

A Comparative Study of Non-Truant and Truant Children¹

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INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Compulsory education dates back to the period of English colonization. During this early development, the emphasis was on vocational and religious instruction, with little, if any, attention paid to what was known as "book education". Although some compulsory education laws have been in existence since colonial times, it was not until the early part of this century—some 50 years after the development of public schools—that serious efforts were made to enforce such laws. Since that time, truant behavior has been a widespread phenomenon.

A number of authors, notably Abbott and Breckenridge (2) and Lash and Kahn (26) emphasize the difference between truancy and other types of absences.

The laws relating to truancy frequently include terms such as "habitual truant" or "chronic truant". Sometimes the meaning of these terms is unclear, and their interpretation may vary not only between different states but also between different communities within the same state.

In the last analysis, since truancy is a legal term it seems to have come into widespread usage only after laws were passed making it illegal for a child to be absent from school under certain given conditions. Truancy, therefore, may be defined as a child's violation of the state's law covering compulsory school attendance.

In the State of California, the *Education Code* seems to be fairly clear regarding the definition of truancy. It defines as an "habitual truant" any child between the ages of eight and 16 years "who has been absent from school without valid excuse more than three days, or tardy on more than three days. Any absence for a part of a day is a tardiness."

In San Bernardino and in other communities in California known to the writer, it is not uncommon to find that neither the intent nor the letter of this law seems to be followed. School officials and others concerned with the problem of truancy generally think and act in terms of trying to find the reasons for the child's truancy and to help the child and his parents with this problem. Furthermore, children who arrive at school late are not usually considered to be truant as stipulated in the law.

For purposes of this study the definition of an "habitual truant" which will be used is the one employed by the San Bernardino High School, from which the sample for the study was obtained. This definition states: An "habitual truant" is one who has had five or more unexcused absences during the school year and who is brought to the attention of the Attendance Office of the school. All of the truant children in this study fall into the category of "habitual truant".

Since there is a relatively limited amount of information regarding the dynamics of truancy, it is hoped that this study may shed some addi-

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tional light on the etiology and nature of truancy and thereby provide some clues regarding more effective methods for the treatment of truant children.

The major question to be considered is: Are there observable and measurable differences between the non-truant and truant children in the sample studied? Other questions which will be raised and for which answers will be sought include the following:

(1) Is there an observable and measurable "truancy syndrome"? In other words, is there a relatively consistent pattern of certain intrinsic and/or extrinsic factors evident in truant children which does not appear consistently in non-truant children?

(2) To what degree and how extensively has the scientific method been applied to the study of truant behavior?

(3) According to what has been published regarding truancy, are there broad generalizations or conclusions which can be drawn and which can add to our fund of knowledge of this subject?

(4) Is there any general agreement regarding the definition of truancy, its causes, and its treatment?

(5) Can certain hypotheses regarding truancy be either supported or rejected?

The principal overall hypothesis to be tested is:

There are no significant differences in certain variables to be measured in matched samples of non-truant and truant children.

The literature appearing between 1920 and 1952 was carefully reviewed. It is interesting to note that although truancy has been a problem of special concern to public school teachers and administrators, the only book on truancy was written by two social workers, Abbott and Breckenridge (2).

Perhaps the two most interesting revelations regarding the literature are: (a) a relatively small amount of material has been published on the subject, and (b) the great majority of the items published appear to be primarily expressions of the authors' opinions with little, if any, objective evidence to support their views.

The ratio of truant children to the total school population in any given community does not seem to be readily available. In the few instances in which ratios or percentages were reported, those data seemed to have no value because of the failure of the authors either clearly to define truancy or to indicate how they obtained their ratios.

Virtually all the authorities consulted refer to truancy as a symptom. Some do not elaborate further. Others indicate that truancy is a symptom of some underlying maladjustment in the child, the home or the school, or a combination of two and sometimes all three factors. It can be stated conservatively that there seems to be a great deal of semantic confusion among the writers. However, there also seems to be a consensus among authors of the last two decades that truancy is a more complicated phenomenon than was believed by earlier writers.

Broadwin's definition of truancy is perhaps an extreme example of the semantic difficulties in this area. He states: "The complete definition must be obtained from the child by the study of his unconscious psychic life, by the study of his instinctual strivings, their evolution and forms of expression . . . In the main, we study the course that his love and hate instincts have taken in his gradual development." (6:253)

From a perusal of the literature, the question whether the truant child will become an adult criminal is inconclusive. The possible re-

relationship of truancy to factors such as poverty, broken homes, employment of mothers, and undesirable neighborhood influences is mentioned frequently in the literature. Some authors even tried to indicate causal relationships between factors such as poverty and broken homes and truancy. However, none presented any objective evidence in support of such opinions.

In discussing the etiology of truancy, three authors, Dayton, de Garcia, and Ell, (10, 11, 13) make broad generalizations which seem to include just about everything that could possibly play a part in the causation of truancy, but they do not support their opinions with any shred of evidence. For example, Dayton states: "We cannot say that truancy is caused by feeble-mindedness alone. The most important contributing factors are the school, the neighborhood, and the home, together with the individual make-up of the child, which may include mental deficiency." (10:800)

In what appears to be the first careful descriptive statistical study of truant boys published, Clark makes the following tentative comment: "There is no doubt that home conditions have been an important factor in causing the delinquency of many of these truant boys, but the factors of intelligence, school retardation, and heredity have also had a vital influence." (8:233) Clark's paper, published in 1918, was the earliest attempt at an objective analysis of truancy found in the literature.

In her control group study of 300 juvenile court cases matched by age, sex, and locality with 300 non-delinquents, Merrill makes the following sober remark: "The fact that any given percentage of juvenile offenders is found to have foreign-born parents, come from broken homes, have red hair, be mentally defective, means nothing unless we know that, with respect to these characteristics, delinquents differ significantly from a similar group of non-delinquents." (28:15-16)

Using mostly Chi-square and critical ratios in her statistical analysis, the author set for herself a standard of the 1 per cent level of significance. Her hypothesis that there are no significant differences between delinquent and non-delinquent children was supported by her findings. Merrill states:

Delinquents are children who are not sharply differentiated from non-delinquent children. Their offenses form a graded series of acts of varying degrees of social consequence from 'mere naughtiness' to crimes of major significance. And the seriousness of the offense is in no wise a criterion of the seriousness or extent of the social maladjustment of the offender. It is a commonplace observation that the delinquent act, without the frame of reference of the total personality of the delinquent actor, has little psychological meaning. (28:3-4)

Wickham, in his more exhaustive and rigorous study of 309 matched pairs of delinquent and non-delinquent boys in Alameda County, California, came to the same conclusion. In summary he states: "Foremost among the conclusions was the finding that there are no absolute differentia in delinquency." (43)

Clinard, Arthur Johnson, and Wallin (9, 21, 42) seem to believe that the major causes of truancy are to be found in the shortcomings of the school. All three of these authors seem to be somewhat less than objective. Johnson emphatically asserts that if teachers and principals had more understanding of children there would be a sharp reduction in juvenile delinquency. Wallin contends that the two primary factors in the school situation "that conduce to truancy, and directly or indirectly, to juvenile misbehavior" are maladjusted teachers who possess little insight into personality problems and a "maladjusted or ill-adapted curriculum." (42:3-4)

In his paper, "Secondary Community Influences and Juvenile Delinquency," Clinard seems to stand almost alone and sharply criticizes most of the views of other writers in this field. He deplors the fact that many writers on delinquency persist in regarding the delinquent as a product almost exclusively of personal maladjustment, that others look at the family as though it were the sole source of value judgments, and that still others place the blame on gangs or bad neighborhoods.

Turning his attention specifically to the problem of truancy, Clinard makes the following observations:

It is a curious commentary on our modern world which emphasizes education, that the school is a large contributing factor in delinquency. Truancy, for example, constitutes a considerable portion of delinquency in itself, and if we recognize that it in turn is related to stealing and sex delinquency, it becomes even more important. By definition, truancy implies that school is an unsatisfactory experience.

Schools are generally not operated with the purpose of developing interested, creative minds with some degree of individuality. Most professional educators would agree that in reality schools are places where juveniles, during a process of several hours a day, are routinized, bored, crushed in their individuality, and thrown into needless competition with others rather than aided in the development of co-operation . . .

Many schools are staffed by persons who inspire neither creative intelligence nor respect for the values of our society. The influences of the school and the teacher may sometimes be personal, but in general, at least in many urban areas, they are secondary, nonintimate, and categoric.

The school situation is a social situation; and the learning process takes place in a situation of personal interaction. Not a few of those selected to educate the young are themselves maladjusted, teaching being, if anything, a neurotic adjustment to life. (9:44-45)

Although Clinard criticizes other writers for their circumscribed and frequently unilateral approach to the study of delinquency, he seems to fall into the same difficulty himself. While making a plea for the consideration of broad cultural factors and their impact upon the delinquent child, he seems to discard all other possible influences. Although he berates the panaceas offered by others, his somewhat categoric criticisms of schools and the emotional qualifications of teachers suggest that he, too, may be seeking panaceas in radical changes in our educational system. And finally, like most other writers in this field, Clinard expresses strong opinions and conclusions without any objective evidence to support them.

A summary of the major points of view expressed in the literature follows:

- (1) Truancy is a result of complicated psychological problems within the truant child.
- (2) It is the first step in a subsequent criminal career.
- (3) It is caused by poverty, broken homes, employment of mothers outside the home, and undesirable neighborhoods.
- (4) It is caused by maladjusted teachers and/or an ill-suited curricula.
- (5) Truants and other delinquents are indistinguishable from non-truants or non-delinquents.
- (6) The phenomenon of truancy can only be understood if one also understands the cultural influence operating in society.

METHODOLOGY AND SUMMARY OF RESEARCH

This research was carried out in San Bernardino, California, a city of 80,000 people located 65 miles east of Los Angeles. The children in the sample were all enrolled in the San Bernardino Senior High School. At the time of the study this was the only high school in the city; it had 3,000 students and was badly overcrowded.

All the truant children who had not yet dropped out of school and who were available for testing were used as the experimental group. There were 80 such children: 50 boys and 30 girls. The control group consisted of non-truants who were matched with truants by sex, age, grade, race, and, of course, school, making a total of 160 children studied.

Identifying data for each child were obtained from existing school records. These data included subjects studied, school marks received, intelligence test scores, race, marital status of parents, possession of telephone, and occupation of fathers. All children were given the *California Test of Personality—Secondary Series*. All were tested in groups ranging from three to fifteen with a mean of six. Truants and non-truants were intermingled during testing sessions. There were no apparent differences in behavior or appearance between the two groups during such sessions.

An effort was made to evaluate the importance of certain parameters in truancy. One of the objectives was to ascertain whether or not there are any observable and measurable differences not due to chance between the 80 matched pairs of non-truant and truant children with respect to their standing on certain independent variables. More specifically, statistical analyses of the data obtained were carried out in an effort to determine whether or not at the 5 per cent level of confidence there were any significant differences between non-truant and truant boys and non-truant and truant girls on the following independent variables: (1) Intelligence quotient, (2) Self Adjustment, (3) Social adjustment, (4) Total adjustment, (5) Scholastic achievement, (6) Paternal occupation, (7) Possession of telephone, (8) Marital status of parents.³

In the statistical analysis of the data, essentially two approaches were undertaken. First, differences between the means of control (non-truant) and experimental (truant) groups on various independent variables or between the proportions of individuals in the two groups who responded in a designated manner, were tested for statistical significance. Second, a correlational approach was employed in which not only the degree of inter-relationship among selected pairs of independent variables was obtained, but also the degree of relationship between certain independent variables and the dependent variable (status with respect to truancy) was evaluated. Separate analyses were made for the two groups of boys and for the two groups of girls.

Statistically significant differences were found between the means of four variables reflecting scholastic achievement of non-truant and truant boys and of non-truant and truant girls. In the samples studied, non-truant girls were significantly higher in mean intelligence test scores, but significantly less variable in their scores, than were the truant girls. No statistically reliable differences were found between the means of non-truant and truant boys in measures of the independent variables studied.

In general, interrelationship among the independent variables tended to be low. However, within each of the four samples (non-truant boys, truant boys, non-truant girls, and truant girls), correlation coefficients of substantial magnitude were found between grade point averages in

³ Self adjustment, Social adjustment and Total adjustment were derived from the scores on the *California Test of Personality*; paternal occupations were tabulated according to The *Minnesota Scale for Paternal Occupations*.

academic courses and grade point averages in non-academic courses and between the scores on the two portions of the *California Test of Personality* that purport to measure traits of self adjustment and social adjustment.

Each of the four measures of scholastic achievement employed was correlated substantially (and significantly) with the dichotomous dependent variable, membership in a group of non-truants or in a group of truants. Measures of general intelligence, personality adjustment, and socio-economic status were not significantly related to the dependent variable. In short, the only independent variable providing a considerable degree of prognostication of truancy status was that of scholastic achievement. However, it is difficult to judge whether truancy is dependent upon poor scholarship or whether a low level of scholarship is a necessary consequence of truancy.

Therefore, it may be reported that the results of this study leave no choice but to state that the major hypothesis—that there are no significant differences between non-truant and truant children—tends to be supported. It is interesting to note that in the two extensive and careful studies mentioned above (28, 43) which endeavored to find out whether there were any statistically significant differences between delinquent and non-delinquent boys, the findings were similar to those in the present study, namely, that there are no differences.

However, a few words of caution are in order. The fact that the hypothesis is supported does not necessarily mean that there may not be some important differences between the two groups in the present study. One can only make the cautious claim that the methods used and the variables examined did not provide any clues for either differentiating between non-truants and truants or predicting the possible future status of a child with respect to truancy.

In summary, then, it may be stated that:

(1) There is a paucity of scientific information regarding virtually every aspect of truancy.

(2) This study did not reveal any group of recurring characteristics which could be labeled a "truancy syndrome."

(3) The study did not throw any light on the etiology or nature of truancy.

(4) It did not suggest any gross shortcomings in the school from which the sample was obtained, other than the fact that the school is excessively overcrowded. The suggestion could be made that the oppressive and punitive state laws dealing with compulsory education be modified in order that they are brought more in line with contemporary knowledge of child psychology and with current practice in handling truancy.

(5) And finally, in this study, the principal hypothesis that there are no significant differences between non-truant and truant children tends to be strongly supported. The only exception to this is that a specific hypothesis indicating that there is no significant difference in the level of scholastic achievement of non-truants and truants is definitely rejected. In other words, the only independent variable providing a considerable degree of prognostication of truancy status was that of scholastic achievement; non-truants rated considerably higher than truants. However, this finding is by no means surprising; common sense would indicate that if a child is frequently absent from school he is very likely to receive poor marks. Since it is difficult to judge whether truancy is dependent upon poor scholarship or a low level of scholarship is a necessary consequence of truancy, it seems that the finding of a positive correlation between truancy and poor scholastic achievement has relatively little meaning.

It is hoped that in the future, students of truancy will undertake similar or comparable studies, perhaps using random samples drawn from a larger universe in order to further test the hypothesis presented above. It is also suggested that whenever possible, such studies might also consider obtaining data through individual interviews and individual tests, rather than relying upon school records and group tests.

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