



NCSE | National Center for School Engagement

GENDER DIFFERENCES AMONG TRUANT YOUTH

National Center for School Engagement

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Gender Differences Among Truant Youth

Exploring gender differences among truant youth is one way to tailor the practices and services used to reengage students in schools. Through identifying gender-specific needs, truancy prevention efforts can ensure that specific resources are in place to address these needs.

Truancy is considered a status offense and is an excellent indicator of later involvement in the juvenile justice system. Males are overrepresented in the juvenile justice system. Up to seven times as many males are in residential placement for criminal offenses compared to females.^{1,2} However, in 2001, national data from the Census of Juveniles in Residential Placement listed almost equal numbers of males and females who commit truancy offenses (447 boys vs. 336 females, per 100,000). In addition, data from the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Truancy Demonstration Project show that girls and boys are *equally* likely to be truant. These data are collected online (in the Truancy Reduction Application interface [TRAIN], a web-based database system housed at the National Center for School Engagement) and involve seven OJJDP federally funded demonstration programs across the US who target different populations and provide different types of interventions. Data are collected at the beginning of the intervention and at three month increments until the student leaves the truancy prevention program.

TRAIN Data

Few gender differences exist across the seven OJJDP demonstration sites according to the data entered in the TRAIN database; however those that do may be important in how we “treat” truancy. Differences that exist are listed below:

➤ Discipline Differences

- Before intervention, truant boys were given significantly more out-of-school suspension days than were truant girls.
- Discipline problems were higher for girls than for boys six months after the initial intervention. This may be a result of discipline problems dropping for boys rather than actually rising for girls.
- Before intervention, girls and boys had approximately the same number of school suspension days. However, girls had significantly more in-school suspensions three months after the initial intervention than did boys. Nevertheless, for both boys and girls this number was lower than before any intervention took place.

➤ Attendance Differences

¹ 2001 Census of Juveniles in Residential Placement Databook statistics

² National Center for Juvenile Justice “Juvenile Arrest Rates” on the OJJDP website; National Center for Juvenile Justice (February 28, 2005). Juvenile Arrest Rates by Offense, Sex, and Race. Online. Available:http://ojjdp.ncjrs.org/ojstabb/crime/excel/JAR_2005228.xls

- Girls had greater numbers of excused absences six months after the initial intervention than did boys ($M=6.13$ and $M=3.49$, respectively).

➤ Achievement Differences

- Most truant students do not have Individual Education Plans (IEP), indicating special education status, but of those who did, boys were twice as likely as girls to have them (75 vs. 43).
- At intervention, truants had low grades (averages in math, English, science, and social studies were approximately a D+), however girls had higher grades than boys in all four subjects, and significantly higher grades in social studies.
- Interestingly, overall GPA for the few students whose records contained them showed that boys' GPAs were higher than girls'. This may reflect coursework that is not one of the four basic subjects discussed above.
- English grades at both three and six months following intervention were better for girls. The same is true of Math and Social Sciences six months following intervention, and GPAs were higher for girls at both three and six months following intervention (see Table 1). However, grades and GPA data were only available for a small subset of students (less than 30 of the 612 in the data base).

	GPA at 3 months	GPA at 6 months
Males	1.28	1.59
Females	2.09	2.11

➤ Behavioral Differences

- Girls are more often truant because they are caring for their own children or others in the family; whereas boys are more likely to be engaged in gang-activity, simply “wandering the neighborhood” or playing with peers. Both genders indicate that romantic relationships are sometimes the cause for truancy, but girls are more likely to be truant due to a relationship with an *older* boy.
- According to notes made by social workers, male and female truants are very similar in terms of having difficulties with families; however, girls may be more likely to have difficulties with adult males in the household who are not biologically related to them. Homelessness and unstable housing seems to apply equally to boys and girls.
- Mental and physical health problems seem to affect both boys and girls similarly. According to notes by case workers, male truants appear to be more aggressive than girls; however, girls were sometimes noted as being bullies.

Observations from the Field

In addition to the data in TRAIN, truancy professionals offered their observations about gender differences. Specifically, a director of student services who has contact with every truant in her district reports that girls prioritize family and friends and can easily get distracted from academics if there are important social obligations that they feel required to meet. Alternatively, she believes that boys become disenfranchised from school if they have few friends or connections with others who attend their school. She also noted that boys display more aggressive behavior, whereas girls will often resort to social/emotional bullying and be likely to avoid school if they are the victims of this type of bullying.

Social workers in a large California county observed somewhat similar differences. Whereas both sexes were thought to be equally likely to skip to *hang out* with friends, there was a tendency to believe that girls would avoid school more if they were experiencing social ostracism. Boys, on the other hand, were thought to skip more if there was likely to be physical confrontations at school or personality conflicts with teachers. As mentioned earlier, social workers also reported that girls will stay home to take care of children (their own or others) and if they suffer from menstrual cramps. Both sexes also fear the stigma of being a *school boy* or *school girl*, a term meant to suggest that they were somehow *too connected* with school. However, one social worker believed this stigma was worse for boys.

Recommendations for Improving School Attendance and Attachment

Academics

Truant boys seem to have more difficulties in academics compared to girls as a whole – at least in the basic core set of courses³. It is possible that, as a group, boys may benefit relatively more than girls from tutoring that will help them get ahead or back on course. If it is true that they feel more stigma around grades – be it their appearance *as caring too much about academics* or “fearing failure” as two professionals believe, private tutoring and Saturday schooling may be particularly helpful. This is not to say that all truants don’t require tutoring options. Missing school is obviously directly related to achievement, but the current observations/data suggest that exploring academic concerns with boys may be particularly useful.

Engagement at School

Professionals who work with truants feel like getting girls and boys involved in activities connected to the school is a good way to reengage them. If it is true that boys become truant as a result of having no close relationships or conflicts at the school, and girls prioritize relationships in general, increasing positive peer relationships makes sense for both sexes. In some cases, transportation to and from extracurricular activities can be a barrier and this must be addressed to enable involvement.

³ English, Math, Science and Social Studies

Family Relationships

In addition, females were almost twice as likely as males to be prosecuted for running away.^{4,5} This supports the anecdotal and TRAIN data showing that relationships, when problematic, lead girls to leave home. Runaways typically have few resources for attending school. Consequently, family relationships should be carefully explored with female students, and counseling that involves the entire family could be particularly helpful.

Delinquency Prevention

National crime statistics show that girls are less likely than boys to be involved in aggressive and delinquent behavior.^{1,4} However, there is clearly a relationship between truancy and delinquency, so what is true for the general population may not be true for the population of truants. When considering only truants, girls are just as likely as boys to have been suspended or expelled from school. In addition, research shows that truancy may lead to the kinds of behaviors that warrant juvenile justice involvement.⁶ Therefore, the population of truant girls may include a large proportion of those who are at risk for becoming delinquent later on. If this is so, focusing attention on truant girls may be a highly effective strategy for preventing female delinquency.

Court Practices

One California Judge, who has focused his attention on what works with female delinquents, notes that girls are much more vulnerable than boys. His belief is that even at the court level girls need empowerment and that typical “male” based court practices are not effective.

Co-Ed Best Practices

Finally, many best practices were thought to be equally successful for both sexes. Unannounced home visits, working closely with parents, positive feedback for school attendance, individualized services and providing same sex counselors were identified as practices that work equally well for both girls and boys. Interestingly, boys seem to have more *sticks* readily available for them in terms of *boot camp-like* activities. It is unknown whether this type of practice would be useful for deeper-end female truants, but given the nature of why many girls are thought to be truant, it may not be as effective for them.

For more information on best practices in improving attendance, achievement, and attachment, go to the National Center for School Engagement website at www.schoolengagement.org

⁴ 1997 Census of Juveniles in Residential Placement Databook statistics

⁵ Center for Juvenile Justice “Juvenile Arrest Rates” on the OJJDP website; National Center for Juvenile Justice (February 28, 2005). Juvenile Arrest Rates by Offense, Sex, and Race. Online: Available: http://ojjdp.ncjrs.org/ojstabb/crime/excel/JAR_2005228.xls

⁶ Hutzinger, D., Loeber, R., & Thornberry, T.P. (1994, March) *Urban delinquency and substance abuse: Initial findings*, Washington DC: Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention U.S. Department of Justice.

The National Center for School Engagement (NCSE) is an initiative of The Colorado Foundation for Families and Children (CFFC). NCSE strives to build a network of key stakeholders who share the belief that improving school attendance and school attachment promotes achievement and school success.



National Center for School Engagement

NCSE was established as a result of more than a decade of educational research about youth out of the educational mainstream conducted by CFFC. The impact of this work has been the development of significant investments of state funds to reduce suspensions expulsions and truancy. Over five years ago, CFFC began working with the OJJDP, US Department of Justice to assist in the planning and implementation of pilot demonstration projects across the country. As projects developed, CFFC became the national evaluator of this five-year truancy demonstration project.

The culmination of ten years of program experience and research has identified truancy and school engagement as the centerpiece of NCSE's work to improve outcomes for youth who are at the greatest risk of school failure and delinquency. We are national leaders in applying research to help communities prevent and reduce truancy.

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