Who's Skipping School: Characteristics of Truants in 8th and 10th Grade

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ABSTRACT

BACKGROUND: Truancy is a serious concern that affects most school districts in the United States; however, we do not have accurate estimates of the prevalence of truancy due to inconsistent tracking and reporting practices of schools. As a result, our best current estimates of the national state of truancy may be from self-reported data. In this article, the first objective is to present the prevalence of self-reported recent truancy (ie, truancy within the past 4 weeks) among 8th- and 10th-grade students. The second objective is to explore associations between recent truant behavior, demographic and family characteristics, school-related risk factors, and drug use.

METHODS: The 2003 wave of the Monitoring the Future data was analyzed. Logistic regression analysis was used to assess the association between many potential predictors and the probability of recent truancy.

RESULTS: Nearly, 11% of 8th graders and over 16% of 10th graders reported recent truancy. Among the most salient predictors of recent truancy were parental education, having large amounts of unsupervised time after school, school disengagement variables (eg, poor grades and low educational aspirations), and drug use.

CONCLUSIONS: Truancy is a common behavior among adolescents and can have potentially deleterious effects. This paper offers insight into the types of students who may be prone to skipping school and suggests potential target audiences for truancy prevention initiatives.

Keywords: truancy; school disengagement; drug use; Monitoring the Future.

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According to the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP), truancy is a serious concern that affects most school districts in the United States.[1] The level of concern over truancy is such that OJJDP named truancy prevention as a national priority.[2] However, while anecdotal evidence suggests that truancy has reached epidemic proportions,[3] we do not have accurate estimates of the prevalence of truancy in the United States due to inconsistent tracking and reporting practices of schools. As a result, our best current estimates of the national state of truancy are from self-reported data. In this article, the first objective is to present the prevalence of self-reported recent truancy (ie, truancy within the past 4 weeks) among the 8th- and 10th-grade students who participated in the Monitoring the Future (MTF) national survey in 2003.

Truancy is a problem behavior that deserves much more attention. Fantuzzo et al[3] indicate that truancy's consequences are far reaching, resulting in negative implications for multiple levels of society. For example, at the individual level, truancy is predictive of maladjustment,[4] poor academic performance and school dropout,[5,6] substance abuse,[7] delinquency,[6-17] and teenage pregnancy.[18] There is also evidence to suggest that the negative effect of truancy persists past adolescence, predicting poor adult outcomes, including violence, marital instability, job instability, adult criminality, and incarceration.[11,19-21] In addition, truancy's consequences extend beyond the individual and his/her family to the society at large. That is, truancy exerts a negative effect on communities because of its effect on delinquency, crime, and negative adult outcomes.

In addition to a paucity of research pertaining to the prevalence of truancy in the United States, we also know surprisingly little about the correlates of truancy. That is, while several studies have assessed the consequences of truancy, no studies that could be identified have assessed the predictors, causes, or correlates of truancy using a nationally representative sample of youth. It is surprising to note that very little research has been conducted to understand truant behavior. Of course, in order to prevent truancy, it is necessary to understand the characteristics of truant youth. Therefore, the second objective of this article is to explore associations between recent truant behavior, demographic characteristics, other school-related risk factors, and drug use among adolescents.

METHODS

Data

The data used for this study were collected by the MTF study in 2003 (Form 1 Data).[22] The MTF study began in 1975 with the goal of tracking drug-using beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors of high school students in the United States. The study employs a multistage probability sample design involving 3 selection stages: (1) geographic areas, (2) schools (or linked groups of schools) within geographic areas, and (3) students within the sampled schools. Within the selected schools, all students were invited to participate in the survey in schools with less than 350 students in a grade. In schools that had more than 350 students in the grade, a random sample of students or classes was drawn. Schools that refused to participate were replaced with similar schools in terms of geographic location, size, and type of school (eg, public, private/Catholic, private/non-Catholic). Schools with less than 15 8th graders (for the 8th-grade survey) or 25 10th graders (for the 10th-grade survey) were excluded. The MTF research team reports that the participation rate among schools has ranged between 66% and 80% since 1975. In 2003, 89% of 8th graders and 88% of 10th graders participated in the survey. In total, data were collected from 5684 8th-grade students and 5429 10th-grade students.

Before data collection, all students were informed that the survey was completely anonymous, that their participation was voluntary, and that they could stop at any time. The data were collected in classroom settings during school hours.

Measures

The response variable of interest, recent truancy, is represented by a single item that assessed the number of full days each student skipped school without an excuse during the 4-week period prior to the survey. The response categories include none, 1, 2, 3, 4-5, 6-10, and 11 days or more days.

The correlates of interest include size of the community (comparing students who lived in one of the 24 largest metropolitan statistical areas to all other students), gender, race (note that the MTF research team sets all races/ethnicities other than white and black in the public-use data sets to missing to protect anonymity), highest level of parental education (high school dropout, high school graduate, some college, college graduate, not known by student), employment status of mother (doesn't work, part time, full time) (it should be noted that employment status of father is also an important variable to consider; however, this variable was not included in the 2003 MTF survey), frequency of participation in religious activities (never, rarely, 1-2 times per month, at least once per week), living situation (lives with no parents, lives with father or stepfather only, lives with mother or stepmother only, lives with a mother/stepmother and a father/stepfather), quantity of unsupervised time after school (none, less than 1 hour, 1-2 hours, 3-5 hours, more than 5 hours), high school tract (college prep, general, vo-tech, other/don't know), academic grades (As, Bs, Cs, Ds

or below), employment status of student (no job, works 5 or less hours per week, works 6-10 hours per week, works 11-20 hours per week, works more than 20 hours per week), perceived likelihood of graduating from high school and college (definitely won't, probably won't, probably will, definitely will), unsafe school environment (never or rarely feel unsafe, feel unsafe some days, feel safe most or all days), and recent drug use (incidence of cigarette use, alcohol use, intoxication, and marijuana use within the past 4 weeks).

Analysis

Descriptive statistics of the prevalence of truancy for 8th- and 10th-grade students are first presented. Next, the proportion of students in each category for each correlate who recently skipped school is presented. Significant differences in truancy as a function of the correlates were assessed through univariate logistic regression models. All analyses were properly weighted using the sampling weights provided by MTF.

RESULTS

Table 1 shows the percent of students who demonstrated each level of truancy. The 95% margin of error is also included. The estimates are presented separately for 8th- and 10th-grade students. As demonstrated in the table, the vast majority of students had not skipped a full day of school during the 4-week period prior to the survey. That is, only 10.5% of 8th-grade students and 16.4% of 10th-grade students had skipped school 1 or more times. Although these percentages are low, this represents a large number of students within a district. For example, given a school with a 10th-grade class of 500 students, we would expect that about 82 of them would have recently skipped 1 or more days of school. Among the truant students, most skipped just 1 or 2 days (7.5% of 8th graders and 11.4% of 10th graders); however, some students demonstrated more chronic truant behavior (3.0% of 8th graders and 5.1% of 10th graders).

Table 1. **Prevalence of Truancy Among 8th- and 10th-Grade Students**

	Percent Who Have Been Truant	
	8th Grade	10th Grade
	% (95% ME)	% (95% ME)
Number of days truant in the past 4 weeks		
None	89.5 (±0.8)	83.6 (±1.0)
1 day	5.3 (±0.6)	7.6 (±0.7)
2 days	2.1 (±0.4)	3.8 (±0.5)
3 days	1.1 (±0.3)	2.2 (±0.4)
4-5 days	0.8 (±0.3)	1.6 (±0.3)
6-10 days	0.4 (±0.2)	0.5 (±0.2)
11 or more days	0.7 (±0.2)	0.8 (±0.3)

ME, margin of error.

Given that most truant students missed just 1 or 2 days, the truancy variable was dichotomized to compare students who had not recently skipped school to those who had recently skipped 1 or more days of school for all subsequent analyses. Table 2 shows the likelihood of recent truancy as a function of several salient correlates. In the first 2 columns, the percentage of students in each category of each correlate is presented for 8th-grade students and 10th-grade students. For example, 30.1% of 8th-grade students and 31.3% of 10th-grade students lived in a metro area at the time of the survey. For each correlate, one of the categories is italicized. This denotes the reference group for the logistic regression analysis in which the probability of recent truancy was regressed on each of the correlates in separate univariate analyses. That is, for each variable, each of the other groups was compared to the reference group. These reference groups were chosen because they represent what might be thought of as the lowest risk category with regard to problem behavior for each variable.

The 3rd and 4th columns of Table 2 show the percentage of students who had recently been truant for each category of each correlate. These percentages are also presented separately for 8th- and 10th-grade students. For example, 10.4% of 8th-grade girls and 17.3% of 10th-grade girls had been recently truant. The stars associated with the percentages indicate whether or not the percentage of truants in each category is significantly different from the percentage of truants in the reference category. For example, consider mother's level of education among 10th-grade students. The reference category for this correlate is a college graduate, and 12.2% of 10th-grade students in this category had recently skipped school. This percentage is significantly lower than all other categories (ie, students whose mother didn't finish a college degree and students who didn't know the educational level of their mother).

Across grade level, some differences in the relationship between the correlates and recent truancy are evident, but overall, there appears to be more similarities than differences. For example, having a mother or father who graduated from college was associated with a significantly lower probability of truancy for all students. Similarly, participation in religious services, having no or only a limited amount of unsupervised time alone after school, participation in a college preparatory track, strong academic achievement, having no job or working only a small number of hours, having plans to graduate from high school and go to college, feeling safe at school, and reporting no recent use of drugs were associated with

Table 2. **Correlates of Recent Truancy Among 8th- and 10th-Grade Students**[†]

	% in Category		% Who Have Been Truant	
	8th	**10th**	**8th**	**10th**
Size of community				
Nonmetro	69.9	68.7	10.5 (r)	17.0 (r)
Metro	30.1	31.3	10.5	15.2
Gender				
Male	47.3	48.5	10.6 (r)	15.5 (r)
Female	52.7	51.5	10.4	17.3
Race				
White	58.3	59.6	9.6 (r)	14.6 (r)
Black	13.0	16.1	11.2	17.9*
Other or missing[‡]	28.8	24.3		
Father's education				
High school dropout	11.7	12.2	16.4**	21.2**
Graduated from high school	25.5	26.7	12.2**	18.9**
Finished some college	11.1	15.0	10.0*	16.7**
Graduated from college	35.7	34.8	7.4 (r)	12.0 (r)
Don't know	16.1	11.3	10.5**	18.3**
Mother's education				
High school dropout	10.4	10.9	15.2**	24.9**
Graduated from high school	23.3	25.0	12.4**	18.6**
Finished some college	16.6	18.6	13.2**	17.4**
Graduated from college	38.8	39.3	7.5 (r)	12.2 (r)
Don't know	11.0	6.4	8.9	16.8*
Employment status of mother				
Doesn't work	19.2	19.5	11.3 (r)	14.8 (r)
Works part time	20.5	17.8	10.9	16.4
Works full time	60.2	62.8	10.1	16.7
Participation in religious services				
Never	14.1	15.5	17.7**	20.2**
Rarely	25.5	27.6	13.3**	19.2**
1-2 times per month	16.7	15.7	9.9	16.5**
Once per week or more	43.7	41.2	8.4 (r)	11.3 (r)
Living situation				
Lives with neither mom or dad	1.2	1.2	5.0	33.5**
Lives with father only	3.7	4.3	13.5*	27.6**
Lives with mother only	17.1	19.4	12.7*	19.8**
Lives with mom and dad	78.1	75.1	9.3 (r)	14.4 (r)
Unsupervised time after school				
None	24.0	22.6	6.4 (r)	11.3 (r)
Less than 1 hour	22.6	20.2	8.0	13.8
1-2 hours	23.4	23.0	10.4**	15.5**
3-5 hours	22.3	27.0	14.0**	19.6**
More than 5 hours	7.7	7.3	21.0**	29.9**
High school program				
College prep	35.1	46.7	8.2 (r)	12.1 (r)
General	16.5	25.3	10.2	20.1**
Vo-tech	5.7	5.9	20.9**	23.9**
Other/don't know	42.8	22.2	10.9**	19.3**
Academic grades				
Ds or below	3.0	2.9	27.1**	40.8**
Cs	21.4	25.1	17.8**	25.2**
Bs	40.9	43.4	10.2**	15.0**
As	34.8	28.6	5.0 (r)	8.2 (r)
Employment				
No job	68.3	64.7	8.7 (r)	15.6 (r)
Works 5 or less hours per week	18.0	11.4	9.1	13.4
Works 6-10 hours per week	6.7	7.4	20.3**	15.8
Works 11-20 hours per week	4.8	10.5	18.9**	21.3**
Works more than 20 hours per week	2.2	6.0	27.8**	23.9**

(*continued*)

Table 2. **(Continued)**

	% in Category		% Who Have Been Truant	
	8th	10th	8th	10th
Perceived likelihood of high school graduation				
Definitely won't	0.9	0.8	20.7**	32.2**
Probably won't	1.2	0.9	27.4**	44.5**
Probably will	11.5	6.9	19.9**	29.9**
Definitely will	86.4	91.4	8.9 (r)	15.0 (r)
Perceived likelihood of going to college				
Definitely won't	2.8	3.7	28.4**	30.0**
Probably won't	4.8	7.1	17.5**	27.5**
Probably will	24.9	25.1	14.3**	22.0**
Definitely will	67.5	64.1	7.8 (r)	12.1 (r)
Feels unsafe at school				
Never or rarely	82.6	85.9	9.4 (r)	15.8 (r)
Some days	12.3	10.0	13.7**	20.2*
Most days or everyday	5.1	4.0	21.1**	23.0**
Cigarette smoking				
None in the past month	89.1	83.4	7.4 (r)	12.8 (r)
1 or more times in the past month	10.9	16.6	35.9**	33.9**
Alcohol use				
None in the past month	79.8	63.4	6.1 (r)	10.2 (r)
1 or more times in the past month	20.2	36.6	26.2**	26.4**
Intoxication				
None in the past month	92.7	81.6	7.4 (r)	11.8 (r)
1 or more times in the past month	7.3	18.4	37.2**	31.2**
Marijuana use				
None in the past month	91.8	82.6	8.1 (r)	11.6
1 or more times in the past month	8.2	17.4	35.5**	37.2**

†Italicized variables denote the reference group; r, reference group; *$p < .05$; **$p < .01$.

‡In order to ensure anonymity, the MTF study sets all races/ethnicities other than white and black to missing.

a lower probability of recent truancy for 8th- and 10th-grade students. These findings suggest that characteristics of students who skip school are similar for both 8th-grade students and 10th-grade students. That is, we would expect that correlates of truancy remain consistent as adolescents progress from middle school/junior high school to senior high school.

On the other hand, a few variables do appear to differ by grade level. For example, race is significantly associated with truancy among 10th-grade students (black students demonstrate a higher probability of recent truancy than white students) but not among 8th-grade students. In addition, living situation appears to have a more salient relationship with truancy among 10th-grade students. That is, 10th-grade students living with no parents or just 1 parent report a higher prevalence of truancy than 10th graders living with 2 parents. More research is needed to understand if these differences are meaningful and, if so, why they may exist. Finally, some variables appear to matter little, including size of the community, gender, and whether or not the student's mother works outside of the home.

Of all variables considered, the most robust effects are observed for school-related variables (very poor academic performance and low perception of the likelihood of graduating from high school) and drug use. That is, students who are disengaged from school and using drugs have the highest probability of recent truancy.

DISCUSSION

This article provides a needed look at the prevalence of truancy in the United States using a nationally representative sample. Most students surveyed had not recently skipped school; only 10.5% of 8th graders and 16.4% of 10th graders had recently (within the past 4 weeks) skipped school. However, even these relatively small percentages should be of concern. According to the US Census Bureau,[23] there were 17.1 million students enrolled in grades 9-12 in the United States in 2003. Using the 16.4% figure estimated here, we would expect that at least 2.8 million students would have skipped school at least once during a given month. Given that truancy has such deleterious effects on a students' own health, well-being, and educational outcomes, these results indicate that much more needs to be done to keep kids in school everyday.

It's not surprising that one of the most robust correlates of recent truancy is drug use. The idea that school-related problems (such as truancy) and substance use coexist has been incorporated into most

of the theories that explain substance use and other problem behaviors. For example, the interrelationship between these variables can be explained by the social development model.[24] The model offers a theoretical framework to describe the mechanisms by which school disengagement (as demonstrated by behaviors such as poor grades, low educational aspiration, and truancy) may affect substance use. The model asserts that prosocial bonds (including bonding to school) preclude problem behavior, proposing that weak school bonds free adolescents from adhering to conventional norms that discourage problematic behaviors. That is, we would expect that students who show a lack of commitment to school (as demonstrated by truancy, poor achievement, and low aspirations) will be more likely to demonstrate other problem behaviors, including drug use.

We would also expect truancy and drug use to coexist due to the unsupervised time that truancy affords a young person. It is well known that young people with large amounts of unsupervised and unproductive time are more likely to demonstrate delinquent behavior, including drug use. Stoolmiller's[25] concept of unsupervised wandering—a measure of unstructured and unsupervised time, primarily outside of the home—describes this relationship. Stoolmiller reports that unsupervised wandering is a key predictor of both onset and frequency of delinquent behavior.

Implications for Prevention

These analyses demonstrate that certain background and family-related variables (including parental education, parental monitoring, participation in religious activities, and living situation) are associated with truancy. These findings suggest that family interventions may play an important role in preventing truancy. Furthermore, several school-related variables (including academic performance, commitment to a rigorous academic program, future aspirations, and perception of safety at school) are also associated with truancy. Indeed, these findings suggest that interventions designed to improve engagement in school and/or improve the school environment may have beneficial effects on truancy. Finally, truancy's strong association with drug use suggests that truant students are also involved in other deleterious behaviors, emphasizing the importance of both preventing truancy (in order to prevent health-compromising behavior) and designing interventions for multiproblem youth.

Limitations

As described by the MTF research team,[22] the data have several limitations. The first limitation, and one that is very salient to the current analysis, is that the study design (ie, surveying students in schools) causes 2 groups of students to be missed (1) students who are enrolled in school but are absent on the day of data collection and (2) students who have dropped out of school. Johnston et al[22] indicate that dropout rates are quite low, less than 1% by 8th grade, and less than 5% by 10th grade. The MTF researchers indicate that 11% of 8th graders and about 12% of 10th graders in the 2003 survey were absent on the day of the survey. In all likelihood, at least some of these absent students were truant. As such, the prevalence of truancy is likely to be underestimated, and the relationship of truancy with the correlates presented in this article may be biased.

Johnston et al[22] offer several additional potential biases, including incidence of school refusals to participate, the self-report nature of the survey, and limitations in sample size and/or design. Despite these limitations, the analyses presented in this article provide a valuable description of the prevalence and correlates of truancy among 8th- and 10th-grade students in the United States.

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