

What Works in Truancy Intervention: A Review

Chris Flaherty, PhD
Richard Sutphen, PhD

What is truancy?

- Legal term
- Varies by state
- Application of term in schools
- Chronic/Habitual

Prevalence

- ?
- 55,000 court petitions in 2004
(Stahl, 2008)
- Denver study 20% eligible, 3% referred
(MacGillivray, 2006; MacGillivray & Mann-Erickson, 2007).

Relevance to SW

- Late 19th – early 20th centuries
 - School social workers assigned 2 roles
 - Visiting teachers
 - Attendance officers

Co-occurring problems

- Delinquency
- Substance abuse
- Promiscuity
- Dropout
- Adult criminality
- Unemployment

Correlates

- Individual
 - School phobia
 - Poor school attachment
 - Learning problems
 - Behavior problems

Correlates

- Family
 - Low income
 - Single parent status
 - Child maltreatment
 - Disabilities
 - Family mobility

Correlates

- School
 - Conflictual teacher/student relationships
 - Deficient attendance policies
 - Non-accomodation of diverse learning styles
 - Bullying

Correlates

- Community
 - Poverty
 - High family mobility
 - High crime
 - Unemployment

Evidence-based practice

- From medicine
- Apply best scientific evidence to guide prediction and intervention
- Categorize "levels of evidence"

Hierarchy of Evidence

Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analysis of RCTs

Randomized Controlled Trials (RCTs)

Meta-Analysis of Quasi- and Non-Experimental Studies

Cohort Studies

Case-Control Studies

Cross-Sectional Surveys

Case Reports

Perspectives

Adapted from Northwest Addiction Technology Transfer Center
Addiction Medicine, July 2004, Volume 7, Issue 7

Our Review

- Peer-reviewed literature
- 1990 – present
- Discernable design
- Some sort of statistics

Findings

- High School
 - Contingency management rewards/token economy (Brooks, 2001)
 - Experimental design
 - Small sample (20/group)

Findings

- High School
 - Rewards and punishment attendance (Sturgeon & Beer, 1990)
 - Exemption from exams
 - Overall attendance increased
 - Small sample/one school

Findings

- High School
 - School reorganization (McPartland, et al, 1998)
 - Fewer students missing 20+ days
 - Better overall attendance
 - One school's experience

Findings

- School Attendance Enhancement Program (SEAP) (Elizondo, Feske, Edgull & Walsh, 2003)
 - School-wide program
 - Enhanced collaboration between schools, law enforcement, mental health providers, social services, and parents
 - Data analyzed from small sample of HS students
 - 50% reduction in unexcused absences
 - No reported N – reliance on anecdotal information

Findings

- Middle School
 - No specific findings from targeted interventions

Findings

- Elementary School
 - Goal-focused support group (Baker & Jansen, 2000)
 - Students showed improvement in attendance during intervention
 - Small sample
 - No comparison group
 - No follow up data

Findings

- Elementary School
 - Daily counseling and rewards for high-absence students (Ford & Sutphen, 1996)
 - Initial improvement, then some regression
 - Small sample
 - No comparison group

Findings

- Elementary School
 - "Check and Connect" model of relationship building and monitoring (Lehr, Sinclair & Christianson, 2004)
 - N=147 (better than most)
 - Limited to one district
 - No comparison group

Findings

- Elementary School
 - National Network of Partnership Schools (NNPS) (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002)
 - High absence students
 - Reduction in % chronically absent
 - Most helpful interventions were rewards, more communication with families, after school programs & court referrals
 - Large N (12 schools)
 - No comparison group

Findings

- Citywide program establishing "attendance court" in Idaho (Mueller, Giacomazzi, & Stoddard, 2006)
 - Significant decrease in absences and tardies
 - Small N
 - No control group
 - Didn't differentiate excused from unexcused

Findings

- NNPS vs non-NNPS schools (Sheldon, 2007)
 - Overall attendance rates higher in NNPS schools
 - Small effect size
 - Little available info re: specific interventions

Findings

- School-wide
 - Financial sanctions for parents who receive public assistance (Jones, Harris & Finnegan, 2002)
 - Experimental group met 80% attendance more frequently, but absences increased over time
 - Fluctuating sample size and missing data

Findings

- Special Ed
 - Rewards for attendance + increased communication with parents (Licht, Gard & Gardino (1991))
 - Control group's attendance declined – Treatment group remained stable
 - Small sample

Summary

- Student & Family Based Interventions
 - Rewards & Punishments
 - Student support and relationship-building

Summary

- School-based interventions
 - School reorganization
 - Small independent academies

Summary

- Community-based interventions
 - Punitive measures
 - Social / mental health services
 - Partnership-building

Moving Forward

- Are all truants the same?
- Typologies
- Bimler & Kirkland, 2001
 - Motivational profiles – truancy “styles”

Styles

- 1& 2
 - Parent-condoned truancy
 - Isolation in school
 - No personality incompatibility
 - Distinction is that style 1 is coping poorly with school stress

Styles

- 3
 - "Unmotivated loners"
 - Socially isolated
 - No delinquent peer group
 - School-related stress
 - Trouble with structured environment
 - Apathy

Styles

- 4
 - Personality clash
 - Coping with school stresses
 - Not isolated
 - Seeking excitement
 - Delinquent peer group

Styles

- 5
 - "Socialized delinquency"
 - Well-adjusted
 - Delinquent peer group
 - "adolescent rebellion writ large"

Implications for future research

- Typology development across age cohorts
- Developing measurement strategies
- Assessment-driven intervention
- Rigorous evaluation designs