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Truancy Intervention Programs: Challenges and Innovations to Implementation

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Abstract

School truancy, particularly in primary and secondary schools, represents a serious issue deserving attention in communities across the nation. Most often treated as a management and disciplinary problem, serious attention to the underlying causes of truancy is usually given after the youth's absence from school becomes frequent or chronic. Truant youths are at considerable risk of continuing their troubled behavior in school, experiencing psychosocial difficulties, and entering the juvenile justice system. Unfortunately, with few exceptions, truancy has not received significant attention by criminologists. This paper addresses three questions: (1) What kinds of truancy programs exist in the U.S? (2) What evidence do we have regarding their effectiveness? (3) What system and programmatic issues present obstacles to implementing successful truancy programs, and need to be considered in establishing effective programs? Finally, we discuss efforts that are underway in Hillsborough County, Florida in implementing an effective continuum of service for truant youths and their families.

Keywords

truancy; truancy programs; intervention; implementation; adolescence

School truancy, or unexcused absences from school, particularly in primary and secondary schools, has increasingly been identified as an issue deserving attention in communities across the nation. According to Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention [OJJDP] (2001), hundreds of thousands of youths are truant each day. Many youths in America neither attend school regularly nor graduate from high school (Arnette, 1995). There is a critical, continuing need to develop and test innovative strategies and programs to improve the delivery of services to truant youths. Most communities lack screening/assessment and intervention services for truant youths, and large percentages do not connect with needed programs. They often fall through the cracks of the service delivery system.

Truant youths represent a challenging, yet very promising, group of at risk youth to study. In addition to having problems in school, they frequently experience troubled family situations, failing grades, psychosocial difficulties including drug use (Dembo & Turner, 1994). Truancy is usefully conceived as midpoint along a continuum that begins with absenteeism and recurrent

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tardiness and ends with suspension or expulsion (National School Safety Center, 1996). Rather than representing an occasional decision to skip school on the part of otherwise good students, our experience at the Tampa Juvenile Assessment Center truancy program indicates that many youths who are picked up and processed for truancy have serious problems in school with regard to performance and participation, and are also drug abusers. It is less the case that they are picked up for truancy because they are in the wrong place at the wrong time; rather, their behavior makes them visible to law enforcement officers. Identification of these youths' problems and responding to them by placing them as early as possible into effective intervention services would benefit them, their families, and society (Hawkins et al., 2000). The limited number of available studies, involving selected samples of truant youths, indicate truant youths are often experiencing serious interrelated problems in regard to a stressed family life (Baker, Sigmon, & Nugent, 2001; Kearney & Silverman, 1995), alcohol and other drug use (Baker et al., 2001; Dembo & Turner, 1994; Diebolt & Herlache, 1991), emotional/psychological functioning (Diebolt & Herlache, 1991; Egger, Costello, & Angold, 2003; Kearney & Silverman, 1995), and educational functioning (e.g., low grades, high rates of being retained in grade or placed in remedial or special programs) (Dembo & Turner, 1994; Garry, 1996; Ingersoll & LeBoeuf, 1997). Many of these youths' difficulties can be traced to troubled families (e.g., parental educational problems, parental history of alcohol/other drug abuse or mental health problems or involvement in crime) and troubled family relationships, which began at an early age (Kearney & Silverman, 1995).

Resources should be placed in assessing and providing needed services to truant youths and their families at the earliest point at which problem behavior is identified (Dembo, Livingston, & Schmeidler, 2002; Klitzner, Fisher, Stewart, & Gilbert, 1991). Society pays dearly for its children's educational failure. It has been estimated that each year's class of dropouts costs the U.S. more than \$240 billion in lost earnings and taxes over their lifetimes (Ingersoll & LeBoeuf, 1997). Due to limited resources, schools tend to have an episodic concern about truant youth. Policy makers are often torn between providing services to truant and other at-risk youths and their families, and responding to youth misbehavior with harsher sanctions (Steinhart, 1996). Most often treated as a management and disciplinary problem (DeKalb, 1999; Diebolt & Herlache, 1991; Dougherty, 1999), serious attention to the underlying causes of truancy is usually given after the youth's absence from school becomes frequent or chronic. At that point, the youth has often developed more serious difficulties in school and other areas of psychosocial functioning in addition to not attending classes.

Truant youths are at considerable risk of continuing their troubled behavior in school, experiencing psychosocial difficulties, and entering the juvenile justice system (Garry, 1996; Ingersoll & LeBoeuf, 1997; Loeber & Farrington, 2000; Puzzanchera, Stahl, Finnegan, Tierney, & Snyder, 2003). Reaching these youths before they become more seriously involved in drug use and other delinquent behavior provides an excellent opportunity to reduce the likelihood they will move into the juvenile justice system. Unfortunately, with few exceptions (e.g., Henry & Huizinga, 2007; McCluskey, Bynum, & Patchin, 2004), truancy has not received significant attention by criminologists.

What kinds of truancy programs exist in the U.S? What evidence do we have regarding their effectiveness? What system and programmatic issues present obstacles to implementing successful truancy programs? These are questions that need to be addressed before an informed understanding of the state of truancy interventions can be developed, and effective programs established. These are key questions informing the present paper. We first provide a general review of the key issues, experiences, and lessons learned from the implementation of various truancy reduction programs in the U.S. We then discuss selected truancy reduction programs of various types, which exemplify the range of such programs that have been implemented. Strengths and limitations in these programs are provided. Finally, we present an overview of

efforts that are underway in Hillsborough County, Florida (the tenth largest school district in the U.S.) to creatively address system level and program issues in implementing an effective continuum of service for truant youths and their families.

Needed Qualities of Effective Truancy Programs and Their Evaluation

In its review of promising truancy reduction programs, the Colorado Foundation for Families and Children noted several critical elements that were necessary for effective programming: (1) parent/guardian involvement, (2) a continuum of services, to include meaningful incentives, consequences and support, (3) collaboration with community resources—including law enforcement, mental health services, mentoring and social services, (4) school administrative support and commitment to keeping youth in the educational mainstream, and (5) ongoing evaluation. Few of the many programs the Foundation reviewed met these criteria. Of particular concern was the general lack of detailed information on program implementation and system issues experienced by truancy reduction programs, as well as process and outcome evaluations, which could inform the field. Most evaluations of truancy programs are based on aggregate data, often lack meaningful comparison groups (Lehr, Sinclair & Christenson, 2004), and focus on short-term benefits (e.g., reduction in unexcused absences [Mueller, Giacomazzi, & Stoddard, 2006]), which do not provide meaningful information on changes in individual's school attendance or academic school performance (OJJDP, 2001). (A similar state of affairs exists in the research on school dropout programs. Lehr, Hansen, Sinclair, & Christenson [2003] attempted to conduct a meta-analysis of forty-five intervention programs addressing school dropout or school completion. They found the “status of the research base did not lend itself to conducting the meta-analysis they had planned [Lehr et al., 2003, p. 360],” leading them to conclude that “the evidence-based intervention research focused on dropout prevention and school attendance ... [was at] an early developmental stage” [Lehr et al., p. 359]).

Relatedly, in 1999 and 2000, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention initiated five year funding of seven truancy demonstration programs. The National Center for School Engagement was contracted to evaluate these programs. Three funded sites, Houston, Seattle and Jacksonville, reflecting different approaches to addressing the truancy problem, were selected for in-depth evaluation in their final year of funding. Several lessons were learned in these evaluations (National Center for School Engagement, 2007, p. 8-9): (1) the need for truancy services to become part of existing student support services, which fosters greater acceptance and impact; (2) early intervention pays off, especially if it involves home visits and outreach to parents of children with few unexcused absences; and (3) the importance of community organizations joining schools to improve school attendance.

The General State of Truancy Programs in the United States

In many communities in the U.S., truancy programs remain sanction and procedure oriented. Resources are focused on identifying, locating and transitioning truant youth back into their respective schools with appropriate sanctions and/or citations. Often, these efforts include formal adjudication, police involvement, and suspension or remedial programs, which have not been shown to be effective in resolving the issues fostering truancy (Byer & Kuhn, 2003). As well, many communities lack screening/assessment and intervention services for truant youth in spite of the psychosocial problems these youth often present. As we argue in this paper, a more effective response to truancy requires identifying and addressing the problems that these youth and their families are experiencing through effective truancy intervention programs. It is important to identify promising truancy interventions that not only address the act of skipping school, but also address the root causes of this behavior. However, our review of the literature identified a relatively small number of studies of interventions that

have been put in place to decrease truancy rates by remediating the problems causing this behavior (Doll & Hess, 2001).

Truancy intervention programs are typically grouped by setting: school based programs, community based programs, school and community based programs, court based programs, and programs offered in other settings. We highlight several model truancy programs in various settings, their effectiveness, as well as the challenges they faced during the implementation process. Our purpose here is not to provide an exhaustive review of truancy reduction programs. Rather, we wish to provide examples of programs that operate in a variety of settings, and illustrate the experiences, successes, and challenges of these programs in light of our earlier discussion.

School Based Programs

To increase school engagement, several programs have been implemented in school settings to reduce chronic absenteeism and truancy. One pilot program, implemented in an urban high school in the Northeast, focused on providing mentoring teacher-student relationships to encourage both attendance and performance at school through daily student check-ins and one-on-one interactions with teachers (DeSocio et al., 2007). Addressing a gap in existing truancy programs regarding health care, this intervention is also unique in that participants were provided access to a school-based health center for screening and free medical services. A school-based project coordinator obtained consent during in-home visits and called families to provide encouragement and to ask parents about their child's absences through the duration of the project. In addition, two in-school meetings were held with the parents to discuss student progress with the intervention. Statistical test results indicated that students who received the intervention had significantly fewer absences than students in the unable-to-enroll or control groups.

At the same time, the DeSocio et al. (2007) pilot program experienced several program issues during its implementation. During the start-up phase of the project, it was difficult to locate and connect with families in their homes, and project staff also found it difficult to engage families to participate in the project. As a result, an unanticipated large number of students and families were unable to enroll. The researchers reported that limited financial resources impeded their ability to collect comprehensive data. Data for the control and enable-to-enroll youth were limited to information typically collected in school records. DeSocio et al. did not report any systems issues relating to interfacing with the school administration and/or the teachers who took part in the mentorship program.

Check and Connect, a school-based intervention program designed to engage students in school and support regular attendance, has been implemented in various elementary, middle, and high schools in both urban and suburban settings (Sinclair, Christenson, Evelo, & Hurley, 1998). Within the *check* component, risk factors are monitored, including signs of school withdrawal. Individual student/family needs are addressed such as within-family communication, needs for social services, problem-solving, and tutoring. The *connect* component of the model utilizes a one-on-one mentor/monitor system which includes two levels of student-focused intervention: basic and intensive. The mentor/monitor works to establish a long-term relationship with the student, family, and school staff through an approach involving persistence with students and families, continuity over time, and consistency. Empirical results from several Check and Connect studies indicate that students within the treatment groups were significantly less likely to drop out of school than students in the control groups (Sinclair et al., 1998). Results from the elementary-specific studies indicate that the intervention group had significant increases in the percentage of students whose absences fell to or below 5% of the time (Lehr et al., 2003). In one particular Check and Connect study, results demonstrated that closer, high quality

relationships between students and the staff mentor/monitor were associated with improved school engagement (Lehr et al., 2004).

Four common barriers were encountered by Check and Connect staff throughout the implementation of these studies. Student mobility was a constant challenge. For example, changing phone numbers and addresses would often negatively impact the ongoing successful communication between mentor/monitors and families. Schools in which punitive discipline policies were enacted to deal with truancy also negatively affected the intervention impact. For example, out-of-school suspension enabled students to become less engaged in school and further hindered the learning and communication process. Moreover, school administrators who sent problem students to other schools, rather than dealing with the inappropriate behavior, also disrupted communication and learning as the students jumped from school to school. Project system issues revolved around ineffective communication between parents and school officials. More specifically, secondary teachers were responsible for many more students than primary teachers in the elementary schools. Likewise, parents of students in middle and high school needed to remain in contact with numerous teachers – not just one as when their child was elementary school age. Due to these communication challenges, opportunities for miscommunication and misunderstandings between home and school appeared on a regular basis (Evelo, Sinclair, Hurley, Christenson, & Thurlow, 1996).

Community Based Programs

In addition to truancy programs run through the school, several other truancy interventions are community-based. For example, Stop Truancy and Recommend Treatment (START) is a community-based intervention designed to reduce truancy that also collaborates with various community agencies within large urban cities (Fantuzzo, Grim, & Hazan, 2005). The theory underlying START's community-based method suggests that collaboration among the school district, human services, family court, and community organizations can better assist truant youth than a more traditional approach in which multiple agencies do not interface. Once referred to the program, quasi-formal meetings and court hearings with truant youth and their families are held in neutral locations such as local schools. Although not carried out in a formal courtroom setting, these community-based court meetings hold the same authority as the traditional city family court. Unique to START, caseworkers from local community service organizations are present at the hearings throughout every phase of the intervention to provide direct services or other referrals to the families. Statistical analyses compared truant youths referred to START, traditional family court referrals, and non-referred truants in regard to future truant behavior. Results indicated that while both START and traditional family court significantly reduced their truancy levels when compared to non-referred truant youths, START youth maintained a reduced truancy level over time. Follow-up results revealed that one year after post-program involvement, youth who received START sessions had significantly lower rates of truancy than youth placed in family court and non-referred youth (Fantuzzo et al., 2005).

Throughout START's implementation, a very specific definition of truancy was used by the city to create referral criteria: a history of 25 or more unexcused absences in the preceding year and a pattern of attendance problems evident early in the concurrent year (an unexcused absence rate of 14% or higher). Due to this rigid definition, program issues developed as the scope of youth able to be enrolled into the intervention was limited. Furthermore, the research staff was limited to data available only in archival databases. Access to data providing information on other known risk factors on the truant youth and his/her family would have permitted a more comprehensive analyses of the program's effectiveness. The authors indicate that an evaluation regarding the fidelity of service is needed to establish a more complete picture of the program's effectiveness. Additionally, although no system issues have been identified with START's

implementation, Fantuzzo and colleagues (2005) suggest a qualitative analysis of the processes of connecting families to services in the community. The results would enable project staff to better identify system challenges regarding agency collaboration (Fantuzzo et al., 2005).

School and Community Based Programs

In addition to separate school and community based interventions, truancy has also been addressed using interventions that are both school and community based. One particular pilot program involved elementary-aged truant youth in an urban Midwestern city (McCluskey, Bynum, & Patchin, 2004). Students were referred to the program if they missed more than 20% of official school days. If attendance did not improve after the mailing of a letter informing parents of their child's truancy, an attendance officer contacted the home via phone or home visit. If these attempts did not have a positive effect on the student's attendance, the attendance officer referred the family to a caseworker at a mental health agency or other participating community service agency. Families in which attendance showed no improvement after two weeks of working with the community case worker were referred to a community-policing officer. Home visits made by the officer would again stress the necessity for improved attendance. Parents with truant youth under age 12 who were not cooperative with school and community officials were prosecuted under state law. Pre- and post-intervention attendance was examined within a single academic year (i.e., nine months). Results from multivariate analyses indicate that the initial intervention was effective in reducing the level of truancy among youth enrolled in the project.

A key program issue identified by the authors of this project involved work load. More specifically, reviewing student attendance records and identifying truant youth who needed to be enrolled in the project proved to be very time consuming. In the pilot studies, principals were the only school officials to take on this critical task. The authors suggest that implementation could have been smoother if the task had been delegated to multiple school officials and/or staff. Program issues were also experienced throughout implementation due to an imprecise process of identifying chronic truants. More specifically, the low cost of the initial intervention, sending a letter to the parents, resulted in students with a wide range of truancy issues, and related problems, being enrolled into the project. In terms of evaluation results, it should be noted that this particular project did not involve control groups (McCluskey et al., 2004).

Court System Based Programs

Several truancy programs utilize legal avenues through the court system to deal with truant behavior and chronic absenteeism. One such program is the Ada County Attendance Court program in southwestern Idaho. Researchers evaluated the effectiveness of this programs' ability to enforce school attendance (Mueller, Giacomazzi, & Stoddard, 2006). Students are referred to the attendance court by a school official after informal school-based efforts to reduce truancy have proven unsuccessful. After the attendance court coordinator investigates the referral, a hearing date is set and the school resource officer issues a court summons to the youth and family. During the hearing, the judge, attendance court coordinator, school officials, and parent(s) discuss the youth's poor attendance and related issues. The judge will then enter into an agreement with both the parent(s) and youth which often includes various community referrals and/or classes. The court monitors the outcomes of these agreements through formal and informal processes, including further hearings, contacts with local school officials, collection of student attendance and academic records, and juvenile court files. Independent research analyses indicate that the average number trancies dropped significantly after the students' first hearing in attendance court (Mueller et al., 2006).

It appears that the non-punitive methods of this particular attendance court are an effective short-term intervention in reducing truancy. However, a “legal loophole stating that parents were under no legal obligation to follow judicial instructions in attendance court proceedings” (Mueller et al., 2006, p. 216) created a critical program issue. If parents and youth had knowledge of this loophole, the apparent authority the court utilized in this intervention would likely be diminished. Other program issues involved a small sample size, incomplete student attendance data, and the lack of a comparison group. Primarily operated through the juvenile court system, this intervention has continued to expand into a collaborative venture with support from various social service agencies including education, health and welfare, law enforcement, community-based outreach, and other legal services. Interestingly, the authors did not discuss any system-related issues involving interfacing among these agencies. They did, however, analyze the effectiveness of the intervention via survey responses from school administrators. Although survey responses were generally supportive of the program, those surveyed did not typically interact with the students in the program on a daily basis. As such, their responses to the survey might not be as accurate as the views of staff having regular contact with program participants, such as teachers (Mueller et al., 2006).

Law Enforcement Based Programs

In addition to programs run through the schools, communities, and courts, other truancy interventions are administered via sheriff or city police departments. One particular program, initiated by the sheriff's department in a large urban county, attempted to reduce truancy rates by utilizing a crime control model (Bazemore, Stinchcomb, & Leip, 2004). Truant students were picked up by police officers and taken to a central Truancy Unit. Once at the unit, students were processed by police officers and assessed by social service personnel. While at the truancy unit, students receive a basic assessment and interview, brief informal counseling with a school social worker, and are under enforced silence. The students cannot spend more than 6 hours at the center and must be picked up by a parent or guardian. An evaluation of the Truancy Unit obtained mixed results for the outcomes of its services (Bazemore et al., 2004). When compared to non-processed youth, Truancy Unit efforts did appear to have short-term benefits (30 days following processing at the unit) for youth processed through the Truancy Unit. However, when analyzing long-term attendance behavior for processed youth, it appeared that Truancy Unit services had a negative impact. Further analyses indicated that processing at the Truancy Unit had little effect on future delinquent behavior.

Despite the original idea of creating a multiagency partnership to reduce truancy, this particular program shifted away from collaborative approaches during the beginning phases of implementation and became more of a crime control model. Several major systems issues were encountered throughout this police-led truancy initiative. Officers seemed to emphasize the number of youth processed through the Truancy Unit rather than the quality of interaction between them and the truant youth. This interaction time was generally limited to brief conversations regarding the absence. As such, little attention was given to the youths' service needs (e.g., the officer encouraging to the student to stay in school or follow through with previous referrals to community services) by the police officers. Social workers at the unit reported challenges in getting youth and their parents to follow through with service referrals. Additionally frustrating, social workers also reported very little, or even nonexistent, cooperation from school authorities in follow-ups at the school after the students were released from the Truancy Unit (Bazemore et al., 2004).

Challenges Presented by Existing Truancy Reduction Programs

Each of the programs we have discussed experienced implementation challenges. As previously stated, a majority of the research published from truancy studies is predominantly descriptive in nature. Of these, a relatively small proportion of studies describe program

evaluation efforts. Even smaller still is the number of studies that discuss implementation challenges or empirically validated results of project effectiveness and short or long term outcomes (Doll & Hess, 2001; Lehr et al., 2003). Indeed, it should be noted that the truancy programs we have discussed were included in the current paper because the results of their interventions have been validated in empirical studies.

The apparent lack of methodologically sound, empirical studies conducted to determine truancy program effectiveness continues to impede our understanding of how to best serve the growing numbers of truant youth across the nation. According to Mueller et al. (2006), program evaluations in pilot studies conducted in the field are frequently considered threatening; whereas, unevaluated programs are perceived to be “safe.” Indeed, “the facts, when made public, may set back a program and the policy under which it operates, particularly if there are some negative findings in the evaluation” (Palumbo, 1987, p. 22). If project staff members are fearful of negative evaluation results, “avoiding political embarrassment rather than accomplishing program goals may become the first priority” (Faux, 1971, p. 278). Although descriptive and predictive studies are important to our understanding events and issues preceding student truancy, chronic absenteeism, and school dropout, studies that evaluate the effectiveness of truancy interventions are necessary to determine whether these programs successfully serve their intended populations and meet project goals by improving truant youth psychosocial functioning, including truant and related behavior (Doll & Hess, 2001). A serious need exists to precisely document truancy interventions, as well as to empirically evaluate their effectiveness. Furthermore, it is important to establish a continuum of care for truant youth, inviting collaboration with relevant community agencies. In the next section, we discuss efforts underway in Hillsborough County, Florida to comprehensively address these needs.

The Hillsborough County Truancy Intake Center

The Hillsborough County Juvenile Assessment Center (JAC), Truancy Intake Center (TIC) in Tampa, Florida, is seeking to effectively address the truancy program and system issues discussed earlier. In particular, the TIC intake, assessment, intervention, and follow-up enhancements being put in place promise to provide a continuum-of-care for chronic truant youths. Public responses to the truancy problem need to be holistic and integrated. Following is a discussion of existing TIC services and program enhancements that will help make the TIC a model program.

Existing Intake Services

Established in 1993, the TIC is a crime prevention tool designed to get students back into the mainstream of school by reducing student dropout (Hillsborough County Sheriff's Office, 1997). Students who are not in school can be taken into custody by various law enforcement agencies located throughout Hillsborough County and transported to the TIC. At the center, the youth is transferred to an officer of the Tampa Police Department (TPD) or a deputy from the Hillsborough County Sheriff's Office (HCSO). The receiving officer calls the youth's parents/guardians, informs them the youth has been picked up for truancy, and requests that the parents/guardians pick up the youth at the TIC by 4 p.m. that day.¹

Table 1 presents information on 883 truant youths processed at the TIC during the 2007-2008 school year. As can be seen, the youths averaged under 14 years of age, were mainly male and non-Hispanic. A majority of the truant youths were African-American. Most of the youths (77%) were in grades 7, 8 or 9. Twenty-three percent of the youths who completed a substance use screening instrument (the Personal Experience Screening Questionnaire [PESQ]),

¹See Table 1 for demographic characteristics, self-reported substance use, and delinquency records of youth processed through the Hillsborough County Truancy Intake Center during the 2007-2008 school year.

developed by Winters [1992]) reported a moderate or higher level of drug involvement in the past year. Nearly 30 percent of the youths had an arrest record including at least one felony arrest.

Enhancements—During the past two school years, the number of truant youths brought to the TIC has declined. Street officers indicate this reduction in truant apprehension is due to an increased sophistication of truants by congregating in places that decrease the likelihood of detection (e.g., staying in their home or in the home of another truant youth, not walking around in their neighborhood or other public sidewalks/streets). To address this problem, an interagency agreement has been established between the Hillsborough County School District (HCSO) and the HCSO. According to this agreement, each school principal within the school district provides a hard copy or electronic list of truants (including their full name, date of birth, and last known residential address) to the TIC Sheriff's deputy on a bi-weekly basis.² The TIC Sheriff's deputy will, in turn, transmit this information to HCSO deputies assigned to the geographic areas where the identified truants live. These patrol deputies will then attempt to pick up the truant youth and bring them to the TIC for processing.

Existing Processing and Intervention Services for TIC Youths

Following a brief intake meeting with the HCSO deputy or TPD officer assigned to the TIC, the truant youth is placed in a large “classroom” (the TIC has been declared a school site), where processing activities continue. Under the supervision on a TIC counselor, the youth completes a Juvenile Self-Report Screening Package, probing psychosocial functioning including alcohol and other drug use.³ The HCSO has assigned a full-time social worker to the truancy center who meets with truant youths to obtain a more complete picture of the psychosocial issues relating to their truant behavior.

The TIC counselor completes a cover sheet on the youth which requires access to information on the youth from various computer databases to which the Tampa JAC is linked: (1) the Hillsborough County State Attorney's Office, (2) the Florida Department of Juvenile Justice (DJJ), (3) the TPD, (4) the HCSO and (5) the HCSB. A copy of the school system's emergency card information is provided to JAC truancy program law enforcement officers as needed. The HCSO social worker assigned to the TIC completes a “truancy alert” form which is sent to the youth's school (including the school guidance counselor) for appropriate follow-up. When necessary, the JAC school social worker will also communicate directly with appropriate school-based personnel.

In collecting information on a truant youth from various databases, the law enforcement officers are made aware of any current judicial pick-up orders on the youth. If the youth has an active pick-up order or *capias* on him/her, the TIC deputy or officer places the juvenile in custody and escorts him/her to another building on the JAC campus for more formal identification and processing procedures. There, the truant youth is detained until Florida DJJ personnel determine the nature of his/her legal status and make an appropriate response. All information collected as a result of the youth's processing as a truant is reviewed and forwarded by the HCSO social worker to the Florida DJJ staff member responsible for the youth on the secure side of the JAC campus. If the youth does not have any active pick up orders, he/she will remain in the classroom until being picked up by a parent or guardian. The information that has been collected on the youth is reviewed by the school social worker and a set of recommendations is developed to address various identified problem areas.

²The Hillsborough County School District (HCSO) considers students with five or more unexcused absences from the beginning of the first quarter, and/or ten or more unexcused absences from the second quarter until the end of the school year, to be truant.

³A copy of this package is available from the lead author upon request.

While the youth is in the classroom, silence is enforced. At various points throughout their stay at the TIC, the youth may also participate in some individual counseling with any of the various TIC personnel. When the youth's parents or guardians arrive at the TIC during normal working hours, they are initially directed to meet with a truancy center law enforcement officer. During this meeting, the officer or deputy discusses the specifics of the youth's infraction. A "School Referral" form is also given to the parents/guardians, which they must present to their child's school administrator the next day for re-admittance to the school. The school social worker then meets with the parents/guardians to share with them the information that was gathered during the youth's processing at the TIC. The parents/guardians are encouraged to assist the school social worker in developing an action plan to support the truant youth. In many cases, recommendations going beyond the educational domain are indicated to make an appropriate impact on the family's situation. After the family leaves the TIC, they meet with a school administrator to discuss the consequences of the student's action. The school administrator will indicate the results of the conference on the "School Referral" form, and mail it to the TIC. (If parents/guardians are not able to pick up their child before the TIC closes, the truant youth is temporarily placed in another building on the JAC campus until his/her parents/guardians arrive.)

Enhancements—One enhancement, recently put in place, has markedly improved TIC follow-up services. Under funding for a large clinical trial by the National Institute on Drug Abuse, a Brief Intervention (BI) service (Winters, K.C. & Leitten, W., in press) has been included as a follow-up for truant youths who meet the following criteria: (1) aged 11 to 15, (2) have no official record of delinquency or up to two misdemeanor arrests, (3) have some indication of alcohol or other drug use – as determined by a screening instrument (PESQ (Winters, 1992)) or the HCSD social worker located at the TIC, and (4) live within a 25 mile radius of the TIC.⁴ Additionally, any HCSD social worker or guidance counselor can make referrals to the Brief Intervention service as well. The Brief Intervention involves up to three in-home counseling sessions.

The primary goal of the BI therapist sessions is to promote abstinence and prevent relapse among drug using adolescents through the development of adaptive beliefs and problem-solving skills. The BI incorporates elements of Rational-Emotive Therapy (RET) and Problem-Solving Therapy (PST) to develop these adaptive beliefs and coping skills. Drug involvement is viewed as learned behavior that develops within a context of personal, environmental, and social factors (Catalano, Hawkins, Wells, & Miller, 1991; Clark & Winters, 2002) that shape and define drug use attitudes and behaviors. Developed over the course of an adolescent's learning history and prior experience with drugs, maladaptive beliefs and coping skill deficits are viewed as primary determinants of drug use. The goal of the BI therapist sessions is to diminish factors contributing to drug use (e.g., maladaptive beliefs) and promote factors that protect against relapse (e.g., problem solving skills).

Neighborhood Accountability Boards

The TIC is also in the process of establishing an additional pilot program, involving six middle schools, which will provide follow-up services for truant youths. Truant youths processed at the TIC from these pilot project schools, who are not already receiving juvenile justice or truancy services from community-based agencies, will be eligible to receive Neighborhood Accountability Board (NAB) services.

⁴Due to Florida compulsory attendance laws that permit youths 16 years of age or older to withdraw from school, the truancy center does not service youths over age 15.

In response to a call for more restorative justice, community-based programs for juveniles, the Florida Department of Juvenile Justice began funding NABs throughout Florida in 2001. Based on Restorative Justice principles, NABs stress the importance of a cooperative structure involving those affected by offending behavior, and the community to provide accountability and support (Bazemore & Schiff, 2001; Van Ness & Strong, 2002). Use of community residents in a restorative efforts helps strengthen community ethical and moral standards, as well as building a more trusting community (Claassen, 1996).

In keeping with these principles, on-going NAB volunteer training is provided by Florida Atlantic University's Community Justice Institute, home of the Balanced and Restorative Justice Project (BARJ) (<http://www.cji.fau.edu/overview.html>). There are currently eleven community-based NABs in Hillsborough County, involving approximately 120 trained board members located in rural, urban, and suburban neighborhoods. NABs serve over 300 Hillsborough County families each year.

In the restorative NAB, youths must be active in regaining their position within the school and community. Individualized NAB contracts are agreed upon, and signed by all present, including the youth. Contract length and assignments are reviewed continually with the goal of empowering the family to draw on its own resources while still being supported by the NAB. Consequences for breaking the contract are tied directly to the youth's actions. An emphasis on family support, tempered with the expectation that families will live up to their responsibilities as good-willed, law-abiding citizens, has been very effective with youth referred for delinquent behavior. Parents who need temporary reinforcement and assistance in establishing disciplinary boundaries or increased supervision are mentored by the open discussion style of the NAB. Monthly NAB meetings allow board members to gauge the youth's progress.

One of the strengths of the NAB model is that board members live in the same community as the families, enabling them to be very familiar with school personnel as well as with services that are available in the community. Indeed, board members are able to offer creative solutions to problems that professionals at a downtown courthouse office could not. By design, referred-to services are free or very low cost to the families. Moreover, these services are already established in the community, rather than designed for the program. This enables families to utilize existing community services as needed in the future.

Truancy presents an opportunity for student and parents to communicate with the school, and for parents to become more aware of, and involved in, their child's progress in school. The NABs are supported by a case manager, who maintains contact with the truant youth and her/his family over time. Since many truant youth present with significant school and other psychosocial difficulties, case manager support may extend for several years. During this time, truant youths and their parents/guardians may be referred to various community services. If proven effective, TIC related NABs will be expanded to all HCSD schools.

Discussion

Truancy represents a growing epidemic in academic settings across the United States (Fantuzzo et al., 2005). Unfortunately, efforts to address truant behavior are all too often sanction and procedure oriented, with truant youths being treated as disciplinary and management problems. Interventions that do not target the root causes of such behavior fail to address the problems that can lead many seriously truant youth to move into the juvenile justice system. However, as described earlier, some truancy programs have started to move away from one-dimensional strategies and, instead, involve more collaborative and holistic approaches.

Summarizing our previous discussion, none of the interventions reviewed come without challenges. Program barriers were often related to both funding and staffing limitations. A common challenge faced in providing truancy services is family mobility, making it difficult to maintain correct contact information on students and parents, and to engage families throughout the intervention process. Other program challenges include ineffective communication and/or cooperation among program staff, parents, and school or community officials. Further, many programs use different definitions of truancy. A final and critical limitation in many truancy programs is the lack of a continuum-of-care. Most programs provide one-shot or short term services, with little tracking of youths and their families over time.

Efforts underway at the Hillsborough County TIC address these important needs from initial contact to follow-through. In particular, the TIC enhancements discussed earlier will: (1) permit an increased number of truant youths to be brought to the truancy center, where (2) their psychosocial problems, including school issues, can be identified, with, for qualifying youths, (3) follow-up involvement in in-home intervention services and, for truant youths attending schools with NABs, (4) longer term case management and referral services. Since many of these youths' problems often continue over the course of their school years, having ongoing service resources available to them and their families is essential, particularly as many of these families lack the resources to pay for services.

Without a program based on a continuity-of-care model, interventions fall short of addressing the complex network of problems associated with truant behavior. Indeed, as Fantuzzo et al. (2005) point out, "a mandate for collaborative intervention requires institutions to cross traditional agency boundaries to address truancy. Unfortunately, the truancy intervention literature to date has many shortcomings and does not adequately reflect these mandates" (p. 658). Current intervention services in Hillsborough County are addressing truancy by crossing these agency boundaries. By connecting law enforcement officers, school personnel, and NABs, this program hopes to efficiently address the diverse factors that contribute to truancy.

It is, once again, important to note that this continuum-of-care has been made possible by the collaboration of community agencies (the Hillsborough County Juvenile Assessment Center, Hillsborough County Sheriff's Office, the City of Tampa Police Department, Hillsborough County School Board, and, the University of South Florida [with NIDA funding]) to achieve a common objective: addressing the service needs and risk factors of truant youths, in an effort to prevent their school failure and movement into the juvenile justice system. This collaboration was built on a foundation of trust developed over 15 years of TIC operation at the Juvenile Assessment Center.

At the same time, several limitations of the Hillsborough County truancy intervention program should also be noted. First, youth in the current truancy program are limited to those who are picked up by Hillsborough County law enforcement officers or those who are referred for enrollment by their school social workers/guidance counselors. As such, these youth likely represent the higher end of the risk continuum among all truant youth. In addition, a selection bias may be reflected in truant youth who are brought to the TIC by police or those who are referred to the program by school personnel, in comparison to truant youths who are not brought to the TIC. Thus, the findings from this specific program may not generalize to lower risk truant youth. Second, the sample of the youth involved in the program may not be sufficiently large to formally examine the potential differences in intervention effects as a function of gender and race or ethnicity. Third, some may view the use of brief interventions as a limitation by virtue of a perception that we are not providing a sufficient therapy dosage to influence prolonged change. However, we contend that the extant literature supports the application of brief interventions with minimally delinquent truant youth.

An additional limitation, reflective of the developmental stage of our continuum-of-care model, is the lack of outcome data. In this vein, it is important to point out that the establishment of this service delivery model: (1) has taken several years of work and interagency collaboration to establish, and (2) it provides an infrastructure for successful program operation. As noted earlier, truancy intervention programs generally do not take a systems view on their operation, and limit their attention to truant youths' school attendance issues.

Despite these limitations, the truancy intervention services taking place in Hillsborough County are far more comprehensive in their attempt to foster interdisciplinary, interagency collaboration, than other one-dimensional truancy interventions. In addition, a major concern in many truancy interventions has been the lack of longer-term follow-up services for truant youths. Most, if any, services truant youths receive are short-lived and do not involve long-term follow up. In contrast, we argue that quality psychosocial assessments should be completed on truant youths, resulting, if indicated, in their placement in treatment services. Further, longer-term follow-up may be needed for these youths to ensure their well being and pro-social school participation.

Truancy programs seeking long-term behavioral change, including improved school attendance and performance, should consider providing more holistic, systems oriented services to truant youths and their families. And, they should make provision for needed follow-up care. In addition, there is a need to develop process and outcome measures, at the both the individual, program, and system of care levels, that will permit the completion of informed, comprehensive evaluations of these programs. As our literature review revealed, evaluations of truancy programs, when they are completed at all, focus on the behaviors of truant youths. They often neglect to consider the influence of the program, and the network of agency collaborations, on these outcomes. Attention to these issues is needed for this field to mature, and to facilitate the conduct of sophisticated, multi-level research to elucidate the manner in which effective truancy programs operate.

In sum, communities, schools, courts, and law enforcement agencies need to work together to address these needs, and in so doing, decrease truancy. Rather than placing a focus on only one setting (i.e., school, community, court, law enforcement agency), successful truancy efforts demand a continuum-of-care. If not, programs fall short of providing the full range of services and support often needed by truant youth and their families. Moreover, without a continuum-of-care, truancy initiatives are ill-equipped to address issues directly associated with truancy such as academic problems, troubled family situations, and other psychosocial difficulties—including drug use (Dembo & Turner, 1994). The truancy intervention services taking place in Hillsborough County are attempting to target these issues, while also fostering interdisciplinary, interagency collaboration in an effort to keep our youth in school.

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Table 1
Socio-Demographic Characteristics, Self-Reported Substance Use, and Delinquent Record
of Youth Processed Through the Hillsborough County Truancy Intake Center, 2007-2008

Age	N	%
8	2	<1%
9	5	<1%
10	8	<1%
11	33	4%
12	69	8%
13	168	19%
14	289	33%
15	309	35%
Total	883	100%
<i>M =</i>	13.81	
<i>SD =</i>	1.26	
<i>Sex</i>	<i>N</i>	%
Male	617	70%
Female	266	30%
Total	883	100%
<i>Completed PESQ^a</i>	<i>N</i>	%
No	161	18%
Yes	722	82%
Total	883	100%
<i>Prior Self-Reported Substance Use</i>	<i>N</i>	%
No	556	77%
Yes ^b	166	23%
Total	722	100%
<i>Dept. of Juvenile Justice Record^c</i>	<i>N</i>	%
No	419	48%
Yes	464	52%
Total	883	100%
<i>Race</i>	<i>n</i>	%

Age	N	%
Caucasian	378	43%
African-American	498	56%
Asian	4	<1%
Other	3	<1%
Total	883	100%
<i>Ethnicity</i>	<i>n</i>	%
Hispanic	309	35%
Non-Hispanic	574	65%
Total	883	100%
<i>Grade Level</i>	<i>n</i>	%
2 nd	2	<1%
3 rd	9	1%
4 th	10	1%
5 th	25	3%
6 th	108	12%
7 th	229	26%
8 th	246	28%
9 th	202	23%
10 th	51	6%
11 th	1	<1%
Total	883	100%
<i>Felony Charge (1+)</i>	<i>n</i>	%
No	637	72%
Yes	246	28%
Total score	883	100%

^aPersonal Experience Screening Questionnaire (Winters, 1992).

^bYouth who scored 22 or above on the PESQ (i.e., a score of 22+ indicates a moderate level of alcohol/drug use).

^c1 or more misdemeanor and/or felony juvenile arrest(s).