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**EXAMINING THE IMPACT OF COMMUNITY FACTORS ON STUDENT  
TRUANCY**

by

Juan Lorenzo

A Thesis

Submitted to the  
Department of Educational Services and Leadership  
College of Education

In partial fulfillment of the requirement

For the degree of

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at

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April 14, 2016

Thesis Chair: Terri Allen, Ph.D.

## **Dedications**

I would like to thank Dr. Terri Allen for her dedication and guidance throughout my research and to Congreso De Latinos Unidos, specially the truancy program for their support.

## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to extend my sincerest gratitude to Nelson Rodriguez and Amber Henley for their support and guidance throughout this research project.

## **Abstract**

Juan Lorenzo

### **EXAMINING THE IMPACT OF COMMUNITY FACTORS ON STUDENT TRUANCY 2015-2016**

Terri Allen, Ph.D.

Master of Arts in School Psychology

Truancy has been an ongoing issue in the lives of many urban and low-income students. Poor school attendance has been one of the earliest indicators of academic failure, delinquency, crime, poverty and etc. Although there has been number of different definitions for truancy, the law has consistently stated that underage students must attend school. It has been clear that addressing and combatting truancy has been issue in many cities. Research has identified many truancy risk indicators and various community factors have appeared to impact truancy rates. Additionally, within an urban setting, the availability of public transportation to and from school has also been implicated as a factor in school attendance. This current study examined the relationship between student truancy rates and community factors and the availability of student transportation. The results found that high school student had higher absent rates, that community factors were not related to number of absences, and a significant interaction between transportation and high school students.

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## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction**

#### **Need for Study**

Truancy has been an ongoing problem, but over the last decade it has received profound attention (Development Services Group, Inc. 2010 & Trujillo, 2006). Truancy is one of the earliest indicators of academic failure, delinquency, crime and poverty, (Guan, 2012). Frequently, truant students have low self-esteem; feel isolated and unpopular and poor academic skills (Baltimore City Public Schools, 2015).

School officials as well as the district officials have recognized the importance of attending school on time and everyday (Chang, 2015). Not only does education mitigate the effects of poverty (Global Partnership, 2015), but also effectively prepares our students for success (National FFA Organization). Although, it is imperative to attend school (Gorde, 2015), students are still truant (Stoneleigh Foundation, 2015).

Due to the variation and complexity of the term truancy (Pawlowicz, 2011), there is no nationally accepted definition (Safe Schools Healthy Students, 2012). This impacts the capability for researchers to describe what really causes truancy (Pawlowicz, 2011). Even though the standards and policies of truancy vary across the United States, (Truancy Prevention, 2015) every state requires that students attend school (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2012). In addition, each state has their own levels of truancy (Attendance Works, 2014) and the number of days a student must miss in order to be considered truant is decided by the state (Shute & Cooper, 2014).



**Purpose**

The purpose of this research study was to evaluate community factors that impact truancy rates of students. Investigating community factors that impact truancy rates may lead to improvement and support of at risk truant students. This study closely evaluated and analyzed how community factors such as transportation challenges, school climate and community vitality affect truancy rates as well as absenteeism in schools.

**Hypotheses**

This study examined the following hypotheses: Students provided with transportation are less likely to be truant; community factors are related to number of absences; and absentee rates increase with student grade.

**Operational Definitions**

Truancy - students with 10 or more unexcused absences.

Livability - considers community factors such economical and safe housing, mobility options, quality of schools and community safety.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Literature Review**

Although as early as 1836, Massachusetts required all children under the age of 15 to attend school (Child Labor Public Education Project, 2015), it was not until 1853 that the state implemented school attendance laws (Alexander & Alexander, 1985). Following Massachusetts lead, later about 32 states enforced school attendance (Alexander & Alexander, 1985) and by 1918 every state had some form of school attendance law (HSLDA, 2015).

However, even with state implemented school attendance laws (HSLDA, 2015), truancy continues to be a problem and is a steppingstone to dropping out of school (American Bar Association, 2010). If truancy is addressed, students can typically improve academically and achieve success (Safe Schools Healthy Students, 2012 & National Center for Mental Health Promotion, 2015).

In the city of Philadelphia, parents must submit an explanation as to why their child was absent in order for the student to be properly excused (The School District of Philadelphia, 2010). As mentioned before, each state has their own definition of truancy (Attendance Works, 2014). In the city of Peoria, Arizona, the school directly contacts the parent/guardian of the student who has three unexcused absences (U.S. Department of Education, 1996) and similar procedures are outlined in California (Safe Schools Healthy Students, 2012). Meanwhile, some schools do not call parents about their child's absences; "some school systems tell parents after one absence, others wait 30 to 40 days" (Strategies for Youth, 2012). Though laws vary in response to truancy (Truancy

Prevention, 2015), “research reveals that the most effective attendance policies are those that promote attendance rather than punish absence. Students, parents and staff must understand these policies, and especially the difference between excused absences and truancy” (Safe Schools Healthy Students, 2012).

Considering the ambiguity of the definition of truancy (Pawlowicz, 2011), in the Chicago Public Schools, students who are extreme truant have missed more than 21 days (Shute & Cooper, 2014) while a moderate truant student would have to miss between 11-20 classes or days (Shute & Cooper, 2014). Truancy is the most common element of dropping out of school (Development Services Group, Inc., 2010 & Virginia Child Protection Newsletter, 2008) because some states fail to address the issue (Strategies for Youth, 2012).

It has been found that there are many factors that influence truancy (Okwakpam, 2012). Students can be truant due to financial hardships, family and community factors, and/or poor school climate (Okwakpam, 2012; Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2015). Also, a long period of academic disengagement and attendance issues can lead to dropping out of school (Dockery, 2015). Lastly, students in urban settings may face complicated transportation arrangements (Pawlowicz, 2011) as well as cutting or skipping school (Bridgeland et al, 2006).

As mentioned above, some early indications of truancy can involve cutting, refusing to wake up and skipping class, “59 to 65 percent of respondents missed class often the year before dropping out” (Bridgeland et al, 2006). It is interesting to learn that high truancy rates are way too common in high schools, “chronic absenteeism rates then begin to increase again through the middle grades and jump substantially in high school,

to the point where half or more of the students enrolled in grades 9 to 12 are chronically absent” (Balfanz, 2015).

At the school level, students are affected by school atmosphere, which later causes the disengagement (Hughes, W., & Pickeral, T., 2013). The correlation between disengagement from school, truancy and dropout are all too common in the lives of students and the schools that they attend (Dockery, 2015). A sense of belonging to the school community can help students feel “more likely to value and pursue academic or school-relevant goals and thus are more likely to participate in the classroom” (Schneider, B.; Martinez, S.; Ownes, A., 2006).

Furthermore, transportation challenges can also pertain to truancy (Blazer, 2011). A study found that poor children often do not have the proper transportation, “many poor families do not have automobiles. Students in rural settings may not have easy access to public transportation. Students in urban settings may face complicated transportation arrangements that include public transportation transfers or reliance on unreliable carpooling sources” (Pawlowicz, 2011).

In the city of Philadelphia, students are able to qualify for transportation if they live 1.5 or more miles from their school, “the District’s student TransPass program has provided free transportation to Philadelphia public and non-public students by issuing weekly student TransPasses to students living 1.5 or more miles from school...” (Butkovtiz, 2008). Meanwhile, in the City of Philadelphia, it has been reported that there has been a mishandling of TransPasses, “during a one-week sampling of TransPass activity at 5 different schools, school personnel could not account for 230 of the passes valued at \$4,200” (Otterbein, 2015) With no doubt, unreliable or lack of transportation is

one of the leading causes of truancy (National Center for Mental Health Promotion, 2015 & Safe Schools Healthy Students, 2012 & Blazer, 2011 & Child Trends Data Bank, 2015). In order to resolve this issue, the school district must continue to “control procedures over TransPass activity and reduce the risk of theft and irregularities, we continue to recommend that the District monitor and enforce policies and procedures relating to the distribution and accounting for student TransPasses” (Butkovitz, 2014).

Schools that have failed to provide a safe or comfortable environment as well as the establishment of positive relationships should diligently practice policies that will increase student’s engagement (Brewster, C., & Railsback, J. 2003 & Boynton & Boynton, 2015 & Hughes, W., & Pickeral, T., 2013). School climate and engagement is major in truancy (Hoy & Hannum, 1997). The National Dropout Prevention Center/Network at Clemson University (2015) found that negative school climate and a disregard of diverse student learning styles were two of many factors related to drop out rates.

Establishing a sense of trust and comfort is essential, especially for students attending school in the urban setting since most of them may not have family or community support, “those working in urban schools, do not know their students well and lack an empathetic understanding of their situations or the interpersonal skills to engage them-conditions that are necessary for a trusting relationship to evolve and be sustained” (Tienda, M., & Mitchell, F., 2006).

Establishing a trusting relationship at the school level can prevent truancy, “when a student feels an attachment to school through a web of relationships with other students, teachers or a caring adult, it can help overcome many of the causes of truancy” (Brown,

2013). Forming positive relationships amongst students and teachers is just the beginning in increasing attendance, “the best strategy to increase attendance is to improve school quality and enhance direct student supports” (Balfanz, 2015).

Developing a plan to address or combat the root causes of truancy is imperative (Shute & Cooper, 2014), however, some school policies are addressing truancy by enforcing “automatic withdrawal after a period of nonattendance and automatic grade reduction or credit denial after a period of nonattendance” (Cumbo, G., & Burden, H., 2015; Children’s Policy and Law Initiative of Indiana, 2014). School policies and practices can unintentionally exclude truant students who are demonstrating disengagements (Cumbo, G., & Burden, H., 2015). It is unfair for schools to use grading based on attendance (Close, 2009) because failing a student after a number of absences is a punishment (Close, 2009). Not only is grading students based on attendance is unfair, but it does not constitute to student work (Close, 2009).

Some schools have adopted the “push-out” method (Tuzzolo, E. & Hewitt, D., 2006), which exclude students from attending school (Trujillo, 2006). If a student is extreme truant, some teachers emphasize and believe that it is nearly impossible for them to catch up since “one day’s lessons build off the prior lesson, chronically absent students are in trouble” (Balfanz, 2015, p. 22). Rather than empowering students, “this “push out” method sends a message to struggling students that they are not wanted, ultimately forcing a student’s situation from bad to worse” (Trujillo, 2006, p. 70).

It is unfortunate that some schools have adopted this method considering that, “students who become chronically absent see declines in average GPA (from 72% to 67%, dropping from a C to a D)” (Attendance Works, 2015, p. 1). The correlation

between truant students and academics is evident; “students who stop being chronically absent see academic improvements across the board” (Balfanz, 2015, p. 4).

Additionally, low-income students, especially youth of color are “more likely to attend overcrowded and under resource schools and are therefore less likely to have their academic needs met” (Rodriguez, 2009). Overcrowded and under resourced urban schools can result in poor academics (Whitehorne, 2015). Unfortunately, there is a “higher truancy rates for racial and ethnic minorities than white students have also been consistently reported. One explanation for this difference is the higher rate of economically disadvantaged racial and ethnic minority students” (Cumbo, 2015, p. 8).

Research has found that students who live with poor families in low-income communities are more prone to experience truancy (Safe Schools Healthy Student, 2012).

The City of Philadelphia was categorized as having one of the worst poverty rates out of the ten largest cities in the United States and additionally, studies found a strong correlation between lower levels of education and poverty (Shared Prosperity Philadelphia, 2015). With high school attendance being the key in fighting poverty (Lauver, 2013); some parents who live in poverty may suggest for their child to miss school in order to watch their siblings as he or she works during the day. (Williams, 2014). Overall, poverty does affect students, which significantly increases chronic absences (Balfanz, 2013).

In Philadelphia, there is a great deal of understanding how neighborhood factors impact schools and attendance (Powell, 2012). Violence has scared and pushed students since they have to walk to school and face community safety issues such as drug dealing, gangs and/or prostitution (Nutter, 2013). Not only are these students concerned about

their safety in school, but they are also fretful about their personal safety in their neighborhood, which has forced them to stay home rather than risking their safety (Pawlowicz, 2011). Children are more likely to avoid school if they do not feel safe or comfortable both in their school and community (Barton, 2009).

The Oregon school district understands the location of the school does benefit the entire community (Planning for Schools & Liveable Communities, 2005). Though there is no complete definition that defines community vitality (Crandall; Etuk, 2008), the term livability definitely varies amongst communities (Litman, 2015), however most individuals consider the following factors: economical and safe housing, mobility options, quality of schools and community safety; “livability as a term is exceedingly difficult to define. For some, it is intrinsically tied to physical amenities such as parks and green space; for others to cultural offerings, career opportunities, economic dynamism, or some degree of reasonable safety within which to raise a family” (Ling & Hamilton & Thomas, 2006, p. 1)

It has been found that schools are a factor that makes a community livable (Fabish, 2010). Though there is limited research on how community vitality and livability affect truancy, “officers understand that resolving problems with unruly people drinking at a public park, working to reduce truancy at a middle school, marshaling resources to improve lighting in a mobile home park, and removing abandoned vehicles from streets, may all be forms of valid and valuable police work, which affect the livability of a neighborhood” (Lincoln Police Department, 2015).

Overall, it is community livability and vitality that pushes a city to be considered livable, “a title that can attract new business and investments, boost local economics and



real estate markets, and foster community involvement and pride” (International Making Livable Cities, 2015, p. 1). In Philadelphia, specifically in the central area, the vitality and livability is not the best for it has a vacancy property rate of 10.5%, which presents a critical problem to both the police and the community (Nutter, 2013).

In the City of Philadelphia, the livable neighborhood program focuses on improving the quality of life (Welch, 2015). This program understands that community livability and vitality is essential, “if you think about it, community “social problems” are caused by a lot of little causes. These causes add up to big effects that are too large for us to manage alone” (Welch, 2015).

Research has found that students who live in urban neighborhoods are more likely to miss school or become chronically absent because of numerous factors that divert students from school (Indiana Department of Education, 2015). In 2013, a study found that “students attending schools in cities or towns were more likely to be absent three or more times a month than were students attending schools in suburban or rural areas” (Child Trends Databank, 2014, p. 1).

Unfortunately, in the City of Philadelphia, violence has been common for the lives of students since it has been considered to be one of the most violent cities in the United States (Nutter, 2013). The 2010 FBI Uniform Crime Report found that Philadelphia had the 4<sup>th</sup> highest homicide rates among the 50 largest US cities (Nutter, 2013). Violence continues to disturb community livability and vitality in the most impoverished and segregated neighborhoods in Philadelphia (Nutter, 2013).

More than often, truancy is referred to as the “gateway crime” (CBS Las Vegas, 2012). Research has found that truant students are at higher risk to experience gang

activity and delinquency; “about 75% of State prison inmates, almost 59% of Federal inmates, and 69% of jail inmates did not complete high school” (Harlow, 2003, p. 3). Equally, in Van Nuys, California shoplifting arrests declined by sixty percent after police operated a three-week truancy sweep (Trujillo, 2006). Other cities such as Minneapolis face similar situation with truancy youths as crime fell sixty-eight percent after police began to cite truant youths (Trujillo, 2006).

Community vitality, livability, school climate do affect truancy, the most recent Youth Risk Behavior Survey of Philadelphia by the U.S. Center for Disease Control found that almost 10% of the youth who responded missed school because they felt unsafe there or no the way to or from their homes from school. Almost 16% carried weapons to school and almost one-third felt sad or hopeless. Exposure to violence can cause poor performance in school, truancy, difficulty managing emotions, behaviors, and poor concentration. Traumatized youth may be prone to carry weapons to deal with intense feelings of vulnerability, or to use illicit drugs in an effort to treat their distressing symptoms. All these behaviors increase the risk of arrest and incarceration. (Nutter, 2013, p. 32)

As mentioned before, although there is no nationally accepted definition of truancy, students are still required to attend school (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2012). The difficulty in defining truancy is still an ongoing issue, but according to information found, financial hardships, family and community factors, and/or poor school climate all affect truant students. Community vitality and livability also affect truant students considering that community violence and unsafe living conditions may cause students to not want to walk to school due to gang and crime activities. Specifically, in the City of Philadelphia, community livability and vitality have affected truant students due to the city being one of the most violent cities in the United States.

## **Chapter 3**

### **Methodology**

#### **Participants**

Archived data was retrieved from records available at Congreso De Latinos. 40 students records were randomly chosen from a larger sample of 200 student truancy records. Demographics of participants were as followed: 25 male and 15 female; 19 Hispanics, 18 African Americans and 3 white. Age ranged from 10 to 17. Each truant student was selected randomly and received a unique identifiable ID number. The following website was used as the generator: <https://www.randomizer.org>. Participants' records were stored in a secured and locked location in order to protect confidentiality.

#### **Materials**

Achieved student truancy records retrieved from Congreso De Latinos. Records used for the study included attendance and demography. Field notes included observations of students home and school neighborhoods.

#### **Procedure**

40 students records were randomly chosen from a larger sample of 200 student truancy records. Each truant student selected randomly received a unique identifiable ID number. The following website was used as the generator: <https://www.randomizer.org>. Field notes included observations of students home and school neighborhood. The field notes included dates, time and place of observation. In addition, the field notes included general observations such as number of businesses, community activities, police presences, and behaviors and interactions between community members.

## **Design**

The independent variables were the community factors, such as transportation, grades and negative and positive community factors. The dependent variables were the attendance records of truant students. The study examined the following hypotheses: if there was a significant relationship (.05) with the following hypotheses: students provided with transportation are less likely to be truant, community factors are significantly correlated with number of absences; and high school students have higher absent rates. If there was a significant difference in the relationship between the above hypotheses, then the independent variables were further examined.

Lastly, an ANOVA was conducted to compare high school students and transportation. The study divided non-high school and high school students to determine and understand if high school truancy is impacted by transportation.

## Chapter 4

### Results

#### Hypotheses

This study examined the following hypotheses: Students provided with transportation are less likely to be truant; community factors are related to number of absences; and absentee rates increase with student grade.

**Truancy and Transportation.** The data revealed a significant main effect for transpass ( $F_{1, 36}=10.037, p \leq .003$ ) and a significant interaction between transpass and high school ( $F_{1, 36}=13.817, p \leq .001$ ). It was found that transportation made a greater difference in high school student versus grade school student attendance rates (see figure 1).

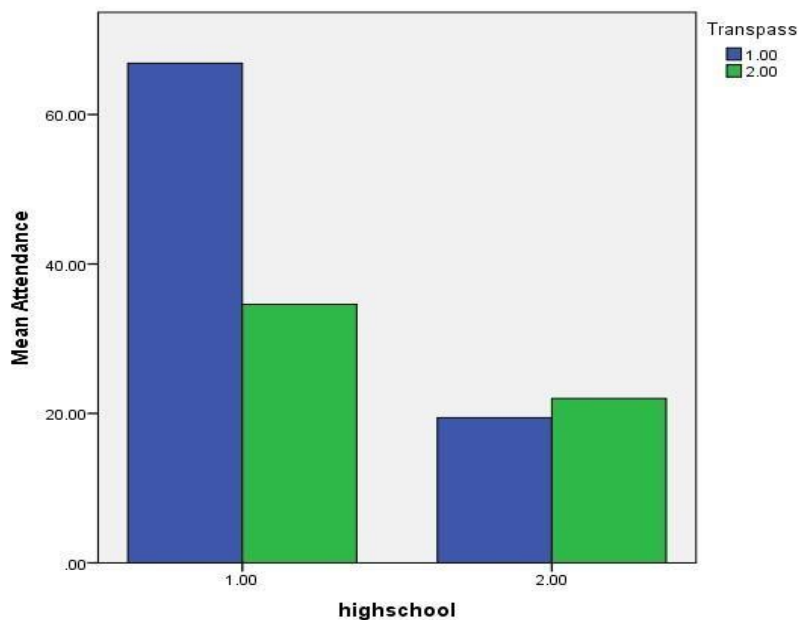


Figure 1. Interaction between transpass and high school students.

**Truancy and Grade Level.** The data found that high school students had higher absent rates (see figure 2). Student grade level was significantly related to attendance ( $r = .647, p \leq .0001$ ). Also, as previously noted, grade level was also influenced the impact of another significant variable, transportation.

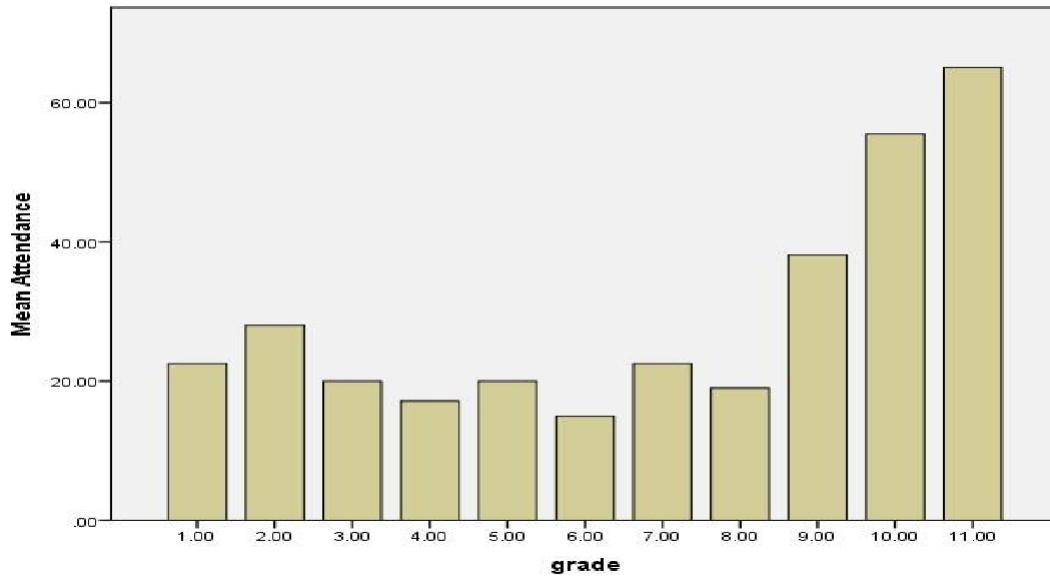


Figure 2. Grade level and absenteeism.

Overall, in the current study, availability of transportation was related to student attendance and absent rates was higher in the older students. However, community factors were not significantly related to number of absences. Additional detail is provided below.

**Truancy and community factors.** Results indicated that community factors were not significantly related to number of absences. Neither positive nor negative community factors were significant related to attendance rates (Positive factors and attendance,  $r = -.154, p = .334$ ; negative factors and attendance,  $r = .037, p = .823$ ).

## **Chapter 5**

### **Discussion**

#### **Summary and Limitation**

This study was conducted to investigate if community livability impact student truancy. Descriptive statistics was used to examine community livability, attendance, grades and transportation. The study examined if students provided with transportation are less likely to be truant, community factors are significantly correlated with number of absences; and high school students have higher absent rates. The data found that there was a significant main effect for transpass and a significant interaction between transpass and high school. The data did reveal that transportation made a substantial difference in high school student verses grade school student attendance rates. The second finding revealed that community factors were not significantly related to number of absences. It was noted that neither positive nor negative community factors were significant related to attendance rates. In contrast, the data did find that student grade level was significantly related to attendance. As mentioned, grade level also influenced the impact of another significant variable, transportation. Most interesting, community factors were not significant related to number of absences due to the lack of validity by community factors. During the data collection, the results indicated a high number of negative community factors, compared to positive community factors. As a result, the data was skewed on the negative distribution, which created a curve that was not symmetrical. With a negative skewed distribution, the data found that there was a lack of variability, which affected the findings. These truant students live in a homogenous nature, impoverished communities, which caused a homogenously skewed distribution.

## **Future Direction**

In addition, future research should include student's grades in order to determine if academic failure in a classroom setting results in higher truancy rates in students. Future research should also observe and collect data of school climate. The school climate data should include school official's interaction with students and safety. Collecting this information can be effective and valuable in determining how school can impact student truancy.



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