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## A Prospective Longitudinal Study of High School Dropouts Examining Multiple Predictors Across Development

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Prior studies report a variety of demographic, school, individual, and family characteristics that are related to high school drop out. This study utilizes data from a 19-year prospective longitudinal study of "at-risk" children to explore multiple predictors of high school dropouts across development. The proposed model of dropping out emphasizes the importance of the early home environment and the quality of early caregiving influencing subsequent development. The results of this study demonstrate the association of the early home environment, the quality of early caregiving, socioeconomic status, IQ, behavior problems, academic achievement, peer relations, and parent involvement with dropping out of high school at age 19. These results are consistent with the view of dropping out as a dynamic developmental process that begins before children enter elementary school. Psychosocial variables prior to school entry predicted dropping out with power equal to later IQ and school achievement test scores. In our efforts to better understand processes influencing dropping out prior to high school graduation, early developmental features warrant further emphasis. © 2000 Society for the Study of School Psychology. Published by Elsevier Science Ltd

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The seriousness of the drop out problem among American youth is well documented including both personal and societal implications (Cairns & Cairns, 1994; Rumberger, Ghatak, Poulos, Ritter, & Dornbusch, 1990). The estimated 3.4 million nongraduating youth (National Center for Education Statistics, 1994) are ill-equipped for the modern work force, thus ultimately paying less tax, adding costs to welfare programs, and being disproportionately represented in crime and incarceration statistics (Kirsch, Jungeblut,

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Jenkins, & Kolstad, 1993; Rumberger, 1987). Nearly a decade ago, the annual financial cost of the drop out problem was estimated at \$240 billion (Dryfoos, 1990).

In some ways, dropping out is no longer mysterious. Five decades of research have uncovered numerous correlates of withdrawal from high school. Prior research highlights various demographic status variables, individual characteristics, psychological and behavioral measures, and family factors associated with high school drop out (Rumberger, 1987, 1995; Rumberger et al., 1990). They are now well-known but not always useful. Demographic factors such as low socioeconomic status (SES), neighborhood-level variables, gender, ethnic minority status, and low parental education, for example, are consistently found to be related to school withdrawal (Cairns, Cairns, & Neckerman, 1989; Ensminger, Lamkin, & Jacobson, 1996; Fine, 1989; Oakland, 1992; Weis, Farrar, & Petrie, 1989). However, such broad status variables leave considerable variance unexplained and are not very informative with regard to the processes of dropping out. Of course, achievement problems and failing grades also are strong correlates (Borus & Carpenter, 1984; Ekstrom, Goertz, Pollack, & Rock, 1986; Ensminger & Slusarick, 1992; Garnier, Stein, & Jacobs, 1997; Lloyd, 1974, 1978), but these may be viewed as early indicators of dropping out itself rather than as root causes.

In contrast to the above status variables, other studies have identified more direct behavioral influences associated with drop out status such as measures of behavior problems, poor peer relationships, and certain family variables (Cairns & Cairns, 1994; Cairns, Cairns, & Neckerman, 1989; Ensminger & Slusarick, 1992; Feldhusen, Thurston, & Benning, 1973; Garnier, Stein, & Jacobs, 1997; Parker & Asher, 1987). These measures (most obtained in middle school or late elementary school) have predicted later dropping out quite well, often with some specificity. For example, Cairns and Cairns (1994) found that association with others on the pathway to dropping out increased the likelihood that a student would drop out. Studies that include family factors have isolated variables such as parental school involvement, monitoring of the child, quality of parent-child interactions, and family lifestyles and values (Alpert & Durham, 1986; Brooks-Gunn, Guo, & Furstenburg, 1993; Dornbusch, Ritter, Leiderman, Roberts, & Fraleigh, 1987; Garnier, Stein, & Jacobs, 1997; Morris, Ehren, & Lenz, 1991; Rumberger, 1995). However, most of these studies relied on questionnaires or interview data, and with the exception of the Garnier et al. (1997) study, none of them began in the early years.

It is also the case that many of the factors predicting dropping out are interrelated. Peer problems, behavior problems, and achievement problems are strongly correlated with each other. Therefore, sorting out their causal role in later behavior is challenging. Moreover, the predictors of dropping out have known antecedents. For example, observed quality of

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