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# Understanding early childhood truancy: the influence of life course studies on evidence-based interventions

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## Purpose

This chapter demonstrates how a study on juvenile justice reform in Louisiana led to a multi-million dollar, evidence based, and early childhood truancy intervention program. As such, we walk the reader chronologically through the history of the Louisiana Truancy Assessment and Service Centers (TASC) program from inception in 1999 until program closure in 2013. In the following sections we describe the single juvenile justice reform study that prompted a deeper look into the lives of juvenile offenders. This led one researcher, accompanied by a small team of research associates, to conduct qualitative life histories with inmates on death row and those serving life sentences. Next, we describe how the life course information derived from these narratives served as the impetus for the creation of an intervention program. In this context, we walk the reader through one case history presented to the Louisiana State Legislature, who subsequently funded the program for over a decade. The TASC program will be presented and described along with the process and outcome evaluations conducted internally. We then review external efficacy studies conducted on the intervention as well as additional research currently being conducted on the holistic impact of this innovative program for youth and families. We conclude the chapter with a discussion of the ramifications of program funding cuts that came about due to state budget restraints that eventually led to the closure of the program.

## Introduction

Laws pertaining to school attendance have been in place in the U.S. since the early 1900's. Historically, chronically absent or truant students were dealt with individually, either through school or court referrals for the student and parent(s). Intervention practices often took truancy at face value, as the root problem, rather than a symptom of greater underlying issues. Truant youth were dealt with in a multitude of ways. For example, token economies have been a popular intervention, as have school suspensions and even incarceration for parents of chronically truant youth (Gandy, Schultz 2007). Although the effects of truancy are now widely known, this was not always the case. More than 6 million children in the U.S. experience truancy or chronic absenteeism annually (Civil Rights Data Collection Center 2016). Truancy has been glorified by the media as a rite of passage in television and movies, such as the *"The Little Rascals"* and *"Ferris Buehler's Day Off"*. These flippant representations of truancy fail to recognize the potentially serious consequences linked to truancy, consequences with cascading effects and ramifications that persist across the life course. Truancy was once considered to be a problem primarily affecting older youth, however, students from every grade experience chronic absenteeism. In fact, early childhood truancy is a particularly critical and often overlooked social problem. Students who are chronically absent are more likely to fail a grade level and eventually drop out of school (Alexander, Entwisle, Kabbani 2001). Adults who lack a high school diploma are more likely to be un- or under-employed, live in poverty, have poor physical and mental health, and become reliant on the American welfare system (Lochner, Moretti, 2004).

The consequences of truancy are not confined to the individual. Local labor markets and the overall community suffer when the pool of job candidates is bloated with undereducated and unprepared individuals. Employers must develop expensive and time consuming remedial and on the job training opportunities to compensate for the unpreparedness of applicants. Lastly, lifetime earning potential is significantly attenuated for individuals who do not graduate high school. In addition to influencing the lives and opportunities of individuals and their families, lost earning potential compounds and leads to a significant loss in tax revenue. Communities in which a large number of residents have failed to graduate high school are also less capable of facilitating attachments among residents, particularly youth, and mainstream social institutions. This institutional isolation becomes endemic in some communities and has been recognized a seminal issue facing researchers and practitioners in the social work and criminal justice disciplines (Lauritsen, Rezey, Heimer 2016; Lubben, Gironda, Sabbath, 2015; McCall, Land, Brooks-Dollar, Parker 2013; Thomas, Drawve, Thomas 2018; Thomas, Shihadeh 2013).

## Juvenile justice reform

As the U.S. crime rate reached an all time high in the late 1980's and early 1990's, the federal, states and local governments, began to recognize the social and fiscal impact of juvenile criminality and incarceration. There was also a growing concern over racial disproportionality in the justice system. The extreme over representation of minorities in the justice system or disproportionate minority contact (DMC) is crucial as youth that come into contact with the system at an early age have been shown to have significantly more negative outcomes over the life course (Leiber, Fox 2005). A number of prior studies have identified explanations for DMC ranging from selective enforcement (Huizinga, Thornberry, Knight, Lovegrove 2007), differential administrative practices (Bridges, Steen 1998), institutional racism (Bishop, Frazier 1988), poverty (Pope, Snyder 2003), differential offending (Pope, Snyder 2003), and the discretion afforded to juvenile justice system officials (Pope, Feyerherm 1990).

In recognition of the overlapping consequences of system involvement, particularly for minorities, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) made analyses of DMC a core requirement of the 1992 Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act (JJDP). Effectively, states must identify, assess, and address potential causes and remedies for DMC. Despite federal and state efforts, minority youth continue to be detained at rates greater than their White counterparts (Knoll, Sickmund 2010; Leiber 2002). For example, between 1983 and 1997, 4 of 5 new detainees were minority (Justice Policy Institute 2002) and the relative presence of Black youth among detainees increased by 11% between 1990 and 1999 (Harms 2003). Moreover, in 2007 Black youth accounted for 17% of the population and 51% of juvenile arrests for violent offenses and 32% of arrests for property offenses (Puzzanchera 2009).

Beyond DMC, youth have historically been charged and tried as adults with many receiving life sentences or even capital punishment. Both researchers and citizens began to recognize this as a growing social problem that could overwhelm the justice system. This led to a change in the sentiment of the general population in which the punitive nature of the juvenile justice system became unpopular while initiatives for juvenile rehabilitation were increasing. As juvenile justice reform efforts expanded, cross-disciplinary professionals were invited to assist with reform efforts, including social workers. Professionals worked collaboratively to collect and analyze data, inform policy, and design evidence based interventions and best practices for juvenile justice systems across the country. These collaborative working groups began examining underlying risk and protective factors associated with youth who had been incarcerated as a mechanism of informing prevention and intervention efforts.

## Louisiana: A case study for reform

Juvenile justice reform efforts for many states arose due to court orders requiring the examination of juvenile justice systems, practices, and outcomes with emphases on DMC, successful reentry, and recidivism among justice involved youth. In order to facilitate timely analyses, researchers were asked to retroactively examine juvenile data so as to shed light on risk factors linked to the mass incarceration of juveniles. One such study examined a cohort of, primarily Black, male juvenile offenders in Louisiana who had been incarcerated at any point during 1977 (Guin 1991). It is important to understand the social and economic context of Louisiana during this time period. This was decade during which the state poverty rate increased from 18% to 23%, making it one of the five poorest states (U.S. Department of Commerce 1993). Schools were among the worst in the nation, especially those in New Orleans, with more than three-quarters of 4th grade public school students reading below grade level (Currie 1998). In 1980, nearly one-third of state residents identified as Black (Louisiana Department of Administration 1990). Between 1970 and 1995 the homicide rate in New Orleans increased 325% and state incarceration rates increased five-fold (Currie 1998).

Data were collected retrospectively from institutional files on a cohort of 817 male delinquents exiting the Louisiana Technical Institute facilities in 1976, which was the only housing for adjudicated and sentenced juveniles in Louisiana. Researchers analyzed detention files to assess demographic information, school history, intellectual functioning, psychiatric history, mental health diagnoses, age at first contact with the police, most recent offense, and highest charged offense (Guin 1991; Thomas, Thomas, Burgason, Wichinsky 2014). Youth ranged in age from 11 to 22 and racial minorities comprising over 70% of the sample. About three-quarters of the youth were either erratically or not attending school. Over 70% came from disrupted family structures and 60% had family members with an official criminal history. The youth had been housed in detention centers for both property (59%) and violent (17%) offenses and more than a quarter had previous convictions.

Utilizing state and federal databases, data on adult offending were collected during a follow-up period in 1988 for 508 of the individuals in the initial sample (Guin 1991). Among the youth in the follow-up sample, 87.6% were charged with another crime and 27% were charged with a violent crime. In fact, 17 cohort members were charged with homicide, 154 with burglary, 158 with robbery or theft, and 53 with armed robbery. Among those charged with murder, 3 were subsequently executed. Further, age at first contact with the criminal justice system varied between 5 and 17 but more than half had their first contact prior to age 14, the traditional cutoff for early onset delinquency (Tibbetts, Piquero 1999). Clearly, individuals exhibiting early onset delinquency and those who went on to violent and chronic adult criminal careers were over-represented in the follow-up sample.

Examinations of criminal trajectories over the life course have long been a staple within the criminological literature. Although minor delinquency is common among juveniles, theoretical perspectives have attempted to develop indicators to identify which youth are likely to become violent or chronic adult offenders. The distinction between adolescent limited and life course persistent offending trajectories is critical to intervention and prevention efforts, which have limited resources and are more effective when targeted toward the most at-risk individuals (Moffitt 1993). The longitudinal data compiled by Guin (1991) provided a unique opportunity to refine the understanding of risk factors associated with life course persistent offending and spurred a series of life course studies.

## Life history narrative: the case of Sam

The aforementioned study prompted the researcher and her team to delve deeper into the histories of male juvenile offenders serving life sentences or who were on death row. Each of the inmates agreed to have their narratives recorded and used for the purposes of creating an intervention for juvenile offenders. Many interviewees expressed a need to have their stories told and used to hopefully keep young men out of the justice system. Life histories were recorded both as narratives and in timeline format with the assistance of the individual and their Department of Corrections case files, which contained information about the inmate, their family, DHS involvement, schooling, and justice system involvement.

Sam's story is just one of the life course narratives collected. Sam was born prematurely in 1976 to a single mother of a large family, however, his father never played a role in his life. Sam's mother did not finish high school and was suspected of having a low level of intellectual functioning. The family lived in dire poverty in a structurally disadvantaged and deteriorating neighborhood. Sam began kindergarten at the age of 5 in 1981, which was the first of six elementary schools he would eventually attend (See Figure 1). Sam accumulated 32 absences in kindergarten or 6–7 full weeks of school. In first grade (1982), he missed 29 days of school, another 6 weeks of school. Sam repeated first grade (1983) at a second elementary schools, and missed 34 days that year as well. Sam entered second grade (1984) at his third elementary school and changed schools again mid year. Over the course of second grade, Sam missed 43 days and was again retained (1985). He repeated second grade at school number four and only missed six days of school the entire year. It was during this time that Sam was placed in the care of his grandmother who ensured he was regularly attending school. However, he was placed back with his mother in third grade (1986), moved to his fifth elementary school, and missed 25 days that year. Sam passed third grade and moved to his sixth and final elementary school. By fourth grade (1987), he was overage for grade at nearly 11 years old. During

fourth grade, Sam missed more than three and a half months of school (78 days). Because of his age, Sam was socially promoted to sixth grade (1988) at the first and only middle school he attended. He missed 103 days of school that year, missing more days than he attended. During sixth grade it was discovered that Sam was illiterate, he was diagnosed with mild mental retardation (IQ-65), and had severe deficits in visual motor functioning that had never been addressed. Sam effectively dropped out of school in the sixth grade when his involvement with the criminal justice system began (1990).

Sam and several friends decided to go swimming at a locked neighborhood pool one evening and the police were called. Sam was charged with criminal trespassing, entering and remaining after forbidden, and returning to property without authority. Over the course of the next two years Sam was in and out of detention centers, correctional facilities, group homes and behavioral institutes. Sam was often moved for his inability to follow rules and poor behavior in these institutions. Sam reported he was often unable to follow rules because he was illiterate and instead of being verbally informed of institutional expectations, he was handed paperwork outlining rules and regulations. His other behavioral difficulties were due to his low intellectual and motor visual functioning. Over approximately the next two years Sam neither attended school nor had any additional juvenile adjudications.

The year Sam turned 18 (1994) he and two friends were charged with two murders. Sam and his friends attended a party where drugs and alcohol were present. At some point during the evening he and his friends murdered two other partygoers while attempting a robbery. He spent the next two and a half years in county jail before being sentenced for first-degree murder, at the age of 21, and sentenced to life in prison at Louisiana State Penitentiary. In 1999, it was estimated that if Sam lived to be 68 years old it would cost the state \$383,783, which did not include legal fees. As of 2017, with inflation and without legal fees, the estimated cost to the state has increased to approximately \$559,756.

Life histories highlighted a crucial risk factor, truancy. Looking at the timeline, it is relatively easy to recognize the numerous missed intervention points. Beyond missed educational opportunities, chronic absences made it difficult to spot Sam's disabilities and appropriately intervene. It is easy to understand how schools, which are charged with a multitude of responsibilities for numerous youth, would view absences as *the problem* rather than a symptom of greater issues, such as those taking place in his home and his community. The researchers carefully compiled all of the men's timelines and printed all of them on poster board as graphical aids during their testimony to the Louisiana State Legislature. They lined the halls with these timelines quite literally forcing legislatures to examine them one by one. The graphical display of timelines clarified the intervention point. Research to this point had demonstrated a clear link between education, truancy and criminal activity. By funding an innovative early truancy intervention, returning youth to school and maintaining their attendance, perhaps the criminal justice system

could be avoided all together for many young men. As such, the Legislature agreed to fund the Louisiana Truancy Assessment and Service Centers (TASC) program at approximately \$1 million for the first few years and \$5 million at the height of the program.

## The TASC program

The original juvenile delinquency study and the life course narratives clearly indicated that intervention for chronic truancy in middle and high school was both insufficient and too late for many at-risk youth. The TASC program creators learned that truancy intervention must be introduced in elementary schools in order to engender attachment to school. As such, researchers worked with stakeholders across the State, including teachers, school administrators, local school boards, county prosecutors and judges, to ensure the program would meet the needs of students and the families. Stakeholders took part in creating the TASC referral process, the risk assessment tools, and even the intervention itself.

The purpose of the intervention was to engage elementary children and their families with the goals of increasing attendance and school attachment. The intervention was designed to treat truancy as a symptom of deeper problems in the lives of children and families (Rhodes et al. 2010). That is, the program was designed to address both truancy and the underlying contributors to chronic absenteeism. Two theoretical frameworks shaped the intervention. One is the social development model, which focuses on risk and protective factors across the life-course. The second is ecological theory, which assesses risk across multiple domains including the family, school, and community (Bronfenbrenner 1977; Richman, Bowen, Woolley 2004). In line with these theoretical perspectives and with an emphasis on elementary age youth, TASC was created as a community-based, intensive case management program for children in kindergarten through 5<sup>th</sup> grade (Rhodes et al. 2010). The TASC program was housed and managed by the School of Social Work at Louisiana State University. The School was responsible for implementation and evaluation of the program as well as budget distributions for TASC sites across the state. An advisory board managed each site. The program was piloted in 2 school districts for 2 years before officially opening in 2001 and then rapidly expanding across the state. At its peak, TASC operated in 28 counties and served more than 10,000 families across 500 schools each year. TASC offices were located in the community, primarily schools, school board offices, and the District Attorney's office. The individual TASC offices employed case managers who served the child and family while working as a liaison between the school and referred families (Rhodes et al. 2010).

## The TASC process

The TASC program defined chronic truancy as five or more unexcused absences during a school year (Rhodes et al. 2010). The threshold for problematic absenteeism was purposefully set low in an effort to rapidly address truancy and any underlying issues before absences became disruptive to the child's education. Once a child reached five unexcused absences, a teacher or attendance officer referred the child to the local TASC office. The referral provided demographic and educational information about the child, such as age, grade, race, gender, free/reduced lunch, previous grade retentions, suspensions, expulsions, and the number of excused and unexcused absences and tardies. The teacher was also asked to complete an instrument designed for the TASC program, the RISK-Indicator Survey-I checklist (RISK-I). The RISK-I examined behavioral, academic, and family-related risk factors using 42 items across 12 categories. These categories included externalizing (e.g. aggressive and attention-seeker) and internalizing behaviors (e.g. isolated and unmotivated) as well as family-related risk factors (e.g. poor parental attitudes and unstable home life). The RISK-I was found to be both reliable and valid for assessing ongoing risk for truancy among elementary age youth (Kim, Barthelemy 2010). Based on information collected at referral and the RISK I instrument, case managers assessed the child's risk for continued truancy as either low or high.

When students were assessed as having a low risk for continued truancy, the TASC office mailed a warning letter to the child's home indicating the child was flagged for truancy and further absences would be monitored for the remainder of the school year. A copy of the state compulsory school attendance law was also included. In contrast, a family conference with a TASC case manager was scheduled, within 21 days of referral, for those youth assessed as a high risk for continued truancy (approximately 50%). Approximately 45% of TASC cases were deemed low risk while 50% were screened as high risk. The remaining 5% of cases were considered "very high risk" for continued truancy. Approximately 60% of youth who participated in the program were African American. Gender was nearly evenly split with boys slightly over represented at 55%. Students in kindergarten and first grade accounted for about 43% of referrals. Slightly less than 25% of children had been diagnosed with a special education status. The majority of program participants were promoted to the next grade level (86%), which was on par with state rates of academic promotion.

Over the course of the program, TASC case managers met with approximately 92% of all referred families (Rhodes et al. 2010). During the family conference the child's truancy was discussed along with any factors the family felt might be contributing to the child's truancy. The TASC case manager also completed a second instrument created for TASC, the RISK Indicator Survey II checklist (RISK-II). This instrument consisted of 47 items across 6 areas (e.g. medical, family social support) and was used to gauge the service needs of the child and family. Using the referral information, the RISK I and II, and any other pertinent information,



case managers developed a case plan tailored to the family's unique needs across seven broad categories of services (e.g. mental health, basic needs, medical). At the conclusion of the conference the family was asked to enter into a 6 month case management plan that addressed the identified needs and service referrals. This Informal Family Service Plan Agreement (IFSPA) was a voluntary, legal, contractual agreement (Rhodes et al. 2010).

TASC participants were monitored for further unexcused absences for the remainder of the school year. Continued absences triggered a change in their risk status. Low-risk youth could be elevated to high-risk and provided with case management services. Families in the high-risk group who failed to follow the IFSPA or if the attendance problems persisted, parents could be petitioned to court. However, this option was rarely utilized with only 3% of cases petitioned to court (Rhodes et al. 2010). At the end of each school year, case managers closed cases as either successful or unsuccessful. A case was deemed successful when the family adhered to the IFSPA case management plan and the attendance improved. An unsuccessful case was characterized by ongoing difficulties following the case management plan and continued unexcused absences.

## Internal process and program evaluation

From 2001 until TASC ended at the University in 2013, mandated internal process evaluations were conducted to monitor sites, data, and intervention quality. Information from referral, RISK I, RISK II, case management plan, and services for each participant were recorded both in paper files and in a statewide web-based database. Using these data, university-based TASC program evaluators were able to generate monthly reports and an annual process-evaluation report for each TASC site. Monthly reports measured 11 performance standards to assess whether individual sites were meeting program objectives. Program auditors also met with representatives of each program site twice per year to assess quality of case management and data entry.

Results of the uncontrolled internal evaluations indicated children served by TASC swiftly re-entered school and maintained attendance for the remainder of the school year (Rhodes et al. 2010). Rudimentary outcomes for truancy reduction were measured by comparing the proportion of unexcused absences before and after referral. Truancy rates from the time of referral to the time of case closure showed a dramatic attenuation in truancy year after year, with an average reduction of approximately 35% among participants (Rhodes et al. 2010). The ongoing success of the program led the main program director to seek out researchers with experience in program evaluation in order to employ a rigorous quasi-experimental design to assess the efficacy of the TASC intervention. The evaluators chose

a Regression Discontinuity design (RD) to assess the intervention, making TASC the first truancy intervention of its kind to move past process and outcome evaluations to using a rigorous evaluation technique (Thomas, Lemieux, Rhodes, Vlosky 2011). The RD design was selected, as it does not require the withholding of treatment, which was preferred over a randomized controlled experiment so that children could immediately access needed services (Shadish, Cook, Campbell 2002).

## **Efficacy of the TASC intervention**

RD is a rigorous, quasi-experimental methodology that employs a cut off score to assign participants to a control or treatment group (Shadish et al. 2002). Items on the referral and RISK-I were assigned point values based on their importance as a risk factor for continued truancy. Together, these two instruments were used to assign each child a risk score. Two previous years of data were retroactively scored to assess the mean risk score. The mean risk score then became the cut-point between the low and high-risk groups. Students who scored 26 or less were assigned to the low risk group and those assigned a score of 27 or higher were assigned to the high-risk group. The RD analysis was used to empirically test the impact of the TASC program on truancy among high-risk students, as measured by the change in truancy between referral and the end of the school year. The RD was employed in one urban, inner city TASC site.

The external program evaluation took place in two parts, with the first evaluation assessing a single cohort of students (2006–2007) (Thomas et al. 2011). The second part of the evaluation included three additional cohorts (2007–2010) (Thomas 2017). Findings from the first evaluation indicated TASC was effective for reducing truancy among high-risk students. Overall, truancy was reduced by 6% in the treatment group. However, results indicated that non-White program participants actually experienced an increase in truancy by about 5%. Students who had been retained at least one grade level also saw a 2% increase in truancy. Neither gender, grade level, nor special education status were significant predictors of change in the rate of truancy. Students whose cases were closed successfully saw nearly a 9% increase in attendance. Lastly, the effectiveness of the TASC intervention was not linear. Specifically, a significant interaction effect between risk score and treatment group indicated students with scores closer to the mean cutoff score experienced less truancy than participants with higher scores. Students with risk scores two standard deviations above the mean experienced a 3% increase in truancy, whereas truancy was reduced by 6% for those with scores at the mean (Thomas et al. 2011).

As program administrators learned of the results of the external evaluation, they quickly addressed issues related to culturally competent intervention practices for

minority participants as well as service and case management needs for the most at risk youth. A replication of the RD with additional cohorts reported mixed results (Thomas 2017). First, the intervention was not found to be effective for the 2007–2008 cohort. However, the following two years of the intervention were again found to be effective for participants in the high-risk treatment group. For the 08–09 cohort, it appeared the intervention was able to address the disparity in truancy reduction among White and non-White students as race was no longer a significant predictor of change in the rate of truancy. The interaction effect was again found to be significant, indicating students with the highest risk scores were not receiving the same benefits from the intervention as those with scores closer to the mean cutoff. Grade level was also a significant predictor with older students experiencing about a 5% increase in truancy. Again, students whose cases were successfully closed in the treatment group had a 5% decrease in truancy. In the 09–10 cohort, neither race nor the interaction effect were significant. The only significant predictor of change in the rate of truancy was successful case closure. It would appear that addressing some of the main barriers to attendance, based on findings from the initial external evaluation, benefitted students in the treatment group.

In addition to the findings discussed above, the change in attendance for participants of the high-risk intervention group was substantial. Participants of other intervention programs often experience a drastic reduction in truancy during the relatively short intervention period. However, truancy often quickly increases as the program concludes (Gandy, Schultz 2007). In contrast, TASC participants exhibited program benefits that endured throughout the school year. Approximately 25% of high-risk participants never had another unexcused absence after referral, 75% accumulated 6 or fewer unexcused absences, and 85% had 10 or fewer unexcused absences (Thomas 2017). This suggests that the rapid response to low initial rates of truancy is key to returning students to school and maintaining their attendance. Although 10 unexcused absences after referral appears excessive, it is critical to consider the risk and barriers to consistent attendance confronted by students and families and how a drastic decrease in truancy for students like Sam may be key to keeping youth in school and out of the justice system.

## **Beyond truancy: the continued impact of the TASC intervention**

Chronic truancy has been linked to academic outcomes at all grade levels, including retention, suspension, expulsion and even dropout (Sutphen, Ford, Flaherty 2010). Academic success and school dropout are often viewed only as educational issues, which is a limited perspective as these are general social problems with crucial implications for individuals and communities (Burrus, Roberts 2012). Prior

research suggests educational outcomes are not evenly distributed across subpopulations as racial minorities and those from impoverished families and neighborhoods are disproportionately less likely to graduate from high school. Highlighting the critical nature of this social problem, up to 70% of incarcerated individuals have not completed high school (Western, Petit 2010). As such, there is an acute need for additional research examining predictors of academic success. Unfortunately, the data necessary to address such research questions is often unavailable or difficult to attain.

A secondary advantage of the TASC intervention is the amount and breadth of data collected over the course of the intervention. As such, the multitude of variables that were collected may be used to assess risk factors for diverse outcomes. Just as a review of Sam's scenario revealed multiple points of interest and factors that influenced his life course trajectory, researchers have begun to assess diverse research questions utilizing data collected as part of the TASC intervention. In particular, recent studies have conducted analyses centered on the associated concepts of staying in school, progressing in school, and grade retention.

Truancy is one of the primary risk factors for academic failure and school dropout (Bartholomay, Houlihan 2014; Sutphen et al. 2010). Due to the numerous deleterious impacts of truancy, school districts often adopt policies wherein students can be retained a grade for accumulating too many absences, regardless of academic ability (Louisiana Department of Education 2017). For perspective on the potential impact of chronic absenteeism, Alexander, Entwisle, and Kabbani (2001) reported that kids who missed less than 7 days of school during first grade were significantly more likely to graduate high school. In addition to the negative effects of truancy and grade retention on the individual, retaining students for even single grade is prohibitively expensive for most school districts.

Research indicates that, rather than being the sole cause of academic failure, truancy is a proxy for a host of social and psychosocial factors that influence academic outcomes (Henry, Knight, Thornberry 2012). Recently, Rhodes, Thomas and Liles (2018) assessed diverse risk and protective factors linked to on-time grade attainment among high-risk participants of the TASC intervention 3 years post intervention. TASC participants were followed for 1 academic year, which necessitated an archival longitudinal approach by which participants during the 2004–2005 school year were matched with records in the State Department of Education database for 2007–2008. Of the 12,644 TASC participants during 2004–2005, over half (6,719) were identified in the DOE database for 2007–2008. Among the youth matched between the two databases, approximately 42% (2,861) had received the TASC high-risk intervention. Rhodes et al. (2018) included 30 predictor variables in their analyses of on-time grade attainment including: race, gender, grade, suspensions, previous grade retention, special education status, number of unexcused absences at referral, psychosocial risk factors, services, and community level factors. Results of logistic regression analyses indicated factors at various levels which simultaneously influence on-time grade attainment. However, as a testament to the

complexity of predicting academic success, this combination of factors explained about 10% of the variance in on-time grade completion. Noteworthy findings included a significantly attenuated likelihood of on-time grade attainment for youth in disadvantaged communities, those assessed as unmotivated, those referred to the program at an earlier age, and racial minorities.

Practitioners are most concerned with profiles of cases they encounter rather than combinations of characteristics they may rarely or never observe (Bellamy, Bledsoe, Traube 2006). Conjunctive Analysis of Case Configurations (CACC) has emerged as an alternative case-oriented approach that facilitates the examination of unique combinations of factors (i.e. subpopulation profiles) as they relate to an outcome (Miethe, Hart, Regoeczi 2008). CACC has been applied to a variety of criminal justice outcomes (Drawve, Thomas, Hart 2017; Rennison, Addington 2015). In contrast, CACC has gained little traction in other social science disciplines. The value of the conjunctive approach is that it provides an easily interpretable visual display of the relative frequency of configurations of relevant attributes. This allows for a description of similarities and differences in the configuration of cases based on a visual examination of tables created in Microsoft Excel. As such, it is a useful tool for exploratory and confirmatory analyses and the development of tailored case management. This approach has the potential to provide researchers and practitioners working with diverse populations with insights into interrelated factors that operate synergistically to influence outcomes.

Thomas, Thomas, Drawve and Rhodes (unpublished) utilized CACC to compare combinations of risk and protective factors that influence on-time grade attainment among the sample of former TASC participants assessed by Rhodes et al. (2018). Specifically, they developed a matrix of overall and grade-specific situational or subpopulation profiles based on the categories of each variable included in the analysis. CACC allows for the identification of the frequency of occurrence for all possible subpopulation profiles or combinations of factors within individuals. Based on the variables considered in their analyses, 3,840 unique subpopulation profiles could potentially be observed in the data. However, analyses focused on identifying dominant subpopulation profiles and assessing distinctions in the likelihood of on-time grade completion among dominant profiles (Miethe, Regoeczi 2004).

Comparisons of dominant profiles revealed substantial contextual variability in the influence of race, gender, service completion, psychosocial risk factors, and truancy as they relate to on-time grade attainment (Thomas et al., unpublished). Results indicated non-White youth were much less likely to be progressing on time three years post intervention. However, the influence of race was dependent on gender with no racial distinctions between females, but a 40% disparity in the likelihood of on-time grade completion between White and non-White males. Psychosocial risk factors also aid in explaining racial disparities as they are most likely to co-occur among non-White males and are associated with a 60% reduction in the likelihood of academic progress among this group. Moreover, grade-specific

analyses indicated race is not influential across all grades and appears to be dependent on truancy level. Minority status in conjunction with chronic truancy severely attenuates the likelihood of academic success.

Beyond the influence of race, Thomas et al. (unpublished) reported a strong association between truancy and on-time grade completion that was robust across race and gender groups. They reported a 30–35% reduction in the likelihood of on-time grade completion between youth with low and chronic levels of truancy. Across diverse subpopulation profiles and grade levels, students with 0–5 unexcused absences were more likely to be progressing on-time, whereas youth with a seemingly small number of additional unexcused absences (6–10) at referral performed much worse. Further, the likelihood of on-time grade completion is markedly low for chronically truant youth (11 or more absences). This suggests swift intervention (0–5 absences) is paramount to long-term success and, as efficacy studies suggest, underscore the importance of intervening when absences appear to be relatively “low”. Overall, the subpopulation profile perspective offered through CACC allows researchers and practitioners to better understand and assess risk and protective factors influencing diverse outcomes and may potentially facilitate the development of tailored case management.

## Conclusion

In Summary, the TASC early truancy intervention is an innovative approach to serving youth at risk of chronic truancy. The TASC program was created as a direct result of a widespread identified need in Louisiana. Findings from both process and empirical evaluations underscore the effectiveness of the intervention at reducing truancy amongst high-risk elementary school students. Although the TASC program was funded at approximately \$5 million per year, an internal cost-benefit analysis revealed that if just 12 of the 10,000 children served annually went on to graduate from high school the program would more than pay for itself. This is in addition to the substantive influence that educational success will invariably have on individuals and families. Data from the program consistently demonstrate the benefit of early and swift truancy intervention. Students who receive intervention after only 5 unexcused absences are much more likely to be academically on time 3 years post-intervention, one of the most robust predictors of high school graduation. Moreover, data from the program continues to inform case management practices for truancy intervention and school based truancy policies across the country.

Despite documented success for individuals, schools, and communities, the TASC program was, for the most part, eliminated in 2013 due to State budget restrictions. When the TASC program closed at the University, the problem did not subside. Annually, more than 10,000 families and 500 schools across Louisiana no

longer have access to the evidence based services offered by the TASC program. It is unfortunate that evidence based social programs, particularly those addressing the needs of youth, are often eliminated as a means of reconciling economic hardships emanating from national or regional level calamities (i.e. disturbances in the stock market or oil / gas industry). Legislators rarely choose to invest in people and programs that have the greatest potential, albeit over the long term, to benefit both the local and State economy. While benefits of the TASC program were evident immediately, a full accounting of the long-term efficacy of the program was not possible until the first cohort of students had the opportunity to graduate high school. Further, the full impact of removing funding for both the educational and judicial systems will remain unknown for years to come. One goal of program assessments, including the current review, has been to empirically establish the efficacy of the TASC program and to provide an accounting of what Louisiana residents and communities stand to lose by eliminating the program. If not Louisianans, perhaps residents of diverse communities and nations will benefit from assessments of how a comprehensive truancy intervention program may be designed from the ground up, assessed, and updated so as to best serve the needs of their constituents.

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