



# Truancy in the United States: Examining temporal trends and correlates by race, age, and gender<sup>☆</sup>



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## ABSTRACT

**Background:** Truancy has long been regarded a common problem in urgent need of effective intervention. Knowledge about factors associated with truancy can guide the development and implementation of interventions.

**Method:** This paper examined trends in truancy rates between 2002 and 2014 and correlates of truancy across racial/ethnic groups. Variables of interest included sociodemographic factors (e.g., age, gender, socio-economic background), behavioral factors (e.g., substance use, violence), and psychosocial factors (e.g., academic engagement, grades, parental control). Using data from a large sample of adolescents ( $n = 209,393$ ; 12–17 years) we estimated truancy prevalence rates and examined trends and correlates via regression analyses.

**Results:** Truancy rates remained constant between 2002 (10.8%) and 2014 (11.1%). Rates were highest among older youth, females, and Hispanic youth. For all racial/ethnic groups, truancy was significantly correlated with alcohol and marijuana use, fighting, the propensity to take risks, and lower academic engagement and school grades. Other factors were differentially associated with racial/ethnic groups. This divergence in risk patterns for different racial/ethnic groups points to some heterogeneity among truant youth.

**Discussion:** Despite truancy reduction efforts, truancy rates have remained stable. Efforts to prevent truancy and to intervene with truant youth may need to target risk factors more prevalent in specific racial/ethnic groups.

## 1. Introduction

Truancy is a type of absenteeism often labeled ‘skipping’, ‘ditching’, ‘cutting class’, and ‘wagging’ (Lawrence, Lawther, Jennison, & Hightower, 2011). It is characterized by youths’ intentional, unexcused absence from school (Gentle-Genitty, Karikari, Chen, Wilka, & Kim, 2015) without parent knowledge or consent (e.g., Galloway, 1982; Huffington & Sevitt, 1989). Truancy is differentiated from other types of absenteeism such as school refusal which is characterized by emotional distress associated with school attendance (Heyne et al., 2017). Support for the differentiation comes from Egger, Costello, and Angold (2003) study of psychosocial vulnerabilities associated with school refusal and truancy. For example, truancy alone

was significantly associated with lax parental supervision and an impoverished home environment, and school refusal alone was significantly associated with worries about leaving home to go to school and shyness with peers.

A myriad of negative immediate and short-term risks have been associated with truancy. Youth<sup>1</sup> who are absent from school three days in a month are missing 15% of their instructional time. Unsurprisingly, truancy has been associated with poorer school performance and dropout (Henry, Knight, & Thornberry, 2012; National Center for Education Statistics, 2012; Vaughn, Maynard, Salas-Wright, Perron, & Abdon, 2013). Indeed, average academic achievement has been shown to continue to decline as absence rates increase (Hancock, Shepherd, Lawrence, & Zubrick, 2013). In addition to educational

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<sup>1</sup> The term ‘youth’ is used to refer to children and adolescents.

outcomes, truancy has been linked to behavioral and health indicators, such as substance abuse (Best, Manning, Gossop, Gross, & Strang, 2006; Henry, 2010; Vaughn et al., 2013), delinquency, and other externalizing behaviors (Lochner & Moretti, 2004; Hirschfield & Gasper, 2011; Vaughn et al., 2013). Research findings suggest that those who are absent more frequently are at higher risk for and report more serious levels of substance use and externalizing behavior than youth who are absent less frequently (Maynard, McCrea, Pigott, & Kelly, 2012, 2013; Maynard, Salas-Wright, Vaughn, & Peters, 2012).

In addition to the negative outcomes experienced by truant youth, truancy also negatively impacts schools and society. Schools can be faced with loss of funds when students miss “count day” and may be at risk for failure to meet state and federal standards for school attendance rates, which can result in a number of consequences for schools including turning over operations of the school to the state or private company. At the community level, truancy is associated with higher rates of criminal activity, fewer productively contributing citizens, and higher government spending for social services (Baker, Sigmon, & Nugent, 2001).

The high prevalence of truancy across the U.S. compounds the negative impacts of this problem. Studies examining truancy prevalence rates with nationally representative samples found that approximately 11% of youth reported skipping school during the prior month (Henry, 2007; Vaughn et al., 2013). Data from the National Center for Education Statistics indicate that approximately 19% of fourth graders and 19% of eighth graders were absent from school three days in the prior month (Aud et al., 2012).

Truancy is a ubiquitous problem. However, it should not be assumed that truant youth are a homogenous group. Truants have different risk profiles based on various demographic factors. For example, older youth, minority youth, and youth from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are more likely to be truant than younger youth, youth who are White, and youth from more affluent backgrounds (Henry, 2007; Henry & Huizinga, 2007; MacGillivray & Erickson, 2006; Vaughn et al., 2013). Even though minority youth have higher rates of truancy than White youth, this relationship is more nuanced. For example, Vaughn et al. (2013) found that most truant youth participating in the least amount of skipping were White (nearly 80%), while most youth with moderate skipping levels were either African American or Hispanic (nearly 80%), and chronic skippers were evenly split between White, African American, and Hispanic youth. This is consistent with research showing that racial groups have varying levels of participation in risky behavior based on the specific type of behavior (Kann et al., 2014).

Truants also have different risk profiles based on psychosocial indicators. For example, Maynard, McCrea, et al. (2012, 2013) and Maynard, Salas-Wright, et al. (2012) found four distinct classes of truant youth when using latent class analysis to examine heterogeneity in terms of school engagement, participation in school activities, grades, parental academic involvement, and number of days skipped. They identified an achiever class, characterized by higher levels of school engagement and participation in school activities and parental academic involvement; a moderate student class, with a higher level of school engagement, but mean levels for all other academic characteristics; an academically disengaged class, characterized by low levels of school engagement, poor grades, low participation in school activities, low levels of parental involvement; and a chronic skipper class similar to the academically disengaged class with the exception of much higher rates of skipping. The four distinct classes of truant youth were also differentially associated with sociodemographic factors and externalizing behaviors. Members in the chronically truant class were more likely to use marijuana and engage in theft, drug sales and fighting than the other classes.

Research examining truancy rates by gender has been inconsistent. In Egger et al. (2003) study of different types of school attendance problems, truancy was defined as failure to reach school or stay at

school in the absence of school permission, a valid excuse, and anxiety, for at least half a day in the previous three months. Among 1420 youth (9 to 16 years;  $M = 12.5$ ) from North Carolina in the U.S., 6% fulfilled these criteria, with significantly more of the truants being males. Vaughn et al. (2013) used a larger, more representative sample comprising 17,480 adolescents (12–17 years;  $M = 14.6$ ) from the 2009 National Survey on Drug Use and Health (NSDUH). The prevalence of truancy, based on the frequency of “skipping” in the past month, was 11% (9% moderate truancy and 2% high truancy), but no gender differences were found for youth reporting moderate or high truancy. An earlier large-scale study of a nationally representative sample similarly reported no difference between genders with respect to truancy rates (Henry, 2007).

Given the prevalence of truancy and the negative implications for youth, schools, and society, the U.S. government, schools and other private institutions have introduced a number of policy and program initiatives to reduce truancy and improve school attendance. For example, the Truancy Reduction Demonstration Program began in 1998 as a cooperative effort between the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP), the Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools (U.S. Department of Education), and the Executive Office for Weed and Seed (which later became the Community Capacity Development Office). The goal of this program was to “reduce the number of truant children and adolescents because truancy can be a first step to a lifetime of unemployment, crime, and incarceration” (OJJDP, n.d., paragraph 1). In addition, the No Child Left Behind Act, which took effect in January 2002, included annual yearly progress measures to hold schools accountable for student absenteeism. Schools districts across the United States have implemented various strategies to combat absenteeism, including comprehensive and complex collaborations and policies in their attempts to reduce truancy across the district (Gase, Butler, Kuo, & Workgroup, 2015).

Despite significant efforts and millions of dollars spent by schools, communities, states, and the U.S. federal government to reduce truancy over the past 20 years, there is little evidence that any positive impact has been made on school attendance (Attwood & Croll, 2006; Davies & Lee, 2006). Despite these efforts, or perhaps due to these efforts, the number of truancy cases petitioned and handled in juvenile courts in the United States increased 69% between 1995 and 2004 (Stahl, 2008). Some insight into the reasons these efforts have not been successful may be found in Maynard, McCrea, et al. (2012) and Maynard, Salas-Wright, et al. (2012) systematic review and meta-analysis of indicated interventions for truancy. They noted the various problems researchers experienced when evaluating truancy interventions, such as families being disengaged from the school system and being reluctant to commence or continue with interventions. These are research confounds but also practical issues that may help explain the continued high rates of truancy, even when there seem to be some effective interventions available (see Maynard, McCrea, et al., 2012; Maynard, Salas-Wright, et al., 2012).

### 1.1. Purpose of the present study

Few studies have examined trends in truancy rates over an extended period of time, and there is a lack of research examining temporal trends by race/ethnicity, age, and gender. Examining trends in truancy over time can provide an indicator as to whether policies and programs that have been implemented are having any impact. Furthermore, examining variation in prevalence by race/ethnicity, age, and gender can provide important information about who benefits most – and least – from the policies and programs. This information can inform prevention and intervention efforts.

We therefore examined trends in truancy between 2002 and 2014 using a large, nationally representative sample of youth aged 12–17 years. Temporal trends were examined by age, gender, and race/ethnicity. We also examined multiple correlates of truancy by race/

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