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The Truancy Outreach Program (Project TOP)  
of Alachua County, Florida: A Final Report

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Executive Summary

The Truancy Outreach Program (TOP) provided individual and group counseling to improve the school attendance of a target population of seriously truant children in Alachua County, Florida. The need for the program developed out of legislative changes and a growing awareness among school personnel of an increasing truancy problem in the schools. Truancy was viewed as a major concern linked to both failure in the classroom and juvenile crime.

The counseling services were provided over a two year period beginning in April 1979 and terminating in June 1981. Over this period of time 83 public school students participated in the program, 57 of whom were included in a series of experimental studies. During the first year counseling was provided to individual students but during the second year counseling was provided to small groups of students. A variety of counseling strategies were adopted to meet specific needs and all services were provided by graduate counseling students from the University of Florida and carefully selected undergraduate students from Santa Fe Community College. The youngsters met with the counselors on a weekly basis for 6 to 11 weeks.

To judge the effectiveness of the program a series of analyses were carried out. Changes in the rate of truancy over time were examined for the program participants and the truancy rates of program participants were compared with the rate of truancy of a comparison group who had not participated in the program but had received a personal letter from HRS threatening further disciplinary action. In addition to examining the truancy rates, the rate of delinquent behavior was also studied.

The results of the analyses indicated that a major reduction in the truancy rate was achieved among program participants. However this reduction did not reach the 50% criterion specified in the program's objectives. In comparison with the control group there were insufficient data to indicate a difference

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in the rate of truancy between the two groups. When the delinquency rates were examined it was found that the program participants rarely were charged with acts of misconduct either before, during or following the program. It was concluded that for the program participants there was no relationship between truancy and delinquency.

Among the major problems identified in implementing the program were: communication breakdowns between agencies, misunderstanding related to the identification and referral of potential participants and the inadequacy of data for evaluation purposes.

While the program was not totally successful, a great deal was learned from the project and some positive effects of the program indicated a useful potential for individual and family counseling as primary methods of reducing truancy among middle school students.

Recommendations for new programs designed to reduce truancy included different programs for different types of students, involvement of family members in the program, coordination of program activities with school personnel and the use of the peer friendship concept in activities outside the home and school.

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The Truancy Outreach Program (TOP) was an experimental project designed to improve by means of counseling services, the school attendance of a target population of seriously truant children in Alachua County, Florida. The treatment staff consisted of a carefully selected nucleus of graduate students in professional counseling programs at the University of Florida and undergraduates in a human services training program at Santa Fe Community College. Over a period of two years these students under the supervision of a field coordinator provided weekly counseling and tutoring services for truant children, together with outreach services to parents. Also, in recognition of the need for a coordination of effort among the agencies most responsible for school attendance, the project staff consulted intensively with school guidance counselors and teachers, court attendance officers, and social workers in Florida's Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services (HRS).

The endeavor was made possible by two consecutive grants from the Federal Law Enforcement Assistance Administration (LEAA), with matching funds contributed by the Alachua County School Board and the State of Florida. The grants were awarded to the Alachua County Board of County Commissioners, and through contractual arrangements, the program was implemented by CREST Services, Inc., a private, non-profit corporation.

#### The Truancy Problem

Project TOP was conceived by CREST Services in 1978 in response to a growing local concern with truancy, expressed repeatedly in the monthly meetings of the Alachua County Juvenile Committee, a county-wide committee comprised of representatives from the public and private agencies that deal with behavior problem youth. State legislation had declassified truancy and the other "status offenses" of ungovernability and running away from home

as delinquent acts. Instead, these offenses were now classified as acts of dependency, and supervision of status offenders was transferred from HRS Youth Services (the state probation program) to HRS Protective Services, a program more attuned to handling child abuse and neglect. This shift in case jurisdiction was accompanied by a change in the manner in which the status offenders could be treated by the juvenile justice system. They could no longer be held in detention centers or committed to training schools or other secure residential facilities. Instead of physical restraint or punishment for offenses that were no longer considered crimes, the law mandated that a more appropriate method of treatment should be that of counseling and/or social work entirely.

Considerable frustration in dealing with truancy expressed by members of the Juvenile Committee, particularly by school board personnel, law enforcement officers and Protective Services workers, centered around two perceived handicaps: (a) although state law still required children to attend school until the age of sixteen, the new changes in the juvenile statutes made the attendance law impossible to enforce; (b) given the higher priorities of child abuse and neglect over the status offenses, there were not enough counseling resources available to deal adequately with truancy.

These concerns were intensified by two other factors: (a) the recognition that most children who are repeatedly absent from school are failing to attain some basic knowledge and skills necessary for personal productivity in this complex, technical society; and (b) the reasonable assumption that children who are not in school are highly vulnerable to crime. Indeed, studies of local police records have shown that 50 per cent and more of all arrests of minors have occurred during school hours on days when school was in session.

### The Planning Stage

Before this project was developed, the current methods of dealing with truancy in Alachua County were analyzed. It was learned that a number of sequential steps were being undertaken to prevent each child with unexcused absences from becoming chronically absent. In the school system these steps ideally began in the local school, with phone calls and home visits, and extended to the services of county attendance officers, who are also sworn officers of the law. For the most part these efforts were effective. Of 800 cases of excessive absences referred by schools to the attendance officers in 1977-78, for example, 612 were successfully handled by the attendance officers themselves without referral to HRS for more corrective action.

HRS procedure required that youngsters who were referred to their HRS Single Intake unit ideally receive at least one counseling session, which usually included the parents. Some cases were then referred to the HRS Protective Services unit for continued counseling, under a consent supervision agreement. That is, the parents and child agreed to ongoing casework as an alternative to facing the juvenile court judge and possibly having the child adjudicated and labeled as dependent by the court. In extreme cases, petitions were filed by Single Intake with the juvenile judge, who then made an adjudication of dependency and placed the child in the care of Protective Services.

In spite of this network of services, a number of children were still showing records of excessive absences month after month. It was for this population, the chronically truant students, that Project TOP was developed. It was postulated that such students are highly resistant to the usual methods of control, particularly methods of authority. It was also postulated that a substantial part of the juvenile crime problem stems from this group.

The project was planned to follow the 1978-79 academic year, but funding was delayed until April, 1979. Two subsequent grant periods then began, each

funded for approximately \$20,000.00. The first grant period ran from April, 1979 through March, 1980. The second period was extended to run through June, 1981.

### Procedures of Treatment

The rationale for treatment was based on two assumptions. First, it was believed that truant behavior is symptomatic of other problems the child is experiencing--problems at home or at school that counseling can resolve. This belief was supported by prior research done in Project CREST with adjudicated delinquents, showing that personal outreach counseling by trained university students had improved the school attendance, reduced the suspensions, and improved the grades of clients. Second, it was reasoned that a child's truant behavior is more likely to change if the various community agents of change are led to cooperate and communicate openly with each other.

This rationale formed the basis for three main treatment objectives:

- (a) to provide direct professional counseling services for up to 50 truant children each year;
- (b) to provide a variety of counseling services to the clients' families; and
- (c) to initiate and maintain regular consultation sessions with the other social agencies involved with the child's school attendance, particularly the local schools, the county attendance office, and HRS program. These objectives were followed throughout both grant periods, with some shifts in emphasis occurring between the two periods.

The treatment staff consisted of a field supervisor who was employed on a yearly basis, assisted by groups of students from the University of Florida and Santa Fe Community College who were placed with the CREST agency for supervised practicum experience on a quarterly basis. Most of these students worked in TOP for at least two quarters; some worked an entire academic year. The university students were advanced degree students in the Counselor Education

and Rehabilitative Counseling programs; they each spent an average of ten hours a week with TOP clients and were given one hour of individualized supervision and one and one half hours of group supervision each week by university faculty members. They were designated as "Counselors" and were given their own case-loads of clients for individual, group, and sometimes family counseling.

The community college students designated as "Counselor Aides" were first and second year undergraduates enrolled in the Human Services Program, which trains para-professional counselors. These students, who were also supervised by their institution on a weekly basis, provided tutoring and some counseling services to TOP clients.

TOP counseling strategy was directed toward the child's world of experience rather than toward truant behavior exclusively. Each of the clients had already been spoken with repeatedly about their truancy by school and HRS officials, without apparent change in their behavior. Many had, in fact, become highly resistant to discussing the matter further with anyone. TOP counselors, therefore, were asked to approach their clients in a warm, non-threatening manner and attempt to establish a personal relationship in which the youngsters would be inclined to explore the difficulties that they were encountering as well as examine their interests, strengths, abilities, values and hopes for their own future.

At the same time, no attempt was made to relieve the child of any social pressure to attend school. The clients were made aware that the project was organized to combat truancy and that their daily attendance record was being monitored. However, the TOP counselors tried to communicate that while they were seriously concerned with the child missing school, they were equally concerned that the child learn to become productive and gain the most from life.

In addition to the counseling with its emphasis on exploring thought processes, some of the clients who would accept it were given help with their homework, some were accompanied to and from school, and some were helped to obtain career information. Specific counseling techniques in each case were left to the judgement of the student counselors and their supervisors.

The First Grant Period April 1, 1979 - March 30, 1980

In the planning stage school attendance officers and HRS workers stated a belief that Project TOP could have its greatest impact on older chronic truant children. Initially then, the main criterion for admission to the program was that the child have had at least two referrals to HRS from the attendance officers, and have been placed under the supervision of the HRS Protective Services unit.

From a list of 30 such referrals, 15 were randomly selected for TOP intervention. All thirty were expected to receive the treatment they would normally receive from Protective Services workers: case work with occasional home visits. Protective Services workers were asked to stress that the child's excessive unexcused absences were in violation of the law. In addition, the clients were given at least three individual counseling sessions each week by TOP counselors, usually in their homes. Parents and other family members were frequently brought into those sessions. In many cases the parents were given separate therapy. The TOP counselors met bi-weekly with attendance officers and visited at least twice weekly in the school of each client, consulting with guidance counselors, teachers, and administrators, and made three to four contacts each week with the HRS caseworkers.

This first group of clients received two months of treatment, and were terminated at the close of school in June. Six of the 15 had to be dropped from the caseload before June for reasons that are described in a separate

section of this report. The remaining nine clients constitute Treatment Group 1 in the experimental study, which is presented later in this report.

Beginning in the fall, problems of referral, which are described later, drastically affected the caseload. Twelve valid clients were referred by HRS to the project between October and March. The referral rate was so low that the experimental design had to be temporarily abandoned: all eligible cases were accepted for treatment, and there was no control group. The methods of treatment were essentially the same as those used the previous spring.

#### The Second Grant Period April 1, 1980 - June 30, 1981

The problem with referral led to several procedural adjustments. First, it was decided to accept as clients children who had only one charge of truancy against them, instead of two or more, and to accept referrals from the HRS Single Intake unit instead of waiting until the child had been processed into the HRS Protective Services program.

Second, it was made explicit in writing that a child was not eligible for TOP who was: (1) within one year of becoming 16 years of age; (2) facing imminent removal from one family to another or removal from the community; (3) living on the streets and therefore difficult to locate; and (4) considered armed and/or dangerous.

The caseload during April and May consisted of 13 clients randomly selected from 26 cases referred by HRS Single Intake, which had recently received them from the school attendance officers. Five of these clients constitute Treatment Group 2 of the evaluation study. The remaining 8 clients were not considered in the evaluation study because of incomplete records.

Following a series of evaluation conferences with school attendance officers and HRS personnel during the summer, four additional procedural changes were made for the fall semester. It was decided: (a) to base client

eligibility on the previous year's attendance record rather than wait for the record to develop in the fall; (b) to address a younger school population, in an effort to reduce ingrained truancy habit patterns; (c) to limit the program to a selected number of schools rather than attempt to cover the entire school district; and (d) to shift the primary emphasis from individual and family counseling services outside the schools to group and individual counseling within the schools.

The fall treatment group consisted of 19 students in four middle schools who were randomly selected from a pool of 49 cases that had been referred to the HRS Single Intake unit by the school attendance officers. These 19 students constitute Treatment Group 3.

In January, 24 additional clients were randomly selected from 50 additional referrals of students in the same four middle schools. This group became Treatment Group 4.

With the support of guidance counselors, teachers and parents, TOP counseling groups were organized in each of the four schools. The usual group size was five to eight students. Weekly discussions followed such topics as, "How School Prepares Me for the World of Work"; "What's My Contribution to My School"; and "What I'd Like to be Doing in 10 Years." Improved attendance at school was reinforced each week by praise from the group leader and the group.

Individual follow-up counseling and tutoring assistance were provided for each of the group members who would accept it. Additionally, the TOP counselors visited the home of each client one or more times and offered parent consultation and family counseling when it was desired.

### Evaluation Results

Three outcome objectives were identified to provide a basis on which to evaluate the effectiveness of the counseling sessions:

- 1) Reduce the rate of truancy among program participants by 50%;
- 2) Reduce the number of repeat truancy referrals by 75%;
- 3) Reduce the number of delinquent charges filed with HRS.

To determine whether these objectives had been met, truancy and delinquency records of program participants were examined prior to, during and following the counseling sessions. While data on the program participants alone did provide sufficient information to judge the effectiveness of the program in terms of the stated objectives, additional evidence of program effectiveness was provided through a comparison of truancy and delinquency rates of the program participants with a control group. The control group consisted of a sample of students who were selected at random from the same list of chronically truant students as the program participants. It had been planned that the control group would receive no additional attention other than that which was the current practice. However it was learned at a later date that some of the control students had received additional treatment in the form of a letter addressed to the parents of the truant students. This letter threatened further disciplinary action. The comparison of the truancy rates between the program and control groups therefore provided a comparison of two treatments and not a comparison of the program with the traditional practice.

Using the above criteria a series of analyses were conducted. For these analyses four independent treatment and their corresponding control groups were studied. All four groups received counseling for periods lasting between 6 and 11 weeks. Students in the first two groups received counseling individually, frequently in their homes, while students in groups three and

four received the counseling primarily in small groups in their school. The control groups three and four received the quasi-treatment of personal letters. Across all four groups a total of 57 youths from four schools participated in the experimental studies. The results reported below provides the findings by each treatment group, first in terms of the stated objectives, and second in terms of a comparison of the program participants with the control group.

#### Treatment Group 1

Nine students were randomly assigned to individualized counseling sessions during April and May 1979. During the first seven months of the 1978-79 school year these students had missed an average of 58 school days or an average of 8.3 days per month. For the two month treatment period the students missed an average of 17.1 days or 8.6 days per month. These results indicated that there was no reduction in the rate of truancy during the counseling period in comparison to the rate of truancy established for these students during the first seven months of the school year. This comparison however may be misleading, since it is possible that without the counseling the rate of truancy during the last two months of the school year might have been even higher. With this in mind, a further comparison was made examining the truancy rate over the entire school year following the counseling sessions (1979-80). During the 1979-80 school year the program participants missed an average of 21.4 days or 2.4 days per month. This was a 66% reduction in truancy in comparison with the previous school year. Based on this result it was concluded that the first objective of the program was met and the truancy rate was reduced among the program participants in Treatment Group 1.

In terms of Objective 3, which examined the rate of delinquency acts charged to the students, it was found that the truant students were rarely

charged with acts of misconduct. During the seven month period prior to the introduction of the counseling sessions only one act of delinquency was charged to one program participant. For the two month treatment period a total of 2 delinquent acts were charged and both of them were charged to one student.

The control group for Treatment Group 1 consisted of 5 students who missed an average of 34 days or 4.9 days per month during the first seven months of the 1978-79 school year. A one-way analysis of variance was computed to compare the truancy rates of the two groups over the seven month period prior to the introduction of the counseling sessions. The results provided a computed F statistic equal to 2.71 and a probability of .12 under the null hypothesis of no difference in absenteeism between the two groups. It was concluded that the truancy rates of the two groups were similar at least through the first seven months of the 1978-79 school year.

During the two month treatment period, the students who received the counseling missed an average of 17.1 days or 8.6 days per month. The control group missed an average of 13.6 days or 6.8 days per month. The one-way analysis of variance comparing the average rates of truancy resulted in a computed F statistic equalling .37 and a probability of .56 under the null hypothesis of no difference in absenteeism between the two groups during the two month treatment period. It was therefore concluded that there was insufficient evidence to indicate that the program reduced the rate of absenteeism among the students who had received the counseling.

The attendance records of the treatment and control group students were monitored over the school year following the treatment period. Over the nine month 1979-80 school year (September - May) the students who had received the counseling missed an average of 21.4 days or 2.4 days per month. These averages were based on 8 rather than 9 students because one of the treatment

students had dropped out of school. The control group on the other hand missed an average of 45 days or 5 days per month. In comparing these rates of truancy the computed F statistics equalled 3.41 and a probability of .09 under the null hypothesis of equal truancy rates. It was concluded that the truancy rates were not equal and that the absentee rate of the students who had received counseling was significantly less at the .10 level than the control group. These results indicate that while the counseling may not have had an immediate effect, it did appear to reduce the truancy rate during the following year.

#### Treatment Group 2

The second treatment group consisted of five students who received individualized outreach counseling during April and May, 1980. Over the first seven months of the 1979-80 school year these students were absent an average of 26.2 days or 3.7 days per month. During the two month treatment period the program participants missed an average of 6.4 days or 3.2 days per month. These results indicate a 14% reduction in the rate of truancy during the treatment period compared with the seven month period prior to the introduction of the counseling sessions. As with Treatment Group 1 however, this comparison may be misleading, since it is possible that absenteeism is higher in the spring than during the rest of the year. To take this into consideration the truancy rate during the same two months (April-May) from the previous year (1979) was compared with the rate of truancy during the treatment period. During April and May of 1979 the students missed an average of 5.3 days per month. These results indicate that there was a 40% reduction in the rate of truancy during the treatment period compared to the same time period of the previous year. Furthermore during April and May of 1981, one year following the treatment period the students missed an average of 2.9 days per month, a 9% reduction in truancy when compared to the treatment period, and a 46% reduction in

truancy when compared to the same two months one year prior to the treatment period. These results indicate that while Objective 1 was not met there was a major reduction in the truancy rate among program participants.

In terms of Objective 3, which examined the rate of delinquent behavior, it was found that students in Treatment Group 2 who participated in the counseling sessions were not charged with any delinquent acts during the counseling period and only one act of misconduct was charged to a student in the first seven months of the 1979-80 school year. As with Treatment Group 1 the results of this analysis indicated a very low relationship between delinquent behavior and truancy.

The control group for Treatment Group 2 consisted of 7 students who had missed an average of 44.3 days or 6.3 days per month over the first seven months of the 1979-80 school year. The computed F statistic for the one-way ANOVA comparing the truancy rate of the treatment and control groups for the September through March period equalled 9.67 with a probability of .01 under the null hypothesis of equal truancy rates. It was therefore concluded that prior to the introduction of the counseling sessions the treatment group had a lower truancy rate than the comparison group.

To adjust for this initial difference in the truancy rates between the two groups, analysis of covariance was computed with the truancy rates over the first seven months of the school year as the covariate. During April and May the average adjusted truancy rate for the treatment group was 15.3 days or 7.7 days per month while the adjusted average truancy rate for the comparison group was 12.8 or 6.4 days per month. The computed F statistic comparing the adjusted average truancy rates equalled .15 with a probability of .71 under the null hypothesis. It was therefore concluded that after taking into consideration initial differences in truancy rates the two groups did not differ in their rates of absenteeism during the treatment period.

For the two month period (April-May 1979) one year prior to the counseling sessions, students in the treatment group were truant an average of 10.6 days or 5.3 days per month. The unadjusted truancy rate during the treatment period equalled 6.4 days or 3.2 days per month. The two truancy rates were compared using a related sample t-test. The computed t statistic equalled -2.41 with a probability of .07 under the null hypothesis of no difference in truancy rates. It was concluded that the truancy rates during the treatment period was significantly less than the same two months a year earlier. These results support the conclusion that the counseling sessions were helpful in reducing the rate of school absenteeism.

For the two month period (April-May 1981) one year following the counseling sessions the average rate of absenteeism was 5.8 days or 2.9 days per month. The truancy rates during the treatment period were compared with the truancy rate over the same two months during the following years using the related sample t-test. The computed t statistic equalled .31 with a probability of .78 under the null hypothesis of no difference in truancy rates. It was concluded that while absenteeism was slightly lower during the two month period a year following the counseling, the difference was not statistically significant. These results indicate that the reduction in truancy rates achieved during the treatment period were maintained during the same period a year following the counseling sessions.

One further analysis was conducted comparing the truancy rates for the first seven months of the 1979-80 school year with the first seven months of the 1980-81 school year. During the seven month period prior to the counseling sessions the treatment group missed an average of 23.6 days or 3.4 days per month. These rates of truancy were compared using the related sample t-test with the computed t statistic equalling -1.57 and a probability of .19 under the null hypothesis of no difference in rates of truancy. It was con-

cluded therefore that although the truancy was less during the seven month period following the counseling sessions than before the treatment, the difference was not statistically significant.

#### Treatment Group 3

In August 1980, 49 students from four schools were identified, on the basis of their 1979-80 attendance records, as eligible candidates for the counseling program. From this list 19 students were randomly chosen as participants for the program and the remaining 30 students provided comparison data. During the fall 1980 the counseling sessions were provided to the students in small groups at each of the four schools. These sessions were provided over a seven week period and each school began the counseling at different points in time. In addition to studying the effectiveness of the program, the truancy records from the 1979-80 school year were correlated with the rate of absenteeism during the fall of 1980 and the truancy rates of the students over the entire 1980-81 school year. The correlations provided the opportunity to study the relationship between truancy rates over time.

To determine the effectiveness of the counseling program the truancy rate of the program participants over the first 18 weeks of the 1980-81 school year were compared with the truancy rate of the students during the previous school year. During the 1979-80 school year the program participants missed an average of 31.06 days or 3.45 days per month. Over the first 18 weeks of the 1980-81 school year these students missed an average of 2.1 days per month. These results indicate a 40% reduction in the rate of truancy among program participants as compared to their truancy rate for the previous school year. These results however may be misleading, since the comparison is based on different parts of the school year. A further analysis was conducted in which the truancy rate over the entire 1980-81 school year was

compared with the truancy rate during the 1979-80 school year. Over the 1980-81 school year the program participants missed an average of 2.4 days per month, which was a 32% reduction in truancy compared to the previous school year. The results of the two analyses described above both indicate a major reduction in the rate of truancy, but neither analysis indicated as large a reduction in the rate of truancy as specified in Objective 1.

In terms of Objective 3, which examined the rate of delinquent acts charged to the students, the records indicated that the program participants were not charged with any acts of misconduct either before, during or following the treatment period. Again the data indicate no relationship between delinquent behavior and truancy.

Since data were available on the truancy rate of students during the 1979-80 school year as well as the rate of truancy during the 1980-81 school year, it was decided to study these data closely by correlating the two sets of data. It was believed that there would be a strong positive relationship between the rates of truancy. This analysis was conducted for the total group and for the treatment and control groups separately. For the total group of 49 students the correlation equalled .24, while for the treatment group the correlation was .01, and for the control group it equalled .36. These results indicate that there was very little relationship between the truancy record from the previous school year and the truancy rate over the first 18 weeks of the current school year.

The correlation of the truancy rates for the entire 1979-80 school year with the truancy rates for the entire 1980-81 school year equalled .13 for the entire sample and .11 for the treatment group and .15 for the control group. Again these results indicate that there was no relationship between truancy rates over time. Students who missed a large number of days over one period of time may or may not continue to miss school in the future.

To further judge the effectiveness of the small group counseling program, the truancy rate of the program participants was compared with the truancy rate of the control group over the first 18 weeks of the 1980-81 school year. The program participants missed an average of 9.5 days or 2.1 days per month while the control group missed an average of 10 days or 2.2 days per month. The truancy rates of the two groups were compared using a one-way analysis of variance strategy. The computed F statistic equalled .11 with a probability of .74 under the null hypothesis of no difference in the truancy rates. Based on this analysis it was concluded that there was insufficient evidence to conclude that the program was effective in reducing the truancy rate of the program participants.

In the fall of 1980 the counseling sessions were provided in small groups at each of the four schools. In two of these schools enough students participated in the program to permit a separate analysis of the truancy rate of program participants with a control group from the same school. For one of the schools studied, the counseling sessions were held over a seven week period from early October to late November. Five students participated in these sessions. During this treatment period the students missed an average of 1.8 days. A control group of 10 students from the same school missed an average of 3.5 days. The rates of truancy were compared using an independent sample t-test. The computed t statistic equalled 1.06, which was not significant at the .05 or .10 levels. It was concluded that there was insufficient evidence to indicate that the seven week treatment period significantly reduced the truancy rate of the program participants in one of the four schools participating in the program.

The second school which was studied provided the counseling sessions over a seven week period beginning at the end of October and ending during the second week of December. For this period the 9 students who participated in

the small group counseling sessions missed an average of 3.7 days while the control group of 8 students from the same school missed an average of 4.4 days. The computed t statistic for an independent sample t-test equalled .48 which was not significant at the .05 or .10 levels. These results indicated that there was insufficient evidence to conclude that during the treatment period the counseling sessions significantly reduced the truancy rates of the program participants in the second school studied.

It should be noted that for both school level analyses the sample sizes were very small and thus the power of the statistical tests was very low. In this situation the practical significance of the mean difference might be considered. In both analyses the treatment groups were truant less frequently than the control groups. In School 1 the average difference was 1.7 days over a 7 week period and in School 2 the average difference was .7 days over a 7 week period. The average difference was 1.4 days per 7 week period which would mean that if truancy rates continued over the 36 week school year the control group would miss approximately 1.5 weeks of school more than the treatment group. Such a difference might be judged to be educationally significant.

Finally for Treatment Group 3, the truancy rates for the program participants over the entire school year were compared with the rates of truancy over the same time period for students in the control group. Over the nine month school year the 19 program participants missed an average of 22 days or 2.4 days per month. The 36 control students missed an average of 24 days or 2.7 days per month. The results of a one-way analysis of variance comparing the truancy rates of the two groups provided a computed F statistic equal to .21 with a probability of .65 under the null hypothesis of no difference in rates of truancy between the two groups. It was therefore concluded that there was insufficient evidence to indicate that the counseling program reduced

the truancy rate among the program participants over the 1980-81 school year.

#### Treatment Group 4

The final group studied to investigate the effectiveness of the counseling program was identified in January 1981. A total of 50 students from the same four schools as Treatment Group 3 were identified as being eligible for the program. From this list 24 students were randomly selected as program participants, and the remaining 26 students provided control data. In the winter and spring of 1981 the counseling sessions were provided to the students in small groups for periods ranging from six to 11 weeks. Truancy rates for all 50 students were obtained from the 1979-80 school year to study the relationship of the rate of truancy over time.

To determine the effectiveness of the program the truancy rate of program participants during winter-spring 1981 were compared with the rate of truancy for these students during the fall 1980 and over the entire previous school year 1979-80. In addition the winter and spring truancy records for the treatment and control groups were compared. And finally for all of the schools studied, enough students participated in the program to permit an analysis of the truancy rates within each of the schools.

Students who participated in the counseling sessions had missed an average of 16.6 days or 3.7 days per month; during the previous school year 1979-80 these students had missed an average of 2.05 days per month. Over the winter and spring months the program participants missed an average of 3.6 days per month. These results indicated a 3% reduction in truancy compared with the rate of truancy during the first 18 weeks of the 1980-81 school year but a 75% increase in the rate of truancy compared to the previous year's truancy rate. In interpreting these results it might be pointed out that the fall truancy rate had been an 80% increase over the rate of truancy observed during

the previous school year. It was therefore concluded that a slight reduction in the rate of truancy was achieved with the program participants but the reduction was not as great as the stated objective of 50%.

In terms of Objective 3, students in Treatment Group 4 who participated in the program during winter-spring 1981 were not charged with any acts of delinquency during the 1980-81 school year. These results provide further evidence of little or no relationship between delinquent behavior and rate of truancy.

The truancy rate from the 1979-80 school year was correlated with the truancy rate for the 1980-81 school year in order to investigate the relationship between rates of truancy over time. For the entire sample the correlation between the truancy rates equalled .46, based on 44 subjects (1979-80 truancy rates were not available on 6 of the students in the treatment group). For the 20 students in the treatment group the correlation equalled .57 and for the 24 control group students the correlation equalled .57. The correlation of the 1979-80 truancy rates with the 1980 fall truancy rate equalled .21 for the entire sample and .34 for the treatment group and .19 for the control group.

The results obtained with Treatment Group 4 were therefore a little different from a similar analysis with Treatment Group 3. In the previous analysis no relationship was found in truancy rates over time but in the present analysis there appeared to be a moderate positive relationship between truancy rates over time. The previous school year's truancy rate, however, was not shown to be related to the fall truancy rate. This result was consistent with the results obtained with Treatment Group 3.

Before the truancy rates during winter-spring 1981 for the program group were compared with the control group, the truancy rates during fall 1980 for the two groups were compared. Over the first 18 weeks of the school year

the treatment group missed an average of 16.6 days or 3.7 days per month. The control group on the other hand missed an average of 12.8 days or 2.8 days per month. The rates of truancy were compared using a one-way analysis of variance strategy with the computed F statistic equal to 6.40 and a probability of .02 under the null hypothesis of no difference between the groups. It was therefore concluded that the two groups were not equivalent in terms of their truancy rates. Over the fall, students who were assigned to the counseling program had missed significantly more days than the control group.

The program participants and the control group students were compared on their truancy rates during winter and spring (January-May 1981) after adjusting for the initial differences between the groups on their fall truancy rates. The analysis of covariance strategy was used to adjust for those initial differences. The adjusted average number of days missed by the program participants was 17.1 days or 3.6 days per month. The adjusted average number of days missed by the control group equalled 13.4 days or 2.8 days per month. The computed F statistic for the analysis of covariance comparing the adjusted truancy rates equalled 2.58 with a probability of .12 under the null hypothesis. It was concluded that the truancy rates were equal during winter and spring after adjusting for initial differences on the fall truancy rates. The participants of the program did not miss significantly more days than the control group.

Finally, the effectiveness of the counseling sessions was judged on the basis of comparing the truancy rates of the program participants with the truancy rates of the control group students within each school. This analysis was conducted in all four of the participating schools. The first school considered for this analysis provided counseling sessions over an 11 week period beginning in the second week of February and continuing through the third week in April. During this period program participants missed an

average of 12.8 days while the control students missed an adjusted average of 5.0 days. The computed F statistic for the analysis of covariance comparing the truancy rates of the two groups equalled 2.27 with a probability of .16 under the null hypothesis of no difference in truancy rates between the two groups. It was concluded on the basis of these results that there was no difference in truancy rates for the first school studied over the 11 week treatment period.

The second school studied provided the counseling sessions over a 10 week period beginning during the third week of February and ending during the third week of April. Over this 10 week period the treatment group missed an adjusted average of 10.8 days while the control group missed an adjusted average of 7.5 days. The computed F statistic comparing the adjusted average truancy rates using analysis of covariance equalled .91 with a probability of .37 under the null hypothesis of no difference in truancy rates. It was concluded that after considering the initial difference in fall truancy rates there was no difference in the rate of truancy during the 10 week treatment period between the program participants and the control group in the second school studied.

The third school considered in this analysis provided counseling sessions over a 6 week period beginning during the third week in February and continuing through the fourth week in March. The program participants missed an adjusted average of 2.3 days during the treatment period and the control group missed an average of 2.9 days. The adjusted average rate of truancy for the two groups was compared using analysis of covariance. The computed F statistic equalled .49 with a probability of .51 under the null hypothesis of no difference in truancy rates between the groups. It was concluded that in the third school studied the truancy rate of program participants was not significantly less than the control group's rate of truancy.

The final school considered provided counseling sessions over an eight

week period beginning during the first week of March and continuing through the third week in April. During this eight week period the program participants missed an adjusted average of 7.2 days and the control group missed an adjusted 6.7 days. The computed F statistic for the analysis of covariance comparing the adjusted truancy rates equalled .02 with a probability of .88 under the null hypothesis of no difference in truancy rates of program participants was not significantly less than the rate of truancy among the control group students.

#### Summary

Several analyses have been conducted in order to judge the degree to which the counseling sessions were successful in reducing the truancy rate among middle school students. Table 1 summarizes the results of the analyses in terms of the truancy outcome. The first column identifies the treatment group studied; the second column identifies the time period over which the truancy rate was summarized; the third column reports the average number of days missed per month by students in the treatment group; the fourth column interprets the results in terms of Objective 1; the fifth column reports the monthly truancy rate for the control groups; and the sixth column reports the significant levels for the comparison of truancy rates between the treatment and control groups. These results indicate that in terms of Objective 1 the program was not successful in reducing the truancy rates of program participants by 50%. However for the most part there was a major reduction in the rate of truancy among the program participants in comparison with their previous behavior. In terms of comparisons with the control group there was insufficient evidence to indicate that the program reduced the rate of truancy among program participants. It must be noted, however, that the control group was not a no-treatment group. Students in Groups 3 and 4 who were assigned to the control condition did receive a treatment in the form of a personal letter threatening

Table 1

Summary of truancy rates for the evaluation of Project TOP

Group	Time Period	Treatment Group	Interpretation	Control Group	Treatment vs Control
	Sept - March 78-79	8.3		4.9	Not Sig.
1	*April - May 79	8.6	Up 3% from the previous year.	6.0	Not Sig.
	*Sept - May 79-80	2.4	Down 66% from the previous year.	5.0	.09
	Sept - March 79-80	3.7		6.3	Not Sig.
	April - May 79	5.3			
2	*April - May 80	3.2	Down 14% from the previous year.	6.4	Not Sig.
			Down 40% from April- May 1979.		
	*April - May 81	2.9	Down 45% from April- May 1979.		
			Down 10% from April- May 1980.		
	Sept - May 79-80	3.5			
3	*Sept - Dec 80	2.1	Down 40% from the previous year.	2.2	Not Sig.
	*Sept - May 80-81	2.4	Down 30% from the previous year.	2.7	Not Sig.
	Sept - May 79-80	2.05		2.8	.02
4	Sept - Dec 80	3.7	Up 80% from the previous year.	2.8	Not Sig.
	*Jan - May 81	3.6	Down 5% from Sept- Dec 1980.		
			Up 75% from the previous year.		

\*Indicates treatment periods or periods following counseling.

disciplinary action. The comparison group, therefore, was between two treatments and the results indicate that both approaches were successful in reducing the rate of truancy.

In terms of Objective 3, the analysis of the records of delinquent behavior indicated that program participants were rarely charged with acts of misconduct either before, during or after the counseling sessions. The evidence consistently showed no relationship between delinquent behavior and truancy among the students who were studied. The evaluation of the program in terms of Objective 3 therefore was not meaningful.

In terms of Objective 2, 11 of the 57 participants (19%) of the TOP Program had been referred to HRS officials prior to the beginning of the treatment period. Following the termination of the program 7 of the 57 participants (12%) were referred to HRS. This difference was a 63% reduction in the number of repeat truancy referrals. While the achieved reduction in repeat referrals did not meet the stated 75% criterion for Objective 2, it was nonetheless a major reduction in the problem.

#### Discussion

The results of the analysis indicated that a major reduction in the truancy rate was achieved among program participants, although this reduction did not reach the 50% criterion specified in the program's objective. Because TOP was a pilot project and there were no antecedent results available on which to base a hypothesis, the 50% figure was rather arbitrarily chosen. Hindsight suggests that it probably was unrealistically high.

It is interesting to note that truancy rates for the control groups also declined. HRS officials knew which students were part of the TOP and control groups. As a result students in the control groups received a different kind of treatment than they would ordinarily have received. This treatment seems to have reduced the truancy rate more than expected. The treatment of control

students in Groups 3 and 4 can easily be identified. It was a letter mailed to the parents calling attention to the unexcused absences, reminding them of the state attendance laws, and informing them that further action would be taken if the attendance patterns did not change. While this may seem to be a weak form of treatment, a forceful letter can have the effect of sending a clear, unmistakable message to parents, which they may or may not receive in ordinary conversation with an HRS social case worker. It was recently learned that the local HRS field unit was in violation of state policy in sending a letter to parents. This study suggests that HRS may benefit from reconsidering that policy.

The most impressive results of the study occurred during the first treatment period when TOP counselors were concentrating on outreach individual and family work within the homes rather than in group counseling within the schools. This finding, coupled with the apparent effectiveness of the letter sent by HRS to parents of control group students, suggests that intervention in the home is a main factor in reducing truancy.

It may be difficult to understand why this study showed no relationship between truancy and juvenile delinquency. Very few of the participants or the controls were found to have delinquent acts charged against them. This finding was particularly surprising in view of other studies of local police records, which showed that high percentages (50% and more) of crimes committed by juveniles under 16 years of age are committed during the hours when school is in session.

Several reasons for the apparent contradiction in the findings suggest themselves: (a) the more than 150 truant students referred to TOP for treatment and control purposes over the two year period were not representative of the Alachua County truant population, a situation that does not seem likely; (b) a large proportion of school hour crime is committed by a relatively

small number of youth who are absent from school on given days, and who may or may not be classified as officially truant; (c) the crimes are committed by truant children who have also been adjudicated delinquent and therefore were not eligible for referral to the TOP program. Further research is needed to answer those questions.

The results of our study do not negate the belief that truancy is an antecedent to crime. It is widely known that most career criminals had histories of truancy. However, it does not follow that all children who are truant will become criminals. While common sense argues that an unsupervised child on the streets is highly vulnerable to becoming a victim of crime and is given increased opportunities to commit crimes, truancy should probably be addressed as a social problem in its own right and not simply as one element of the crime problem.

Project TOP encountered unforeseen problems which should be avoided in future interventions of this kind.

First, there was a problem with data. School records do not indicate whether absences are excused or unexcused. Technically TOP was measuring changes in rate of excessive absences, not changes in excessive unexcused absences. It was assumed that a ratio of excused to unexcused absences would be balanced by the randomization procedure that was used in selecting treatment and control groups.

Additionally, the data collected were insufficient to measure other important changes besides attendance rates that are relevant to the truant child. Given adequate time and staff we would like to have gathered data on student grades, conduct marks, attitudes, life planning, and teacher and peer relationships.

A second problem which became exasperating in the early stages was the difficulty in obtaining a sufficient number of appropriate referrals. One

of the most serious blows that can be dealt a largely volunteer effort is to have enthusiastic volunteers on hand with no clients to see. The problem began when it was discovered that some of the children placed in the treatment groups were nearly 16 years of age, some were facing imminent removal from their family or the community, some were impossible to find, and some were in violation of laws other than school attendance. The rate of referrals was also affected by a decision of school officials to file truancy cases with the juvenile court rather than to refer them through the HRS process. Though not intentional, this procedure resulted in a delay of referrals to TOP, since the agreed upon referring agency to TOP was HRS, and the main referral criterion was that the child have had at least two referrals from the school system to HRS. This problem was finally alleviated the second year by a mutual decision among agencies to shift the target population from older "hard core" truants to younger, middle school students and by allowing school officials to refer directly to HRS cases that were targeted for further referral to TOP.

Finally, TOP shared a problem that is reportedly common to truancy correction efforts everywhere: that of breakdowns in communications among the agencies and institutions that share the greatest concern with truancy. Difficulties of coordinating efforts among agencies is often the result of conditions over which individuals in the agencies have little or no control.

One condition has to do with opposing philosophies of how to deal with truancy. How do you enforce the state law that a child must attend school until the age of sixteen in a "free society?" There are those who believe that this law, like every law, is impossible to enforce, unless there are serious consequences to be paid for repeated violations, such as loss of freedom by confinement in a secure facility. There are others who argue that failing to attend school is an offense that is hardly equivalent to committing

crimes, and that truancy violations can be rectified only by dealing with problems that cause truancy, namely improving educational, community, and family influences on the child. These philosophies propelled by strong sentiment find political expression in legislation which often seems oscillating and ambiguous.

Another condition affecting agency cooperation are the policies and limitations imposed upon field workers by the agencies themselves. For example, workers in HRS may be constrained from spending as much time as necessary with truant cases because of higher priorities of child abuse and neglect cases. The agency, in turn, may have been forced to order its service priorities by constraints in public funding.

#### Recommendations

Despite the problems and shortcomings encountered over its two year history, as an experimental program Project TOP yielded important knowledge that should prove invaluable in developing subsequent truancy intervention strategies. Each element that appeared in the operation of the project was evaluated with respect to its usefulness in future planning.

We remain convinced that chronic truancy is a symptom of other problems and that a program that aims at more than transitory results must identify and treat causes as well as symptoms. Some of the causes of truancy lie in the nature of contemporary society and cannot be solved by local intervention efforts. Our analysis of this project, however, has led us to believe that many of the problems connected with truancy can be alleviated by local intervention approaches, provided they are sufficiently comprehensive. We recommend that a comprehensive program, which can be both effective and economical, incorporate these key elements:

(1) An outreach counseling endeavor capable of functioning skillfully in the home, the neighborhood, and the school, providing several types of counseling

assistance according to the needs and response levels of each child.

(2) An assessment procedure whereby the varying treatment needs of the clients can be identified.

(3) Family intervention in almost every case, which might range from parent consultation sessions to family therapy.

(4) Individual counseling, as appropriate, to deal with the particular concerns of each child. The TOP studies indicated that individual counseling combined with family work outside the school setting was the most effective of the treatment approaches that were used.

(5) Individual and group counseling in the school with selected clients to supplement the work of guidance counselors. The TOP project yielded more knowledge of the characteristics of clients who might best respond to this approach.

(6) A college-age volunteer peer-facilitator matched to clients, as needed, to provide encouragement and daily contact. These helpers, supervised by the professional counseling staff, would serve as behavior reinforcers as well as academic tutors.

(7) Evidence of the delivery of clear, unmistakable messages to the parents of truant children calling attention to the nature and seriousness of the law violation and stating specific consequences that will ensue. This communication could be in the form of a standardized interview procedure conducted by a state official or by means of a prepared statement which parents are asked to read, discuss, and sign.

(8) Joint sponsorship or support of the program by a board or committee comprised of official representatives of local target schools, the school attendance office, the juvenile court, HRS Single Intake and Protective Services units, and possibly volunteer parents. Each representative would be committed to a working agreement on all referral, treatment, and evaluation

policies.

(9) An on-going research and evaluation program to identify weaknesses and key areas of effectiveness. In addition to changes in school attendance, the evaluation might encompass changes in student attitudes toward school, school climate, grades, self-concept, teacher perceptions and parent perceptions.

**END**