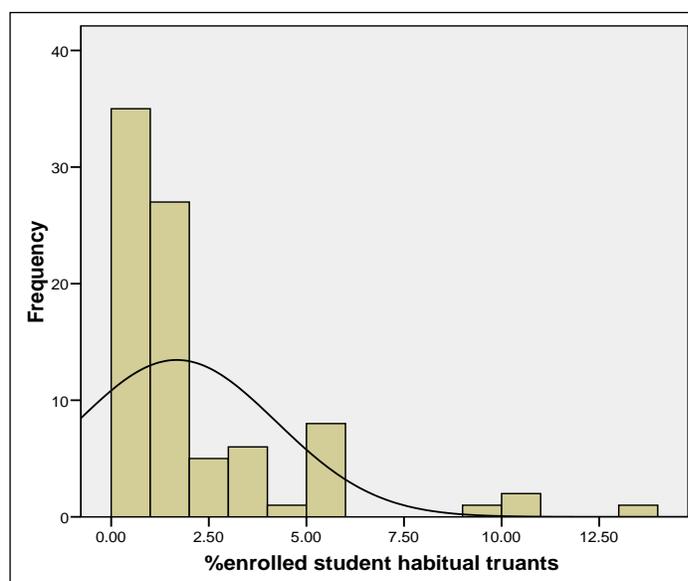
Table represents the % of schools that reported a certain number of absences that are used to determine if students are chronic or habitual truants.

While 24% of the schools defined chronic truancy narratively and used no other numerical definitions, the remaining schools defined chronic truancy with numerical absences ranging from 1 absence to 20 absences. In fact, 39% of the principals defined the range of 0 to 5 absences as chronic truancy. This number was followed closely by 26% of the principals

defining chronic truancy as 6-10 absences. In some instances, the results indicated that schools were actually identifying students as chronic truants much earlier than stipulated by the State of Indiana. Two-thirds (65%) of the schools that responded were using 10 or less absences as their definition of chronic truancy. On average, schools required that students miss eight days before they were considered chronic truants.

Percent of Habitual Truants. In addition to their numerical absences, I wanted to get a view of what percent of their student body principals considered were habitual truants. This information was requested as it was presumed to influence principals' perception of social bonding in their school. In their responses to item 15 of the questionnaire (What percentage of your school's currently enrolled students are habitual truants?), the principals reported that on average, a very small percentage of their students (2%) were chronic or habitual truants. For all the schools surveyed, there was a range of 0% to 14% of the total school population whom principals considered chronic truants (See Figure 2).

Figure 2 - Histogram of Percent Enrolled Students who are Habitual Truants



Mean: 1.68

SD: 2.55

N=86

Tracking and Responding to Truants

On average, over 67% of the public school principals used a combination of attendance records (registers used by homeroom teachers) and school-recorded absences (records kept by the school on overall attendance – sometimes called attendance books) to track chronic truants. Less than 24% used school-recorded absences alone. However, when asked what action was taken after a certain number of absences, there was much variation in principals' responses (See Table 2). Principals were asked "What action is taken when a student misses school?" Their responses were entered into four separate response categories – what happens after 1-3 absences, after 4-6 absences, after 7-9 absences, and after 10+ absences.

After 1-3 absences, 60% or more of the principals reported that their teachers notified the parents of the child's absence; 19% reported not doing anything. After 4-6 absences, 84% or more of the principals reported that they or their teachers continued to send parental notifications and warning letters home. This time however, the letters warned parents of pending actions to be taken by the school if the parent did not respond. After 7-9 absences, on average 65% of the principals reported that more letters were sent home but this time letters were sent by the principals with more warnings of impending court action if the parent did nothing. In addition to this measure, 34% of principals reported that they simultaneously initiated direct disciplinary actions (detention, suspension) against the student and/or required the student and/or parent to attend conference talks. After 10 or more absences the schools used more direct action. About half (47%) of school principals reported that they called for back-up from community partners such as truancy and probation officers, the police, and the juvenile courts; 30% continued to use parental notification and the administering of harsher student discipline strategies (22%) such as expulsion, out-of-school suspension, and loss of course credit, among others.

Table 2 – Action Taken After Certain Number of Absences

Absences	Most Often	Somewhat Often	Least Often
1-3	Parent Notification = 62%	Nothing = 19%	Student Discipline (warning, detention, conference call, talk) = 16%
4-6	Parent Notification with warning = 84%	Student Discipline (make-up time and work, in-school suspension) = 12%	Nothing = 2%
7-9	Parent Notification (with description of court action and formal policies) = 65%	Student Discipline (warning, detention, conference, talk) = 34%	<i>None reported</i>
10+	Outside Assistance (from police, prosecutor, attendance officers, court etc.) = 47%	Parent Notification (court action, formal policies, mandatory conferences etc.) = 30%	Student Discipline (expelled, out of school suspension, loss of credit etc.) = 22%

Who is most Responsible? From the results on actions taken after a certain number of absences, there seemed to be an assumption that middle school principals believe parents have a significant role in the chronic truancy equation. This assumption was supported by the principals' responses to two specific items (Q78 & Q81) from the online questionnaire. The first question, item 78, asked: "Who do you see as most responsible for encouraging students' social bond to school?" [Answer choices: (a) the student him/herself, b) parents, c) teachers, d) school principals, e) the community, f) school].

Using the five response choices, principals were asked to rank the entities most responsible with "1" being most responsible and "5" being least responsible. Each principal had one response per answer choice. Overall, the rank order as chosen by principals, using the highest percentage score for each category, showed that parents (31%) were chosen as the most responsible in rank 1. In rank two, parents (31%) were chosen as the second most responsible for creating the social bond. In rank three, the student him/herself (39%) was responsible for creating the social bond. In rank four and five parents (25%) and teachers (25%) were tied for fourth and community was ranked as the fifth most responsible (48%). Since parents were

ranked as most responsible in several categories, I was curious as to what the true rank would be for each answer choice. To ascertain a rank order of total responses, the mean rank was found using the numerical frequency score for each answer choice. For example, all the scores for parents from each category were added together to get a rank order. Although school was not an answer choice it was understood to be a ‘default’ category and served as a sixth category in the answer choices. Since principals had five answer choices it was understood that totals would exceed 99 – the total number of respondents – when totals for each entity in each rank were added together. The result was that the highest score was for parents with over 108 principals believing that parents were responsible for creating the social bond to school. The second rank was the student him/herself 96; third rank school with 94, rank four was teachers with 75; rank five and sixth were school administrators and the community with 61 of the 99 principals viewing them as most responsible for creating the social bond to school (See Table 3). These results are in line with the published literature that largely suggests that parents are perceived as the most responsible for students’ behavior (Fiske, 1991).

Table 3 - Rank of Who is Most Responsible for Creating Social Bond (n=99)

Rank	Total # of respondents for each choice
Rank 1	Parents 108
Rank 2	Student him/herself 96
Rank 3	School 94
Rank 4	Teachers 75
Rank 5	School Principals 61
Rank 6	Community 61

What contributes the most to chronic truancy? Principals were also asked “What do you think contributes the most to chronic truancy in your school?” (See Table 4). The respondents typed their answers into the open space provided in the questionnaire. Since the responses were open-ended, the answers were categorized into themes and then analyzed. The themes that

emerged were 1= Family/Parental Influence, 2= Home Environment, 3= School Factors, 4= Student Abilities and Attitudes, and 5= Other. The answers of each principal were then re-coded with the numerical number of the related theme and re-entered into SPSS to run frequencies. This step helped to ascertain the percentage distribution of what principals believed contributed the most to truancy in their schools. The results indicated that, on average, 75% of the middle school principals perceived that the family and home environment contributed the most to chronic truancy in their school. This percentage accounted for 62% of the principals choosing family/parent and 13% home/environment as contributing to chronic truancy in their school. Other contributory factors to truancy in middle school as reported by the principals were the school (18%) and other factors (6%) not specifically named.

Table 4 – Principals’ Perception of Factors Contributing to Chronic Truancy

Factors	Percent Contribution
Family/Parental Influence	62
School Factors	18
Home environment	13
Other	6
Student Abilities	2

Scholarly efforts are needed to determine what can be done to affect change before more middle school students impair their future. The call is loud especially in Indiana where the local newspaper, the *Indianapolis Star*, published over 15 stories in just the first half of 2007 alone on chronic truancy and its effects with headlines ranging from *Skipping out on success* (April 22), *A battle with absentees* (April 22), *From absentees to dropout* (April 24), *We can jail them later or we can make investments now* (May 1), *Uncaring schools add to truancy problem* (May 1), *To Fix middle schools for high school success* (October 15), *Out of school out of touch* (September 1), *Summer no-shows reflect problems of truancy* (July 26). The headlines are glaring and sure

attention-getters pointing to the need to effectively find ways to engage more of our students in school.

While this focus or interest is not new pinpointing specifically what it was that enabled us to succeed and thereby be able to replicate that success is a challenge. One assumption I have is that the schools' social bonding opportunities account for a portion of school completion. The assumption is that irrespective of our academic abilities, families, ethnicities, or socio-economic backgrounds, if schools provided adequate social bonding opportunities, my hypothesis is that more students would remain in school and not disengage from it. In advocating for such a change research is necessary to support my current opinion.

Summary

Chronic truancy is a significant and emerging social problem in middle schools. To create any long term and effective change, there must be an understanding of why students disengage. Learning about the relationship among schools' opportunities for social bonding and principals' perceptions of students' social bonding in their school on rates of chronic truancy is a first step. Better understanding of students' social bonding in middle schools could enhance opportunities to create more effective policies and practices that address students' need to belong and encourage school engagement rather than disengagement. However, until we better understand the dynamics of school disengagement, the number of children disengaging from school will likely increase as will the rates of daytime crime, financial loss due to shoplifting, burglary, purse snatching, and car theft. While limited research has begun to illuminate chronic truancy in middle schools, much more is needed.

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