



Prevalence and correlates of truancy in the US: Results from a national sample



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A B S T R A C T

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Truancy has been a persistent problem in the United States for more than 100 years. Although truancy is commonly reported as a risk factor for substance use, delinquency, dropout, and a host of other negative outcomes for youth, there has been surprisingly little empirical investigation into understanding the causes and correlates of truancy using large, nationally representative samples. Using the adolescent sample ($N = 17,482$) of the 2009 National Survey on Drug Use and Health (NSDUH), this study presents the prevalence of truancy and examines individual, school engagement, parental, and behavioral correlates of truancy. Overall, 11% of adolescents between the ages of 12–17 reported skipping school in the past 30 days. Results from multinomial logistic regression models indicate skipping school was robustly associated with an increased probability of reporting externalizing behaviors, less parental involvement, and engagement and lower grades in school. Implications for theory, prevention, and policy are discussed.

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Truancy, a persistent problem in the United States for more than 100 years, is associated with a host of life-course problems (Attwood & Croll, 2006; Garry, 1996). Compared to most developed nations, the United States fares poorly with respect to tolerating a relatively high level of truancy and school dropout rate (Willms, 2003). Despite significant efforts and millions of dollars spent by schools, communities, states, and the 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; National Center for Education Statistics, 2006; Sheppard, 2007; Stahl, 2008).

Although truancy is one of the major issues facing schools and the education of youth in the United States (Heavyside, Rowand, Williams, & Farris, 1998), estimating the prevalence of truancy has been fraught with challenges. Despite federal requirements for states to report truancy, definitions of truancy and the reporting standards are not uniform across states. Due to this lack of uniformity, calculating a national rate of truancy by aggregating state level data is, at best, problematic (National Center for School Engagement, 2006). Several large inner-city schools systems report thousands of unexcused absences each day while some estimate hundreds of thousands of youth being absent from school on a regular basis (Baker, Sigmon, & Nugent,

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2001). Henry (2007), who examined the prevalence and correlates of skipping school among 8th and 10th grade youth using data from the 2003 wave of the Monitoring the Future study, found that nearly 11% of 8th graders and 16% of 10th graders reported recent truancy. Data from other non-peer reviewed sources indicate a wide range of truancy prevalence. For example, the National Comorbidity Survey (Adolescent Supplement) interviewed 9244 students across the country and asked students questions on truant-related behaviors. From this self-report data, 27.04% of adolescents reported that they have ever played hookey or skipped a whole day of school, with adolescents skipping on average 3.78 days of school during the month that they skipped school the most (Kessler, 2001–2004). Another national survey, the School Crime Supplement to the National Crime Victimization Survey, also asked students in the sample about skipping. From this survey, the prevalence of skipping in the four weeks prior to the survey was 5.5% for students between the ages of 12 and 18 (United States Department of Justice, 2007).

While current prevalence estimates lack the accuracy needed to determine the specific magnitude of the problem, there is substantial evidence that truancy is linked to serious consequences. Studies have found that students who are chronically absent from school are more likely to drop out of school and less likely to be employed 6 months after the end of compulsory schooling, which in turn negatively impacts their earning potential over their lifetimes (Attwood & Croll, 2006; Garry, 1996). Truancy has also been associated with a variety of risk behaviors that can negatively impact the development and wellbeing of truant youth. Prior studies have linked truancy to negative outcomes such as the use of tobacco, alcohol, and other drugs; delinquency and crime; poor academic performance; and school expulsion (Best, Manning, Gossop, Gross, & Strang, 2006; Dynarski & Gleason, 1999; Henry, 2010; Henry & Huizinga, 2007; Lochner & Moretti, 2004; Loeber & Farrington, 2000; Perez, Ariza, Sanchez-Martinez, & Nebot, 2010). The associations between truancy and delinquency and substance use suggest that truancy can best be conceptualized as part of the externalizing spectrum (e.g., Krueger et al., 2002; Krueger, Markon, Patrick, & Iacono, 2005; Vaughn et al., 2011).

Notwithstanding the extant research, there has been little attention given to the examination of truancy as a focal problem using nationally representative samples. Much of what is known about truancy is derived from studies examining the consequences and costs of truancy or studies examining other problematic behaviors. Studies of truancy are plagued by small and/or non-probability convenience samples often comprised of students from urban and disadvantaged areas, or the studies have employed qualitative designs. Few studies have identified truancy rates and correlates using large, nationally representative samples.

Conceptual underpinnings

The problem of truancy is increasingly recognized as a developmentally complex and heterogeneous problem that can be influenced by a number of factors in multiple domains including school, family and individual domains (Kearney, 2008; Kim & Streeter, 2006). As such, this study is guided by a developmental-ecological framework that views truancy as an outcome influenced by dispositional and contextual factors across multiple domains that adolescents traverse. Within this overarching framework, truancy is theorized in two major ways: as an externalizing behavior closely corresponding to delinquency and as an indicator of low school engagement (i.e., disengagement). Although more recent research is pointing to a reciprocal relationship between engagement and delinquency (Hirschfield & Gasper, 2011), it is unclear whether truancy is better theorized as low school engagement, or if truancy is indeed more aptly conceived within the externalizing continuum, in which truancy is just one of several other problem behaviors comprising a syndrome of externalizing problem behavior in adolescence that often persists into adulthood (Donovan, Jessor, & Costa, 1998; Jessor, 1991; Krueger et al., 2002; Krueger, Markon, Patrick, Benning, & Kramer, 2007). Therefore, this study aims to examine truancy from a dual largely intertwined framework that considers truancy within an overlapping engagement perspective and externalizing spectrum in adolescence.

Present study purpose

Understanding the correlates of truancy is important to the development of prevention and intervention strategies. Although numerous prevention and intervention efforts are in operation across the United States, they have done little to impact truancy (Maynard, McRea, Pigott, & Kelly, 2012). This study improves upon and expands the current knowledge base on truancy by examining correlates of truancy in multiple domains from an engagement and problem behavior theory/externalizing behavior framework while controlling for key confounding variables; exploring differences between students who report no skipping, some skipping, and high rates of skipping; and utilizing a large, nationally representative sample to provide a broader, more comprehensive and generalizable view of truancy in the United States.

Specifically, this study considers five research questions: (1) What is the prevalence of truancy? (2) What are the socio-demographic and mental health correlates of truancy? (3) What associations does school engagement have on skipping school? (4) To what extent are youth who skip school less likely to have a parent involved in their lives and in what aspects? and (5) To what extent does the externalizing spectrum of behaviors increase the likelihood of skipping school? We also explore the relative associations among youth who reported higher rates of truancy (4 or more days in the prior 30) compared to moderate rates of truancy (1–3 days in the prior 30). Our overarching hypothesis is that truancy is part of the externalizing spectrum of behavior and, as such, correlates with other externalizing behaviors will have the strongest effects even after controlling for the confounding effects of age, gender, race/ethnicity, family income, and internalizing behavior (lifetime anxiety and depression).

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