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Research on Social Work Practice 2010 20: 161 originally published online 11 January 2010

DOI: 10.1177/1049731509347861

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Research on Social Work Practice
20(2) 161-171
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DOI: 10.1177/1049731509347861
rswp.sagepub.com



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Abstract

Objectives: This article presents a systematic review of the literature on evaluative studies of truancy interventions. **Method:** Included studies evaluating truancy interventions appearing in peer-reviewed academic journals from 1990 to 2007. **Findings:** In total, 16 studies were assessed. Eight studies used group comparison designs and eight studies used one-group pretest/posttest designs. Studies varied on sample sizes, definitions of truant behavior, focus of interventions, and dependent measures. **Conclusions:** Six studies produced useful and promising interventions including contingency management, school reorganization, punitive measures, community partnerships, and family-oriented activities. The substantial methodological shortcomings, inconsistent definitions, and lack of replication demonstrate a need for more and better evaluation studies to provide a more definitive knowledge base to guide effective truancy interventions for practitioners.

Keywords

education, evidence-based practice, adolescents

School absenteeism and truancy have been issues in the United States since the introduction of compulsory education and mandatory attendance in the late 19th and early 20th centuries (Leyba & Massat, 2009). Student attendance is one of the Adequate Yearly Progress measures for which elementary and middle schools are held accountable under the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (P.L. 107-110).

Truancy is a legal term that is generally defined by each state as a specified number of unexcused absences from school over a designated period of time. "Chronic" or "habitual" truancy are terms that are typically applied when a student exceeds a specified number of unexcused absences over a certain period of time that may result in court referrals (Smink & Heilbrunn, 2005). State compulsory attendance laws vary by the number of absences that define truant behavior and the age of students that are covered by the statutes. Some states do not set a state standard for truancy but instead compel school districts to establish attendance policies and the number of absences that define truancy or habitual truancy (Smink & Heilbrunn, 2005; Zinth, 2005). These statutory differences speak to the fact that there is no uniform national definition of truancy and, therefore, no estimate of the national prevalence rate of the problem. Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) aggregates data on truancy petitions filed in state courts. There were more than 55,000 petitions filed in state courts in 2004, which represented a 69% increase from 1995 (Stahl, 2008). The national truancy data collected by OJJDP merely represent the extent to which schools across the nation use the courts to intervene when students accumulate excessive absences. One study that examined

the truancy court referral process suggests that the court petitions filed in the Denver school system substantially underestimated the extent of the truancy problem. The study showed that while 20% of the truant students in the school system were eligible for court referrals, only 3% actually received referrals (MacGillivray, 2006; MacGillivray & Mann-Erickson, 2007).

Attendance policies and procedures followed by individual schools are most often set locally, either by state departments of education or school districts even if there are state statutory definitions of truancy, exemplifying the "localized" nature of the problem (Smink & Heilbrunn, 2005). Furthermore, schools are apt to be concerned with schoolwide attendance rates that include excused absences and tardies and may have higher thresholds of absences before students are referred to the courts than the number of absences established by state truancy statutes (Smink & Heilbrunn, 2005). These local variances should be taken into consideration when examining the truancy research literature.

The perception that regular school attendance is necessary for acceptable academic performance and conducive to development of desirable social skills and behaviors has led the public education system to pursue methods to increase attendance and discourage absenteeism. There have been numerous

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programs implemented to address the problems of truancy and absenteeism at the national, state, and local levels (Mogulescu & Segal, 2002; Reimer & Dimock, 2005; Smink & Reimer, 2005; Teasley, 2004). The purpose of this study is to review empirically based evaluations of interventions in the United States designed to address the problems of truancy and school nonattendance. This review is limited to studies and articles that have appeared in peer-reviewed journals since 1990 with the intention of presenting the most contemporary evaluative research on truancy. Evidence-based practice has been encouraged for educational and social interventions in many fields and it is timely to initiate the process of establishing best practices in truancy prevention as well.

Social work has a long history of working in the school setting and intervening in attendance problems. When states began to pass compulsory education laws in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, social workers were employed in two roles. First, they were employed as “visiting teachers” with the goal of intervening in the child’s environment outside of the school by linking schools with families and the community. They also worked as “attendance officers” with the specific task of intervening in truancy problems (Constable, 2009; Leyba & Massat, 2009). With more than 100 years of practice in school attendance, there is a clear need for evidence-based models of effective practice to guide social work interventions in producing outcomes that promote educational attainment, quality of life, and social benefits (Leyba & Massat, 2009; Massat & Constable, 2009).

Background

Truancy and nonattendance are associated with an array of negative child well-being outcomes such as poor academic performance, low school attachments, delinquency, drug use, sexual promiscuity, and school dropout (Baker, Sigmon, & Nugent, 2001; Garry, 1996; Loeber & Farrington, 2000; Sheldon, 2007; Sheldon & Epstein, 2004; Teasley, 2004). The relationship of truancy to school dropout is well established whereby truancy interventions are sometimes regarded as “drop-out prevention” (Alexander, Entwisle, & Horsey, 1997). The problems of truant adolescents are likely to persist into adulthood increasing the likelihood of criminality, continued drug and alcohol abuse, marital problems, violence, lower status occupations, unstable career patterns, and unemployment (Baker et al., 2001; Bell, Rosen, & Dynlacht, 1994; Farrington, 1986; Halfors et al., 2002).

Research examining factors that contribute to truancy have been categorized into four general domains: individual, family, school, and community. Without providing an exhaustive review of these correlates, several important factors within each domain are noteworthy. Individual factors include school phobia, learning disabilities, poor school attachments, and behavior problems (Alexander et al., 1997; Bell et al., 1994; Jenkins, 1995). Family factors linked to truancy include low family income, single-parent status, child maltreatment, parental disabilities, lack of parental involvement in education, and

family mobility (Alexander et al., 1997; Bell et al., 1994; Bimler & Kirkland, 2001; Corville-Smith, Ryan, Adams, & Dalicandro, 1998; Ford & Sutphen, 1996; Oman et al., 2002). School factors include conflictual relationships with teachers, deficient attendance policies, nonaccommodation of diverse learning styles and bullying (Bell et al., 1994; Bimler & Kirkland, 2001; Corville-Smith et al., 1998; Teasley, 2004). Community factors associated with truancy are largely connected to the relationship between low family income, neighborhood residence, and local schools. These neighborhoods are marked by higher levels of family mobility, violence, child maltreatment, crime, drug abuse, and unemployment that taken together contribute to more truancy (Astone & McLanahan, 1994; Bell et al., 1994; Epstein & Sheldon, 2002; Teasley, 2004; Wandersman & Nation, 1998).

The complex interplay of truancy correlates across these four domains has influenced the formation of truancy interventions (Corville-Smith et al., 1998). These interventions have generally addressed the contributing factors specific to each of the four domains and have been categorized accordingly as individual and family-based, school-based, and community-based (Teasley, 2004). Bell and associates (1994) described a fifth category called “multimodal interventions” that combine interventions from the four domains.

This classification of truancy interventions organizes the most common methods found in the literature to address the problem. It is intended to assist social work researchers and practitioners to review the research literature with the goal of providing guidelines for best practices and direction for further research.

Methods

The purpose of the current study is to review evaluations of truancy interventions that meet the following criteria: (a) studies that examined the outcomes of truancy interventions, including clinical interventions neither for school refusal or school phobia nor for school dropout. Studies examining school refusal, school phobia, and dropouts comprise related but distinct and different research bases addressing school attendance and retention problems; (b) studies that were published in peer-reviewed academic journals during the time period of 1990–2007, thus, covering the past 18 years; (c) studies that used a discernable research design; and (d) studies that used some level of statistical analysis. Using the key terms of truancy, truant, attendance, nonattendance, absences, and absenteeism, the literature search included computerized databases, hands-on searches of journals and of government documents both print-based and Web-based, and references from the sources listed above. The initial search used the databases of WebSPIRS, including the Education Resources Information Center (ERIC) Database, MEDLINE, PsycINFO, and Social Work Abstracts. Although there were several articles evaluating clinical interventions for school refusal and school phobia, and numerous articles presenting the conceptual basis for attendance promotion and describing truancy intervention

programs, only a few articles that presented studies evaluating truancy interventions were found. Out of a total of 222 reviewed from this search, there were 16 articles that met the criteria for inclusion in this study.

Findings

A summary of findings is presented first to describe general methodological trends in published truancy intervention research. Study designs, foci of interventions, samples, and variable definitions across the 16 studies are discussed. Second, most promising practices in student/family-based interventions, school-based interventions, and community-based interventions, as observed in this body of literature, are reviewed.

Study Designs

One of three general research designs were used in each of the studies selected for review: two experimental group comparisons (Brooks, 2001; Jones, Harris, & Finnegan, 2002), six quasi-experimental group comparisons (Brunsmas, 1998; Licht, Gard, & Guardino, 1991; McCluskey, Bynum, & Patchin, 2004; McPartland, Balfanz, Jordan, & Legters, 1998; Newsome, 2004; Sheldon, 2007), and eight one-group pretest/posttest designs (Baker & Jansen, 2000; Elizondo, Feske, Edgull, & Walsh, 2003; Epstein & Sheldon, 2002; Ford & Sutphen, 1996; Lehr, Sinclair, & Christenson, 2004; Mueller, Giacomazzi, & Stoddard, 2006; Sturgeon & Beer, 1990; White, Fyfe, Campbell, & Goldkamp, 2001).

Focus of Intervention

Interventions focused either on students or entire schools or districts. In total, 12 studies focused on individual students' attendance, whereas four were aimed at improving overall school attendance. Five studies took place in elementary schools, four in high schools, one in elementary and middle schools, one in middle and high schools, and one in elementary, middle, and high schools. Only one study examined an intervention that focused specifically on students deemed to meet a court designated definition of "truant."

Sample Sizes

Partially attributable to variations in designs, sample sizes varied greatly across studies. In total, 11 studies reported sample sizes, ranging from $N = 9$ to $N = 2,780$, with large samples being accounted for by studies that measured overall school attendance, thus, counting all enrolled students to be study subjects. Four reported schools versus students as sampling units. One study reported no sample size.

Definitions of Truancy

Two studies provided no definition of truancy. There were 11 different definitions of truancy across the other 14 studies. In total, 3 studies defined truancy as 20 or more absences and

2 studies defined any absences as truant behavior. For one study each, truancy was defined as 10 unexcused absences, 9 or more absences in the first 8 weeks of school, 20 absences in the previous school year, tardy or absent for 12% of school days, 80% or less attendance for school days, low attendance in the previous school year, more absences than the locally defined legal definition, and 4 or more "truant incidents."

Dependent Measures

With several nuances, there were four different dependent variables assessed in the 16 studies. These were school attendance rates (2), school attendance rates plus count of students with 20 or more absences (2), number of absences or tardies for specified student samples (4), and number of absences for specified student samples (8).

Most Promising Strategies

In total, 8 of the 16 studies used group comparison designs. However, most of these are limited by methodological challenges such as small sample sizes and questionable equivalency of control and intervention groups. Nevertheless, in light of the scarcity of empirical data in this topical area, these findings offer the strongest evidence for effective truancy intervention strategies and warrant further discussion. These studies are presented according to intervention strategies. The remaining studies, across the three intervention levels, used pretest/posttest designs without comparison groups. These studies offer pilot data that may indicate potential areas for further research. However, these designs are weak in terms of accounting for threats to internal validity, so findings must be considered cautiously. One-group studies are presented subsequent to group comparison studies for each intervention strategy used. Effect sizes, or amount of variance accounted for, are included in Table 1 for studies in which these were reported by researchers or where data presented were sufficient to calculate effect sizes.

Student and Family-Based Interventions

Rewards and punishments. Student and family-based interventions that have demonstrated the most promise in the published literature use some combination of positive and negative contingency management. Brooks (2001) found that students who received an 8-week program using contingency management with a token economy, individual behavioral contracts, and group guidance meetings had significantly fewer postintervention absences over an 8-week observation period than students in a control group. Licht et al. (1991) found that special education students with poor attendance who received a program of tangible rewards, such as fast-food coupons, movie tickets, or school supplies, for attendance and punctuality, followed by telephone calls to parents, subsequent to any further absence, stabilized their attendance rates, whereas attendance for matched controls continued to decline.

In a notable negative finding, Newsome (2004) found no difference in postintervention attendance for a group of middle

Table 1. Summary of Studies From 1990 to 2008 Grouped by Type of Intervention

Reference	Focus/Definition of Truancy Intervention	Design/Sample	Dependent Variables/Measures	Findings	Limitations
Student and family-based interventions Baker and Jansen (2000)	Focus: Elementary school students in Indiana <i>Truancy:</i> 10 unexcused absences <i>Intervention:</i> Goal-focused support group to encourage attendance for elementary school students (Group 1 for students in grades 1–2; Group 2 for students in grades 3–5)	<i>Design:</i> Pretest/posttest one group; 8 in Group 1; 6 in Group 2. Measures administered at the beginning and the end of 4 months of weekly groups. <i>Sample:</i> N = 14	Number of absences (excused and unexcused)	Students in both groups showed improvement in attendance during the program intervention period. Cohen's <i>d</i> for Group 1 = 3.1, Group 2 = 2.6	Very small N; no follow-up after intervention. No comparison/control group
Brooks (2001)	Focus: High school students in California <i>Truancy:</i> 9 or more days of verified truancy during the first 8 weeks of school <i>Intervention:</i> Contingency management with token economy, individual contract, and group guidance meetings to reward attendance	<i>Design:</i> Experimental/pretest/posttest control group design. In total, 20 randomly assigned to the experimental group and 20 to the control group. <i>Sample:</i> N = 40	Number of absences at baseline and during intervention period	Students in the experimental group had significantly fewer mean days truant in the intervention period. Cohen's <i>d</i> = 2.7	Small N; no follow-up after the intervention
Ford and Sutphen (1996)	Focus: Elementary school students in Kentucky <i>Truancy:</i> 20 absences in previous school year <i>Intervention:</i> Attendance incentive program in an elementary school setting. Focus program for high-absentee students with intensive intervention (daily counseling and rewards) followed by weekly "maintenance" intervention and a family-based assessment and intervention	<i>Design:</i> Pretest/posttest one group. Students with poor attendance followed over a school year. <i>Sample:</i> N = 9	Number of absences. Measured prior to intervention, during intensive intervention phase, and during maintenance phase	Students in the focus group showed an increase in attendance during the intensive phase of the intervention, but regressed somewhat during the maintenance phase. Overall school attendance improved	Very small N for focus group; no comparison group
Lehr, Sinclair, and Christenson (2004)	Focus: Elementary school students in one school district (nine schools) in Minnesota <i>Truancy:</i> absent or tardy at least 12% of the time since enrollment <i>Intervention:</i> Check & connect model designed to promote engagement in school through relationship building, monitoring and individualized and timely intervention with students at risk for dropping out of school	<i>Design:</i> Pretest/posttest one group. Comparison of elementary school students receiving the intervention for at least 2 years. <i>Sample:</i> N = 147	Number of absences and tardies	Absences and tardies declined significantly among the participants	Limited to one school district (nine schools) and to participants who were in the program for at least 2 years
Licht, Gard, and Guardino (1991)	Focus: Special education high school students in Florida <i>Truancy:</i> any absences <i>Intervention:</i> Program providing social and tangible rewards for attendance to special education students in a high school, and notifies parents when students were absent	<i>Design:</i> Pretest/posttest paired groups design. Students paired according to similar absentee rates during a baseline period, then randomly assigned from each pair to the treatment or control groups. <i>Sample:</i> N = 20	Number of absences and tardies	Treatment group members' attendance did not decline; control group members' attendance rates declined significantly. Cohen's <i>d</i> = .75	Small sample size. Looked at a relatively small program limited to special education students in one high school setting.

Table 1. (continued)

Reference	Focus/Definition of Truancy Intervention	Design/Sample	Dependent Variables/Measures	Findings	Limitations
Newsome (2004)	<i>Focus:</i> Middle school students in Ohio <i>Truancy:</i> Low attendance from the previous academic year <i>Intervention:</i> Solution-focused brief therapy (SFBT) groupwork	<i>Design:</i> Pretest/posttest comparison group; 13 at-risk students in SFBT treatment compared to 13 comparison group students. Group equivalency confirmed with bivariate analysis. <i>Sample:</i> N = 26	Number of absences	Pre and post absence data indicated no significant differences between the intervention and comparison groups	Small sample size
School-based interventions Brunsmma (1998)	<i>Focus:</i> 10th grade students participating in the National Educational Longitudinal Study (NELS) of 1988 <i>Truancy:</i> None (number of days absent) <i>Intervention:</i> Mandatory school uniforms	<i>Design:</i> Pretest/posttest comparison group using secondary data from the NELS; data from 327 Catholic School students and 80 private school students were sampled. Students were "matched" in two groups, one in which their schools required uniforms and one in which the schools did not require uniforms. Statistical controls were included to establish pretest group equivalency. <i>Sample:</i> N = 407	Number of days absent	Mandatory uniforms did not decrease absenteeism	Limited to the secondary data available; only included private Catholic and non-Catholic schools. Used weighted data to estimate effect of school uniforms on a very small subset of the overall NELS sample
McPartland, Balfanz, Jordan, and Legters (1998)	<i>Focus:</i> High school students in one Baltimore, Maryland, school <i>Truancy:</i> 20+ absences—school attendance rates <i>Intervention:</i> High school reorganization including creation of smaller independent academies within the high school, student identification badges, and detention for tardies	<i>Design:</i> Pretest/posttest group comparison. Attendance rates of target high school compared with rates of eight other district schools for the same time period. <i>Sample:</i> N = 9 schools. Group equivalency unknown	School attendance rates and percentage of students missing 20 days of school or more	Attendance increased for the school. Percentage of students missing 20 or more days decreased. Other district schools had no increase in attendance or decrease in the number of students missing 20 days or more	Limited to one school's experience with the reorganization program; not much information on "comparison" schools. Low level of statistical analysis
Sturgeon and Beer (1990)	<i>Focus:</i> One rural high school in Kansas <i>Truancy:</i> Any unexcused absence <i>Intervention:</i> Reward for good attendance; exemption from taking semester tests; students with one unexcused absence must take all semester tests	<i>Design:</i> Pretest/posttest one-group trend analysis comparing attendance from the years 1976–1979 (pre-intervention) to data for the years 1980–1989 (post-intervention). <i>Sample:</i> N = 1 school	School attendance rates for each study year	Attendance increased and absences decreased significantly after the reward was introduced	Measures were limited to a small rural high school/district wide attendance and absence data

(continued)

Table 1. (continued)

Reference	Focus/Definition of Truancy Intervention	Design/Sample	Dependent Variables/ Measures	Findings	Limitations
Community-based interventions Elizondo, Feske, Edgull, and Walsh (2003)	<p>Focus: Citywide program in California aimed at elementary, middle, and high school students</p> <p>Truancy: More absences than the legally defined threshold of truant</p> <p>Intervention: School Attendance Enhancement Program (SAEP) run by the County Probation Department as part of the Safe Schools/Healthy Students (SS/HS) Initiative: Federally funded pilot program to enhance collaboration among schools, law-enforcement, public and mental health experts, social-service providers, city and county agencies, and parents and students in one city</p>	<p>Design: Pretest/posttest one group. A small sample of the students the SAEP program reaches through six SS/HS school sites. Sample: N = none stated</p>	<p>Number of unexcused absences and tardies</p>	<p>"After participating in SAEP, most of the students reduced their absences and tardiness by more than 50%"</p>	<p>No reported N or sampling plan; much reliance on anecdotal information provided for overall evaluation of the SS/HS initiative. No comparison group</p>
Epstein and Sheldon (2002)	<p>Focus: Elementary schools in Maryland, California, Minnesota, and Pennsylvania participating in the National Network of Partnership Schools (NNPS) at Johns Hopkins University program</p> <p>Truancy: 20+ absences—school attendance rates</p> <p>Intervention: Guidance from the NNPS program to assist schools to develop and implement research-based family and community activities to improve school attendance</p>	<p>Design: Pretest/posttest one group. Baseline, midyear and final survey of 12 elementary schools participating in the NNPS program. Sample: N = 12 schools</p>	<p>School attendance rates and percentage of chronically absent students</p>	<p>Elementary schools' attendance rates increased and the percentage of chronically absent students decreased. Most helpful practices included rewards for attendance, after-school programs, more communication with families, and referrals of truants to court officers</p>	<p>Surveys were from the 12 elementary schools that returned all surveys: these were elementary schools with varying levels of attendance and chronic truancy</p>
Jones, Harris, and Finnegan (2002)	<p>Focus: Countywide program aimed at 16- to 18-year-old students in San Diego, California, receiving public assistance</p> <p>Truancy: <80% attendance</p> <p>Intervention: School Attendance Demonstration Project (SADP), countywide intervention applying financial sanctions to experimental group students who continued to have poor attendance</p>	<p>Design: Experimental group comparison: random assignment of eligible students to experimental and control groups; monthly comparisons of attendance. Experimental group n = 1,807; control group n = 973. Sample: N = 2,780</p>	<p>Number of absences</p>	<p>Experimental group students met the 80% attendance rate more frequently, $R^2 = .004$, but attendance for both groups declined over the course of the intervention</p>	<p>Fluctuating sample size and data availability</p>
McCluskey, Bynum, and Patchin (2004)	<p>Focus: Districtwide program targeting students with extreme attendance problems in three schools in Michigan</p> <p>Truancy: Absent 20% + of the school days in the baseline period</p> <p>Intervention: Elementary Absenteeism Initiative developed from Operation Weed and Seed funded by the U.S. Department of Justice: multimodal approach progressively including personnel from schools, social services, mental health agencies, and law enforcement agencies</p>	<p>Design: Pretest/posttest group comparison of 271 chronic (20% or more days missed) absenteeism and 91 missed) absenteeism and 91 participants with nonchronic (20–29 days missed) absenteeism. Sample: N = 362</p>	<p>Number of absences calculated preintervention and postintervention at each possible stage of intervention</p>	<p>There was significant improvement in attendance for the chronic absentees. More improvement in attendance was noted after the initial stages of intervention (letter from school, visit from attendance officer) than from later stages (social services or mental health referral, contact by police)</p>	<p>Limited follow-up, particularly for later stage interventions. No comparison groups</p>

Table 1. (continued)

Reference	Focus/Definition of Truancy Intervention	Design/Sample	Dependent Variables/ Measures	Findings	Limitations
Mueller, Giacomazzi, and Stoddard (2006)	<p>Focus: Countywide program targeting elementary school students in three school districts in Idaho</p> <p>Truancy: absent for more than 10% of the school year</p> <p>Intervention: Attendance court program that refers students and parents to the court, school, and attendance officers to work on improving attendance</p>	<p>Design: Pretest/posttest one group. Compared absences for 44 truant students from 1 school district. Data was collected 4 months prior to intervention and 4 months post intervention. Sample: N = 44</p>	Number of absences and tardies	There was a significant decrease in the number of absences and tardies	Small N, no comparison group, no follow-up. Did not differentiate between excused and unexcused absences
White, Fyfe, Campbell, and Goldkamp (2001)	<p>Focus: Citywide program targeting truants in Richmond, California</p> <p>Truancy: Four or more truancy incidents (i.e., being picked up by the police for being on the streets during school hours without a valid excuse slip)</p> <p>Intervention: Truant Recovery Program, a collaborative school-law enforcement effort. Police from eight different departments conducted periodic "truancy sweeps" lasting 3–5 days, contacting truants. Truants contacted were taken to the school system's Student Welfare and Attendance Office (SWAT) and reviewed by the school's Student Attendance Review Board (SARB) for referral to Suspension Alternative Classes (SAC) or juvenile court</p>	<p>Design: Pretest/posttest one group. Compared truant events for 178 randomly selected truants picked up by police. Data were collected for 3 years prior to pick-up and 18–21 months post pick-up. Sample: N = 178</p>	Number of unexcused absences	Overall median number of unexcused absences showed a nonsignificant increase; some students showed marked improvement	Problems with prepick-up data as many of the truants had moved in and out of the school district during the course of the study
Sheldon (2007)	<p>Focus: Elementary schools in Ohio</p> <p>Truancy: None—school—attendance rates</p> <p>Intervention: Development of schoolwide programs based on the National Network of Partnership Schools (NNPS) to develop and implement research-based family and community activities to improve school attendance</p>	<p>Design: Pretest/posttest group comparison. Attendance rates compared for NNPS versus non-NNPS elementary schools. Sample: 76 NNPS member schools and 69 matched (achievement, enrollment, attendance) non-NNPS schools. Sample: N = 145 schools</p>	School attendance rates	NNPS schools experienced significantly greater improvement in attendance from 2000 to 2001; small effect size $R^2 = .025$	Not much information available regarding the methods schools used to implement the programs or what the programs included

school students who received solution-focused brief therapy (SFBT) in a group format, as compared to students in a control group. Readers should interpret this negative finding cautiously due to this study's small sample size.

Single-group studies indicated improved attendance for high-absentee students through incentive-based programs (Ford & Sutphen, 1996), student support programs (Baker & Jansen, 2000), and relationship-building and monitoring efforts (Lehr et al., 2004).

School-Based Interventions

Comprehensive school reorganization. This strategy was supported in one study. McPartland et al. (1998) found that phased school reorganization in a traditionally low-performing urban high school improved attendance and lowered the number of habitual truancies, as compared to eight other schools within the district. Structural changes included creation of smaller independent academies within the high school, with each providing a specific career track focus, special extended instruction for students who struggled in particular subjects, and an alternative after-hours program for students with serious attendance or discipline problems. Other reforms included implementation of student identification badges and detention for tardies.

In a notable negative finding, Brunsmas (1998) found no difference in attendance rates for 10th grade students attending schools that implemented mandatory school uniform policies, as compared to schools that did not mandate school uniforms. A single-group study indicated overall improved attendance in a rural high school after implementation of a reward-based program (Sturgeon & Beer, 1990).

Community-Based Interventions

Punitive measures, social/mental health services, and partnership-building activities. Community-based interventions appearing in the literature tend to use primarily punitive responses coupled with social services or community partnerships that promote family-oriented activities. Two predominantly punitive interventions demonstrated some degree of effectiveness. McCluskey et al. (2004) found that a multimodal intervention involving progressively intensive interventions, including written notification from school, referral to social services and mental health agencies, and visits by law enforcement agencies for elementary school students with very high absence rates resulted in improved attendance for chronic truants but not for other students. The early phases of the intervention, such as letters to parents, demonstrated the greatest effect, whereas, latter interventions, such as social service referrals and visits by law enforcement had little additional effect. Jones et al. (2002) found that an intervention that offered attendance-focused case management services, and penalized public assistance payments to families whose high school children continued to show poor attendance, increased the percentage of students achieving >80% attendance, as compared to controls. However, both groups' attendance declined over time.

The program was more effective for teens from two-parent families than for those from single-parent homes.

Sheldon (2007) found that 69 schools that participated in National Network of Partnership Schools (NNPS) initiative to develop and implement research-based family and community activities showed modestly higher attendance rates, as compared to 69 schools that did not participate in NNPS. Schools that participated in NNPS received tools and guidelines for establishing and maintaining a partnership program that reached out to students and families. The intervention model encourages schools to conduct partnership activities focused on parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision making, and collaborating with the community. This research built on an earlier study of NNPS schools that did not use a comparison group (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002).

Single-group studies showed some support for improved attendance for high-absentee students through collaboration building (Elizondo et al., 2003; White et al., 2001) and use of enhanced policing and court intervention (Mueller et al., 2006; White et al., 2001).

Discussion and Applications to Practice

Evidence-based practice is necessary to effectively address serious problems such as truancy. School attendance is the most basic foundation of academic and social success. Numerous programs have been funded to combat the problems of truancy and nonattendance. It is striking that the search for peer-reviewed research literature evaluating truancy interventions in the United States yielded no more than 16 studies for the years 1990 to 2007. Of those, only eight used some form of group comparison designs; the remaining research used one-group pretest/posttest designs. Only two studies reported effect size data. There was no clear and consistent definition of truancy and no agreement regarding how many excused or unexcused absences meet the criteria of an attendance "problem." Only one study actually evaluated the effects of an intervention on court-designated truants. The lack of evaluation studies of truancy interventions, particularly those with experimental or quasi-experimental research designs, does not offer much guidance to recommend effective truancy interventions. This point is especially salient when one considers that two of the eight group comparison studies produced negative results for the interventions that were assessed. The remaining six studies, each with its own methodological limitations, can only serve to provide suggestions for effective strategies that are in dire need of replication, ideally using experimental research designs, larger samples, similar student populations, and consistent definitions of truant behavior.

At present, there is a paucity of evidence-based truancy interventions. Suggestions for further research are extensive. First and foremost, current truancy interventions need to be evaluated and the results submitted to peer-reviewed journals. There is no shortage of peer-reviewed articles describing programs to combat truancy and promote attendance; there are so many descriptive articles that it appears as if nearly every school district has

its own truancy program. Building a strong evidence base is hampered when these programs are not evaluated beyond the anecdotal level to assess their effectiveness. Systematic evaluations of truancy intervention programs are primarily published as research reports, monographs, or in nonpeer-reviewed journals that lack the scrutiny of scholarly assessment and cannot be accepted as evidence-based literature. It is acknowledged that it is difficult to use randomization methods in field research, especially in school settings, but evaluation studies of truancy interventions should use group comparison designs and preferably random assignment whenever possible. Where significant group differences are found, effect sizes should be reported, in order to facilitate comparisons across interventions.

Second, a consistent definition of truant behavior needs to be identified and used across studies to allow for the comparison of effects. The evaluated studies used either truant behavior from the previous school year or from the current school year as a basis for receiving an intervention. We propose the following definition of truant behavior that warrants consideration for intervention. We suggest that previous school year truant behavior be defined as a student missing 20% of the school year, regardless of whether the absences were excused or unexcused. For the current school year, attendance can be assessed within 6-week intervals from the start of the school year. Students with three unexcused absences in an interval should be assessed and perhaps receive a parent notification intervention. If the truant behavior persists into the following intervals, then the student would be deemed in need of a more intensive truancy intervention. Admittedly, these criteria are somewhat arbitrary and are not based on evidence regarding thresholds related to risk of negative academic and social outcomes. The definitions are simply offered as an attempt to establish some consistency to advance efforts to objectively compare various interventions. Future research may produce a refined definition that is empirically linked to negative outcomes.

Promising interventions reported in the studies using single-group designs should be replicated with more sophisticated research methods. Several interventions seemed promising—using a focused support group, providing student incentives for attendance and working with families of at-risk students, the “check and connect” model, and the use of attendance officers at the elementary school level.

The truancy interventions from the group design studies that were targeted to students at specific school levels should be tested on students at other levels. If rewards, school reorganization, and sanctions with case management interventions are apparently effective for high school students, how effective would they be for middle and elementary school students? Conversely, would an intervention combining law enforcement and social services that is ostensibly effective for elementary school students also work for middle and high school students? Numerous programs and interventions are being developed and implemented; the research should be evaluating and guiding the interventions with consistent definitions and measures.

Clearly, social work has not made much of a contribution to the truancy intervention literature. Only 4 of the 16 research

evaluations in the current study were published in social work journals. Social workers need to substantially increase their evaluative research activities with truancy and submit the studies to social work journals to make the findings more accessible to social workers.

With all the methodological limitations of the current studies, the results nonetheless provide some direction and guidance for social work practice in truancy prevention. Truancy interventions can be classified according to those that social workers may use with individuals or groups of truants directly in the school or court setting or those that require rather large-scale collaborations with entire schools, school districts, or community partnerships.

Examples of interventions with direct application to students have been illuminated in several studies showing the beneficial effects of using positive and negative contingency management to improve attendance. Employing interventions using token economies, tangible rewards, behavioral contracting, group guidance, and parental notification appeared to be effective at the high school level.

Interventions that occur within a much larger institutional or community context and require collaborations and partnerships must be used across entire schools or school districts. For example, there is support for a comprehensive school reorganization intervention that focuses on student career tracks, special instruction for struggling students, an alternative program for students with the highest levels of absences and behavioral problems, and sanctions against tardies. Another example of this kind of intervention can be found in the work of Sheldon (2007) that promoted school partnerships with family and community activities to decrease truancy at the elementary school level. Other community-based approaches use multimodal interventions that require social workers to collaborate with many community entities including schools, law enforcement, social and mental health providers, and families. The results of these studies were mixed in this category and it appears that there were substantial elements of punitive interventions embedded in these approaches. Although community and schoolwide interventions appear to be promising, social workers are in need of more practical direct interventions with individuals and groups where they can be more effective in daily interactions with youth and families to reduce truancy that do not require large-scale community collaborations and partnerships.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interests with respect to the authorship and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The authors received no financial support for the research and/or authorship of this article.

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