

The Impact of Chronic Truancy on Individuals and Communities

Excerpts from the Yonkers Juvenile Crime Enforcement Coalition's Yonkers Juvenile Justice Strategy and Action Plan

D. Prevent Chronic Truancy:

The YJCEC has identified chronic truancy as the most reliable early indicator that a child is at high-risk for becoming delinquent and involved in juvenile crime. For example, chronic truants in grades 6-8 who also have at least one three-day suspension have a 61% chance of being arrested within the next three years.

The YJCEC also stressed the importance of dealing with chronic truancy in early elementary school, before students fell too dramatically far behind their peers in academic competencies. Research published recently confirms the significance of early absenteeism. An analysis of data from a nationally representative sample of kindergarteners¹ reached the following conclusions:

- ◆ On average, children missed 5 days in kindergarten, 4.5 days in first grade, and 3.7 days in both third and fifth grades. However, almost 14% of kindergartners, 12% of first graders, 11% of third graders, and 10% of fifth graders were at-risk absentees: they missed an average of 12 to 18 days during the school year. Over 11% of kindergartners, almost 9% of first graders, 6% of third graders, and 5% of fifth graders were chronic absentees: they missed at least 18 days or more of the school year. In total, one-quarter of all kindergarten children were either at-risk or chronic absentees.
- ◆ In kindergarten, children in poor families were four times more likely to be chronic absentees than their highest income counterparts; this proportion decreased to 3.6:1 in first grade, and 2.6:1 in third grade, but rose again to 5.3:1 in fifth grade.
- ◆ Data suggest the emergency of trajectories of absenteeism early in children's careers in formal schooling: the greater the number of absences in kindergarten, the greater the number of absences in first grade. Over one-half of chronic absentees in kindergarten also were chronic absentees in first grade.
- ◆ Early absenteeism negatively impacted on academic achievement in reading, math, and general knowledge in the early school years. Greater absenteeism in kindergarten was associated with lower achievement in reading, math, and general knowledge at the end of first grade. On average, children missing 10% or more of the school year scored five points less than did those who were absent up to 3% of the school year in kindergarten.
- ◆ Low-income and Latino children were especially at a disadvantage in first grade, particularly when they were chronic absentees in kindergarten: they scored, on average, 10 points less in first grade reading achievement than did white children with the best kindergarten attendance.

¹ Romero, M., Lee, Y. A National Portrait of Chronic Absenteeism in the Early Grades. National Center for Children in Poverty October, 2007, using data from The Early Childhood Longitudinal Study (1998 Kindergarten Cohort).

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The U.S. Department of Justice's Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) recently published a study² that summarized the many negative personal and social impacts associated with truancy:

Truancy, or unexcused absence from school, has been linked to serious delinquent activity in youth and to significant negative behavior and characteristics in adults.¹ As a risk factor for delinquent behavior in youth, truancy has been found to be related to substance abuse, gang activity, and involvement in criminal activities such as burglary, auto theft, and vandalism (Bell, Rosen, and Dynlacht, 1994; Dryfoos, 1990; Garry, 1996; Huizinga, Loeber, and Thornberry, 1995; Rohrman, 1993).

Much of the work in the area of developmental pathways to delinquency shows that these behavioral problems often are followed by progressively more serious behavioral and adjustment problems in adulthood, including an increased propensity for violent behavior (Bell, Rosen, and Dynlacht, 1994; Dryfoos, 1990; Kelley et al., 1997). Further, adults who were frequently truant as teenagers are much more likely than those who were not to have poorer health and mental health, lower paying jobs, an increased chance of living in poverty, more reliance on welfare support, children who exhibit problem behaviors, and an increased likelihood of incarceration (Bell, Rosen, and Dynlacht, 1994; Dryfoos, 1990; Hawkins and Catalano, 1995; Ingersoll and LeBoeuf, 1997; Rohrman, 1993).

Left unaddressed, truancy during the preteen and teenage years can have significant negative effects on the student, schools, and society. It is important to identify promising strategies to intervene with chronic truants, address the root causes of truancy, and stop youth's progression from truancy into more serious and violent behaviors.

The U.S. Department of Justice's Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) recently published a "Tool Kit for Creating Your Own Truancy Reduction Program"³, found at http://ojjdp.ncjrs.gov/publications/truancy_toolkit.html. The Toolkit included the following overview of how truancy impacted other social problems:

Although truancy often results from deep-seated problems in a child's life, it creates additional problems in its wake. Although some young people miss school to care for younger siblings or to work, truancy frequently leaves young people with plenty of time to get into trouble. The frequency of risky behavior, including alcohol, tobacco and drug use, early sexual intercourse, driving or riding with a driver under the influence, and criminal activity increase with the frequency of truancy. Truants tend to do poorly in school, and fail to earn high school credits and progress toward graduation. A large proportion become discouraged and drop out altogether. Failing to earn a high school diploma is devastating for the individuals, but the negative effects of inadequate education seep throughout society. Dropouts are rarely prepared to contribute to the workforce, use more social service dollars than graduates, and require greater criminal justice expenditures than graduates.

² "Truancy Reduction: Keeping Students in School," Myriam L. Baker, Jane Nady Sigmon, and M. Elaine Nugent, *OJJDP Juvenile Justice Bulletin*, September 2001.

³ "Tool Kit for Creating Your Own Truancy Reduction Program," U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, Feb. 2007, found at http://ojjdp.ncjrs.gov/publications/truancy_toolkit.html.

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One recent study focuses on how dropping out of high school contributes to poverty.

Over the course of his or her lifetime, a high school dropout earns, on average, about \$260,000 less than a high school graduate.⁴

A major report on dropouts in America starkly summarizes how failure in high school locks in poverty. It concludes that for many people in America's cities, particularly people of color,

the only real and lasting pipeline out of poverty in modern America, a solid high school education followed by post secondary schooling or training, is cracked and broken.⁵

Another recent study highlights the dramatic impact that increased education can have on reducing crime.

A study reported in the American Economic Review on the effects of education on crime found that a one year increase in the average years of schooling completed reduces violent crime by almost 30 percent, motor vehicle theft by 20%, arson by 13 percent and burglary and larceny by about 6 percent.⁶

Another study focuses on the long-term impact of changing young people's life trajectory away from crime. Fight Crime: Invest in Kids, a bipartisan anti-crime organization made up of more than 3,000 law enforcement representatives and violence survivors, reports that:

Professor Mark A. Cohen of Vanderbilt University estimated that for each high-risk youth prevented from adopting a life of crime, the country saves \$1.7 million.⁷

The potential long-term benefits of addressing chronic truancy, especially in early grades, are enormous. New procedures could identify and help bring early intervention services to hundreds of high-risk youth in high-risk families who would otherwise in most cases float through the system unaided until they emerged again into public view as teenage delinquents, dropouts, and criminals. The early intervention services provided will not be able to save every student or turn around every dysfunctional family, but they offer our best hope for reducing school failure, violence, drug abuse and crime in Yonkers.

⁴ "FactSheet: High School Dropouts in America", Alliance for Excellent Education, September 2007, citing Rouse, Cecilia E. 2005. Labor market consequences of an inadequate education. Paper prepared for the symposium on the Social Costs of Inadequate Education, Teachers College Columbia University, http://devweb.tc.columbia.edu/manager/symposium/Files/77_Rouse_paper.pdf.

⁵ Balfanz, R., Legters, N. Locating the Dropout Crisis: Which High Schools Produce the Nation's Dropouts? Where Are They Located? Who Attends Them? *Center for Social Organization of Schools*. June, 2004.

⁶ Lochner, Lance and Enrico Moretti. 2004. "The effect of education on crime: Evidence from prison inmates, arrests and self-reports." *American Economic Review*. Vol. (94(1)), quoted in "Education and Public Safety", Justice Policy Institute, August 30, 2007.

⁷ Cohen, M.A. 1998. The monetary value of saving a high-risk youth. *Journal of Quantitative Criminology*, 14(1), 5-33., quoted in "From America's Front Line Against Crime: A School and Youth Violence Prevention Plan", Fight Crime: Invest in Kids, March 2007.