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# Chronic absence, eighth-grade achievement, and high school attainment in the Chicago Longitudinal Study

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## ABSTRACT

Although not as commonly reported as average daily attendance, chronic absence data may be of significant importance for understanding student success. Using data from 1148 participants in the Chicago Longitudinal Study, we assessed the associations of chronic absence in the early middle grades, grades fourth through sixth, with eighth-grade achievement and three measures of high school attainment including four-year graduation by diploma, graduation by diploma by age 21, and any high school completion by age 21. The rate of chronic absenteeism, defined here as students missing approximately 14 days of school or more in a year, was 15%. Using Ordinary Least Squares, probit regression, and inverse-probability-weighting regression-adjustment methods (IPWRA), results indicated that chronic absence in the early middle grades was negatively associated ( $d = -0.17$ ) with eighth-grade math achievement and reduced the probability of four-year graduation by diploma by 18 percentage points, graduation by diploma by age 21 by 17 percentage points, and any high school completion by age 21 by 11 percentage points. IPWRA yielded similar estimates. Coefficients varied by subgroup with males and children of mothers who completed high school experiencing more detrimental effects. Associations of chronic absence with outcomes are important to understand because school interventions and practices which begin early can be effective in reducing the prevalence of absenteeism.

## 1. Introduction

In their report, *The Importance of Being in School: A Report on Absenteeism in the Nation's Public Schools*, Balfanz and Byrnes (2012) estimated between 5 and 7.5 million children in the U.S. are chronically absent every year. Chronic absence is often defined as missing at least 10% of school days for any reason in a given year (e.g., Van Eck, Johnson, Bettencourt, & Johnson, 2017). Alternatively, in the 2016 report, *Chronic Absence in the Nation's Schools: An Unprecedented Look at a Hidden Educational Crisis*, the U.S. Department of Education defined chronic absence as missing at least 15 days of school in a school year. Some states have also set their definitions of chronic absence at 15 days (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012). Chronic absence does not usually occur in one school year, but is often a pattern of attendance that develops over time with some children missing almost a month of school each year. Children who have been chronically absent during several school years can graduate high school having experienced an entire year less of instructional time than their non-chronically absent peers (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012).

Despite this reality, children who are chronically absent are not commonly identified by schools. Average daily attendance (ADA) is more widely used and reported by schools even though chronic absence status may be a more significant indicator of student progress. Furthermore, schools may have high ADA while simultaneously having high, unidentified levels of chronic absence if

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absences are concentrated within a small number of students (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012; Bruner, Discher, & Chang, 2011). Schools with ADA as high as 93–97% could be dealing with unidentified problems of chronic absenteeism (Bruner et al., 2011). In addition chronic absence is also a more accurate representation of school attendance than traditional truancy measures because it accounts for both excused and unexcused absences, an important distinction as research shows time in school, not reasons for absences, is what matters for students. The negative impacts of excessive absences occur regardless of reason (RI Data Hub, n.d.; Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012).

In the current study, we further explored chronic absenteeism, particularly in the early middle grades, grades fourth through sixth, as an indicator of the potential for reduced achievement in eighth grade and as an early warning of high-school non-completion. We extended the limited body of chronic absence literature in a few ways: First, we employed the definition of chronic absenteeism, 15 days absent in a year, put forth by the U.S. Department of Education (U.S. Department of Education, 2016), which allowed us to test a lower threshold of absences than in many previous studies. Second, instead of looking only at dropout, we looked at four-year graduation by diploma, an outcome recently named as a Leading Health Indicator in Healthy People 2020 (Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, n.d.). Next, we examined both the main effects of chronic absence and effects for subgroups including males, children of mothers who did not complete high school, and children with average or above parent involvement in first through third grades. We chose to look at subgroup effects because most studies do not identify for which groups chronic absence might be particularly disadvantageous. In doing so, we sought to provide information for the tailoring of targeted interventions to reduce chronic absenteeism and mitigate its harmful effects. Finally, this study is methodologically different than other chronic absence studies in that we employed not only Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) and probit regression, but also inverse-probability-weighting regression-adjustment (IPWRA) to address potential issues of selection.

### 1.1. Review of literature

#### 1.1.1. Chronic absence

Although much research has been conducted on attendance and truancy, studies focusing specifically on the outcomes of chronic absence are less common. Chronically-absent children experience lower levels of both math and reading achievement (Chang & Romero, 2008; Connolly & Olson, 2012; Gottfried, 2010; Moonie, Sterling, Figgs, & Castro, 2008; Ready, 2010; Romero & Lee, 2007). In addition, chronic absenteeism increases the probability of high school dropout (Balfanz, Herzog, & Mac Iver, 2007; Mac Iver & Mac Iver, 2010; Ou & Reynolds, 2008; Schoeneberger, 2012), and decreases the probability of college enrollment and persistence (RI Data Hub, n.d.; Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012). Differences in associations of chronic absence with outcomes by subgroups, such as student and family characteristics, have not been widely assessed, although Ready (2010) found that the impacts of chronic absence on outcomes may be larger for children in low-income homes. Some studies find that children who are chronically absent in early elementary school are more likely to have poor attendance later in school (Alexander, Entwisle, & Kabbani, 2001; Connolly & Olson, 2012; Sanchez, 2012).

#### 1.1.2. Middle-grade attendance

Chronic absence can be especially harmful when it occurs in the middle grades, grades fourth or fifth through eighth (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2006; Kieffer, Marinell, & Stephenson, 2011). During this period, the math achievement gap most readily develops (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2006; Beaton et al., 1996). Children who miss many days of school in the middle grades may be missing out on key instructional time which serves to lay a strong foundation for advanced math in later grades.

Attendance during the middle grades is also critical to consider because this developmental period encompasses the transition from middle childhood to early adolescence (Eccles, 1999), a time of increasing autonomy when children begin to independently make decisions. Therefore, middle-grade attendance challenges are thought to be related to individual characteristics and decision making (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012; McCluskey, Bynum, & Patchin, 2004; Thornberry, 1987). Over time, absence is believed to be less driven by child illness and more driven by child choice (Easton & Engelhard Jr, 1982). Viewed through this lens, absenteeism at this age is identified as a strong indicator of school disengagement and can serve as an early signal for future academic difficulties (Schoeneberger, 2012), including continued poor attendance (Balfanz et al., 2007; Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012) and school dropout (Balfanz et al., 2007; Janosz, Archambault, Morizot, & Pagani, 2008). This is likely due to the fact that engagement is considered a key driver of eventual dropout (Finn, 1989). Chronic absence in sixth and eighth grade is also associated with reduced probability of on-time high school graduation, defined as graduation by age 18 (Balfanz et al., 2007; Kieffer et al., 2011; Neild & Balfanz, 2006).

#### 1.1.3. Risk factors for absence

Risk factors for absenteeism can often be classified as individual-, family-, or school-related. Among individual risk factors for absence, children who experience maltreatment or trauma are more likely to miss large amounts of school (Barth, 1984; Dube & Orpinas, 2009; Kearney, 2008). Previous grade retention, special education participation, and other health factors have also been found to be associated with higher rates of absenteeism (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012; Kearney, 2008; Sälzer, Trautwein, Lüdtke, & Stamm, 2012; Thomas, Lemieux, Rhodes, & Vlosky, 2011). In some studies, males have been more frequently truant than females (Sälzer et al., 2012; Veenstra, Lindenberg, Tinga, & Ormel, 2010), but these gender differences are not consistent (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012). Individual motivation, attachment, and other psychological factors, such as depression and anxiety, have also been found to be associated with absenteeism (Bools, Foster, Brown, & Berg, 1990; Dube & Orpinas, 2009; Veenstra et al., 2010).

Among family risk factors for absence, children from families with lower socio-economic status (SES) were at higher risk for chronic absenteeism in many studies (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012; Ready, 2010; Romero & Lee, 2007). Others include age of mother at birth of child, education level of mother, and four or more children in the household (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012; Romero & Lee, 2007).

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