Safety Linked to Reduced Truancy in High-poverty Schools

By Kevin Gee and Kelsey Krausen, UC Davis School of Education

Truancy in California is a pervasive problem that disproportionately impacts children in high-poverty schools. Our study examined how school safety and connectedness relate to truancy in California’s high-poverty middle and high schools. We found that children who perceive their schools to be unsafe and feared being in fights were more likely to skip school. Students who reported that they were more closely connected to their schools, particularly students who reported having a teacher or adult who cared about them, were more likely to attend. School-wide initiatives enhancing both school safety and connectedness may lead to improved school attendance at California’s most disadvantaged schools.

Key Facts

1. Schools in which 75% or more students qualify for free and reduced price lunch (FRPL).
2. Based on students’ self-reported rates of “skipping school.”
3. California Department of Education DataQuest.
6. Harris, ibid.
8. Chronic truancy refers to a student who misses 10% or more of the school year, or 18 or more days of school.
12. Ibid.; Chronic absenteeism refers to students who miss 10% or more of the school year or 18 or more days of school, for any reason.
13. Schools in which 75% or more students qualify for free and reduced price lunch (FRPL).
middle and high school youth.

We examined three categories of students’ truancy based on their self-reported frequency of skipping school or cutting classes in the past 12 months: 1) truant (a few times); 2) habitual truant (once a month); and 3) chronic truant (once a week or more). We augmented the CHKS data with school-level poverty data from the California Department of Education (CDE). Our pooled sample included approximately 1.4 million 6th-12th graders. Of those, about 200,000 attended high-poverty schools.

Factors for Truancy in High-poverty Schools

In our sample, the chronic truancy rate for high-poverty schools was 1.5 times that of low-poverty schools (6.3% versus 4.2%). Among high poverty schools, habitual and chronic truancy rates have remained relatively stable from 2006-07 to 2009-10, with a slight increase among children who are truant (11.6% to 12.7%).

Our analysis of student survey responses revealed that students in high-poverty schools who felt very safe at school had 44 percent lower odds of being truant relative to students reporting unsafe school conditions. Students who more frequently feared being in school fights (i.e., 2-3 times in the past 12 months) had 28 percent higher odds of being truant.

Our analysis also revealed the importance of having supportive adults at schools. Students in high poverty schools reporting that there was a teacher or adult who cared about them at their school had 10 percent lower odds of being truant.

Differences in the degree to which high- and low-poverty schools are safe and emphasize school connectedness may contribute to the gap in chronic truancy rates between high- and low-poverty schools. Another contributing factor to the gap is that high-poverty schools tend to serve more students who are at a higher risk of being truant.

Reducing Truancy and Chronic Absence

Our results demonstrate that increased school safety and school connectedness are linked to lowered odds of truancy in high-poverty schools. Recently, California required all local education agencies to establish annual goals to reduce chronic absence as part of their Local Control and Accountability Plans (LCAP). Our evidence lends strong support for focusing on school safety and connectedness in high-poverty schools to reduce truancy and chronic absence.

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This graph shows the difference in truancy rates between high-poverty and low-poverty schools. This study suggests that differences in the degree to which schools are safe and emphasize connectedness may contribute to this gap in chronic truancy rates.

**Figure 1: California Truancy Rates 2006-2010, High-versus Low-Poverty Schools**

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Citing the importance of school connectedness in high-poverty schools...

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