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Final Report

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of a

Research Study

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of the

Nashville, Davidson County, Tennessee  
Juvenile Court Truancy Reduction Program

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FINAL REPORT

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# The Nashville, Davidson County, Tennessee Juvenile Court Truancy Reduction Program Research Study

## Executive Summary

### Introduction

As part of the National Drug Control Strategy, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's (HUD) Public and Indian Housing Drug Elimination Program (PHDEP) provides funds to public housing agencies to support anti-drug and anti-crime efforts. Metropolitan Development and Housing Agency in Nashville, Tennessee has used these grant funds to fight crime and provide residents with alternatives to crime and violence. PHDEP funds have been used to increase security patrols and police coverage and to operate drug prevention and intervention programs in targeted public housing developments. These targeted public housing developments represent the public housing communities with the highest crime rates in Nashville, since PHDEP funds target communities with high crime rates.

One of the PHDEP-funded programs is the Nashville/Davidson County Juvenile Court Truancy Reduction Program. The Truancy Reduction Program is a collaboration among Metropolitan Development and Housing Agency, the public housing authority, Nashville/Davidson County Juvenile Court, Davidson County public schools and the Nashville/Davidson County Police Department. PHDEP evaluation results had indicated the program's success. The purpose of the study was to confirm the evaluation results and study specific components to try to determine the contribution each played to the success.

### Program Description

The goals of the Truancy Reduction Program (TRP) are to 1) increase attendance and 2) get children safely to and from school. The intent of the program is to intervene in truancy before the student comes to the attention of the juvenile court. The TRP staff consists of Probation Officers under the employ of the Juvenile Court, as well as Probation Officer Assistants (Truancy Aides) who are residents of the public housing community at the time of hire. The Program operates out of public housing units that have been converted into offices and meeting areas.

On the day a K-8 grade student residing in one of the targeted developments has his third unexcused absence, the TRP office receives a fax from the school with the child's name and address and name of parent or guardian. When the fax is received the student is placed on the TRP caseload. The TRP consists of a variety of services that are discussed below.

Home Visits. The day the fax is received, the Truancy Officer or Aide makes a home visit to determine the reason(s) for the unexcused absences and to try to resolve the truancy

before a formal petition has to be filed. Often, the court officer can work with the family through a process of counseling and referral to resolve truancy without involving formal juvenile court proceedings.

Community Advisory Boards. If needed, Advisory Boards come in after the primary intervention and before the court hearing. The boards are comprised of service providers, school people and community representatives. Their focus is problem solving with the identified problem of truancy.

Suspension School. Probation Officer Assistants also run a suspension school. Previously, when students were suspended from school they were returning to empty apartments or a lack of parental supervision, so a suspension school was started. Now, if a child is suspended, she/he spends the time in a suspension school under the supervision of juvenile court personnel either completing assignments sent by the school or working on basic skills.

Summer Program. During the summer school break, juvenile court staff collaborated with neighboring community agencies to provide daily activities and field trips to keep students occupied during the days with constructive activities.

The TRP program was also enhanced in some communities by adding other components to remove barriers to school attendance. These included:

Cumberland View School Bus Stop Safe Passage. Juvenile court officers and volunteer adult residents monitor the bus stops and ride school busses to make sure a) children get out of their apartments in time to catch the bus and b) are safe while waiting for the bus or returning home in the afternoon. Students walking to school also have adults escorting the children to and from school. There was so much violence, particularly shooting, at bus pickup and drop off times that the Metro Police were hired with PHDEP funds to patrol during those times. Police continued patrols during school transportation time after the PHDEP funds expired. The shooting ceased during those times and children are now able to get to school and back safely.

Cayce Bus Program. In one inner city development, James A. Cayce Homes, children have a very long walk to the middle school. Juvenile court officers in collaboration with the Metro Transit Authority bus the children to and from the middle school using a dedicated public bus. Juvenile court probation officer assistants ride the bus as monitors.

PHDEP evaluation results have shown success with various components of the TRP.

### **Sample**

The target population was child and youth residents from five public housing communities in Nashville, Tennessee who participated in the Metro Davidson County Juvenile Court Truancy Reduction Program (TRP). The public housing communities include all the communities with HUD PHDEP funded TRPs during the study period. These communities also represent the

public housing communities with the highest crime rates in Nashville, since PHDEP funds target communities with high crime rates. These communities include all but one of the public housing communities where the Truancy Reduction Program was offered during the study period. They also included 5 of the 8 family public housing developments.

James A. Cayce Homes and Parkway Terrace were considered one community in this study. James A. Cayce is the largest public housing community in Nashville. Parkway Terrace is one of the smaller public housing communities and located in the same school district as Cayce. Parkway Terrace and Cayce share a probation officer and probation officer assistants. Cayce and Parkway Terrace residents attend the same neighborhood schools. Cayce and Parkway Terrace are located within walking distance of Nashville's central business district. In addition, the communities surrounding Cayce are rich in indigenous community services including health care and social services, parks and recreation, schools, businesses and churches. The TRP program began in Cayce. PHDEP funding for the TRP ran through the first semester of the study period. Therefore, Cayce and Parkway Terrace serve as the post treatment follow-up community for the study.

In comparison to Cayce and Parkway Terrace, the other communities in the study are relatively isolated. The services available to those communities reside primarily within the public housing development. J.C. Napier and Tony Sudekum Homes are two neighboring public housing developments that make up one identifiable community. Together they comprise a large public housing community. Nashville's enterprise zone includes Napier and Sudekum. Cumberland View is a medium sized community in an isolated area of Nashville. Very few community services are available to Cumberland View residents. Metro Parks runs a community center within walking distance of Cumberland View. Preston Taylor Homes is a large community. Preston Taylor has an onsite community center that offers a variety of recreation and social services. The school district dissects Napier/Sudekum, Preston Taylor and Cumberland View so that school zone lines run through these neighborhoods. Therefore, some of the children attend neighborhood schools while their neighboring peers are bussed to distant suburban schools to meet racial quotas. PHDEP funded the TRP in Napier/Sudekum, Cumberland View and Preston Taylor for the duration of the study period.

All K-8 grade students from the targeted communities who began participating in the TRP during the 1998/99 or 1999/2000 school years were included in the study. The TRP served 489 K-8 grade students during the 2 school years included in the study. Students who had all the required data elements were included in the study. Required data elements included TRP entry date and school entry and exit dates. Students must also have begun the TRP program during the study period. The final sample size was 298. The sample consisted of 151 female and 147 male students, 272 black and 26 white students.

### **Data Collection**

Data sources included juvenile court TRP records and metro schools attendance records. The juvenile court probation officers who conducted the truancy reduction programs submitted a list of TRP participants and their addresses to study staff. Study staff then collected the TRP entry dates from the probation officers. TRP participants who entered the program during the study

years became the study subjects. Study staff then collected the attendance data from the juvenile court's terminal into the metro school system's attendance data. Each student's attendance record for each school year of the study (1998/99 and 1999/2000) was printed from this system. Study staff then key entered the data into the study database. Data included the student's name, address, social security number, gender, ethnicity, TRP entry date, school entry and exit dates and attendance data by school day. After all the data were entered, identifying information was stripped from the database to protect the anonymity of the participants.

## Hypotheses

The data analyses were driven by the hypotheses to be tested:

H1: Students who participate in the Juvenile Court Truancy Reduction Program will increase their attendance rates.

H2: Students who participate in the Juvenile Court Truancy Reduction Program and other community services that are part of the Public Housing Drug Elimination Program (PHDEP) network will increase their attendance rates at higher rates than students who participate in the Juvenile Court Truancy Reduction Program alone.

## Data Analyses

Truancy was operationally defined as unexcused absence, tardy or suspension. Excused absences and early dismissals were not counted as truant behavior. The proportion of days of truant behavior before TRP ( $p_{pretrp}$ ) was calculated by dividing the number of truant days prior to and including the TRP entry date by the number of days the student was enrolled in school prior to and including the TRP entry date. The proportion of days of truant behavior after TRP ( $p_{posttrp}$ ) was calculated by dividing the number of truant days after the TRP entry date by the number of days the student was enrolled in school after the TRP entry date. The possible range of  $p_{pretrp}$  and  $p_{posttrp}$  is zero to one.

The  $pdiff$  was calculated by subtracting the  $p_{posttrp}$  from the  $p_{pretrp}$ .  $pdiff$  can range between -1 and 1.  $pdiff$  is approximately normally distributed.

In summary:

$p_{pretrp}$  = proportion of truant behavior before TRP

$p_{posttrp}$  = proportion of truant behavior after TRP

$pdiff$  =  $p_{pretrp} - p_{posttrp}$

$pdiff$  is a direct indicator of success in the program. A positive difference indicates a reduction in inappropriate behavior, zero indicates no change and a negative value indicates an increase. If  $pdiff$  differs among groups, then the difference in change between the groups differs. Groups with larger changes have changed more than groups with smaller changes.

The general test of whether TRP has any effect was conducted using a t-test to test whether there was a difference in truant behavior prior to and after beginning the TRP. A difference was found beyond the .001 level of significance.

A 3-way univariate analysis of variance was conducted to determine whether there were grade, gender or ethnic effects with regard to truant behaviors. Only the gender main effect was significant ( $p \leq .042$ ). No statistically significant differences were found in analyses that compared ethnicity (black, white) or grade. No interactions were significant.

Additional analyses were conducted to determine whether community factors were related to reductions in truancy. No difference was found in the comparison of the truant behaviors of children who are bussed to school as compared to those who attended neighborhood schools. No difference was found in the comparison of students who participated in PHDEP-funded prevention programs in addition to TRP. Differences were found between the communities.

### **Findings**

Students who participated in the Truancy Reduction Program decreased their truant behaviors. There was a 14% reduction in truant behavior.

Educational neglect does not discriminate by gender. In most juvenile justice populations, males outnumber females by a large percentage. The TRP had near equal numbers of males ( $n=147$ ) and females ( $n=152$ ) in the study population. Boys initially had higher proportions of truancy (.15) than girls (.13) prior to participation in the TRP. Their truant behaviors decreased at a greater rate (26%) than did the girls' (11%). Boys' post-TRP truancy proportions (.11) were lower than the girls' (.12). This finding is particularly noteworthy since boys do not usually respond as well as girls to prevention and intervention efforts.

While 63% of the general population of resident youth (aged 4-17) participated in prevention activities at Metro Parks alone during Jan - July 2000, only 13% of the TRP study sample participated in any PHDEP prevention activities, including Metro Parks programs, for the two years of the study. No difference was found in the comparison of students who participated in prevention programs in addition to TRP.

Differences were found between the communities. Cayce and Parkway Terrace had the greatest truancy reduction rate (50%) of all the communities. Truancy rates decreased at both Cumberland View (16%) and Preston Taylor (24%). The truancy rate at Napier/Sudekum remained relatively stable (a 4% increase). Cayce and Parkway Terrace had the greatest initial rates of truancy (.22), almost twice that of Cumberland View (.12). Cayce and Parkway Terrace's post TRP truancy rates (.11) came down to post TRP levels similar to Cumberland View (.1) and Preston Taylor (.1). Cayce/Parkway Terrace as no-treatment follow-up had the greatest reduction rate of all the communities. This demonstrates that the program not only is effective but the reduction in truancy is sustained even after services are no longer available.

## Policy Implications

The Nashville, Davidson County, Tennessee Juvenile Court Truancy Reduction Program Research Study may best be summarized by discussing the policy implications which arise from the review of the literature and findings of the study:

1. Juvenile Court strategies should include prevention because it is more cost-effective than intervention.

Delinquency prevention is the most cost-effective approach to reducing juvenile delinquency beginning early in the developmental pathways to problem behavior and serious, chronic and violent offending. Intervention should be immediate when delinquent behavior occurs using effective approaches and including the family and other core societal institutions in this intervention (Howell, 1995).

The Truancy Reduction Program meets Howell's (1995) criteria. Early delinquent behavior (truancy) is identified at the prevention stage, that is, before it becomes an adjudicated offense. Juvenile court and the schools work with the students and their families to reduce the truancy. The current study has demonstrated the TRP does reduce truancy. This reduction in truancy prevents the students' entry into juvenile court as adjudicated truants. Reducing truancy has also been linked in the literature with preventing other common covariates of delinquent behavior including early and persistent school failure and dropping out of school.

2. Truant students need specific Juvenile Court intervention rather than school or community prevention services.

Truant students are not regularly attending school where most prevention and intervention programs are delivered. Since so many of the promising practices to prevent crime and delinquency are school-based, it is essential that the students who are at the highest risk of developing delinquent behavior be in school to participate in those programs. Reducing truancy is a major key to this participation.

Truancy reduction programs, however, need to be provided by the juvenile court as the students who are most in need of those programs are not in school or participating in community prevention programs.

Most of the TRP participants had not connected to the school or community prevention programs. Lack of connection to both school and community puts youth who are in high need of prevention services in double jeopardy. By the time students are identified as truant intensive measures need to be taken which specifically target truancy reduction. Parents and students respond with improved attendance at school because the Juvenile Court TRP involves legal issues and ramifications, while other types of prevention program have no such consequences.

### 3. Best practices for truancy reduction programs should be established.

Despite the wealth of truancy reduction programs being implemented, no truancy reduction programs are specified in the lists of promising practices. Since truancy is an early step into the Authority Conflict Pathway to problem behaviors, best practices in truancy reduction need to be determined. Part of this determination should include the importance of the location of delivery of services. Unique aspects of the TRP are that it is delivered within the communities in which the participants live and that at-home family involvement is a part of the program. This is in contrast with current practice of delivering truancy prevention programs in school, because the highest risk population is not regularly attending school.

### **Conclusion**

Most of the work of juvenile courts over the past several years has been on the most serious and violent offenders. While this application of tertiary services may enhance community safety to a small degree, it is certainly short sighted. Effective truancy reduction programs such as described in this article may, however, be a significant deterrent of later serious delinquency. The measure of this study has been improved school attendance. Juvenile courts with a longer view of delinquency prevention would be well served by exploring truancy reduction programming as an essential piece of their service delivery system. If juvenile courts can identify truant children early and can successfully reduce their truancy, the link between truancy and development of delinquent behaviors may be broken.

This research was supported by grant number 1998-IJ-CX-0056 from the National Institute of Justice. Points of view are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the position of the U.S. Department of Justice.

# Final Report of a Research Study of The Nashville, Davidson County, Tennessee Juvenile Court Truancy Reduction Program

## Abstract

Metropolitan Development and Housing Agency in Nashville, Tennessee received a National Institute of Justice grant to study the effectiveness of Nashville's Juvenile Court Truancy Reduction Program (TRP). The TRP is a collaboration among the Metropolitan Development and Housing Agency, the public housing authority, Nashville/Davidson County Juvenile Court, Davidson County public schools and the Nashville/Davidson County Police Department. Evaluation results had indicated the program's success. The purpose of the study was to confirm the evaluation results and study specific components to try to determine the contribution each played to the success.

The goals of the TRP are to 1) increase attendance and 2) get children safely to and from school. The intent of the program is to intervene in truancy before the student comes to the attention of the juvenile court.

Data collected included two years of school attendance data and independent variables including prevention and treatment programs in addition to the TRP in which the students and their parents participated. Attendance of students who participated in the program in the first school year (1998-99) but not in the second (1999-2000) was examined to determine no-treatment follow-up outcomes. The TRP has served 489 K-8 grade students during the 2 school years included in the study. The database for the study includes the 298 students who began the TRP during the study period.

The following hypotheses were tested:

H1: Students who participate in the Juvenile Court Truancy Reduction Program will increase their attendance rates.

H2: Students who participate in the Juvenile Court Truancy Reduction Program and other community services that are part of the Public Housing Drug Elimination Program (PHDEP) network will increase their attendance rates at higher rates than students who participate in the Juvenile Court Truancy Reduction Program alone.

Students who participated in the TRP decreased their truant behaviors. There was a 14% reduction in truant behavior. There were near equal numbers of males (n=147) and females (n=152) in the study population. In most juvenile justice populations, males outnumber females by a large percentage. Educational neglect, however, does not discriminate by gender. Boys initially had higher proportions of truancy (.15) than girls (.13) prior to participation in the TRP. Their truant behaviors decreased at a greater rate (26%) than did the girls' (11%). Boys' post-TRP truancy proportions (.11) were lower than the girls' (.12).

Differences were found between the communities. Cayce and Parkway Terrace had the greatest initial rates of truancy (.22), almost twice that of Cumberland View (.12). Cayce and Parkway

Terrace's post TRP truancy rates (.11) came down to post TRP levels similar to Cumberland View (.1) and Preston Taylor (.1). Truancy rates decreased at both Cumberland View (16%) and Preston Taylor (24%). The Napier/Sudekum truancy rate increased by 4%.

No statistically significant differences were found in analyses that compared ethnicity (black, white) or grade. No difference was found in the comparison of the truant behaviors of children who are bussed to school as compared to those who attended neighborhood schools. No difference was found in the comparison of students who participated in prevention programs in addition to TRP.

### **Scientific Foundations of the Study**

The Pittsburgh Youth Study (Kelley, Loeber, Keenan and DeLamatre, 1997) found that the development of boys' disruptive and delinquent behavior follows developmental pathways beginning with less serious problem behaviors and progressing to more serious problem behaviors. The most common pathway into serious problem behaviors, the authority conflict pathway, begins early and progresses from stubborn behavior to authority avoidance, including truancy and curfew violations. The authors discuss the difficulties parents, teachers and juvenile court officers experience in detecting early problems that can lead to serious behavior problems. The implications for practice cited by the authors are that the warning signs of early onset of disruptive behaviors must be taken seriously with age-appropriate interventions to help the children master key developmental tasks. The authors recommend that these interventions use a holistic approach.

Truancy is a stepping-stone to delinquent and criminal activity (Garry, 1996) and chronic absenteeism is the most powerful predictor of delinquent behavior (Shuster, 1995). Truants and dropouts are at high risk of delinquency and crime (OJJDP, 1997). Predictors of later violent behavior include early (elementary) academic failure (Farrington, 1989; Maguin et al, 1995) and high truancy rates (Farrington, 1989). Research cited in Bilchik (1995) confirms that early antisocial behavior predicts later criminal behavior and violence and that an early predictor of delinquency is academic failure; a predictor for older youth (aged 7 to 12) is academic failure and lack of commitment to school. Poor school achievement, poor attendance, and school suspensions contribute to antisocial behavior (American Psychological Association, 1993). Academic failure (often co-occurring with truancy) is often associated with the beginning of delinquency and escalation of serious offending (Maguin and Loeber, 1996). The habitually truant also experience school failure, bring weapons to school, bully or threaten their classmates, or regularly disrupt the school's learning environment (OJJDP, 1997). More than 71 percent of 13 to 16 year-olds prosecuted in Miami, Florida for delinquent violations had been truant (U.S. Department of Education, 1996). In San Diego, California, 44 percent of violent juvenile crime occurs during school hours (U.S. Department of Education, 1996).

Substance abuse and gang membership are strong predictors of serious delinquency and subsequent violence (Hawkins et al, 2000). Researchers have documented the correlation between truancy and drug use and gang membership. Wish, Gray and Levine (1996) found 51% of female detainees not in school at the time of arrests tested positive for drug use. Garry (1996) cited a study that reported 53% of male juvenile arrestees tested positive for drug use with those

who did not attend school being far more likely to test positive for drug use than those who did attend. Kass (1996) reported the link between truancy and gang membership.

OJJDP and the U.S. Department of Justice findings strongly support the implementation of truancy reduction programs as a part of an overall juvenile crime prevention strategy (OJJDP, 1996). Jurisdictions that have implemented truancy reduction programs have found not only an increase in school attendance but also a drop in daytime juvenile offenses (OJJDP, 1997).

Many of the promising approaches cited by Bilchik (1995) are school based. Of these programs, none are truancy reduction programs. Howell (1995) edited a review of promising and not so promising approaches for preventing delinquency and violence. By far, the majority of promising approaches involved school-based programs. Of the multitude of programs examined there were no truancy reduction programs. The President's Crime Prevention Council (1995) identified 300 specific strategies to prevent crime, violence, substance abuse and neighborhood deterioration but none were truancy reduction programs.

From these studies, it may be concluded that truancy, being one of the early documented behavior problems and one of the pathways into serious delinquent behavior, should be monitored and that effective interventions should be provided to truant children so that they do not develop more serious problem behaviors. Reducing truancy is also logical in that early school failure is a predictor of later problem behaviors and school success is dependent on school attendance. Finally, many of the promising approaches are delivered at school. Children who are not at school will not be participants in these interventions.

The present study examined the impact of a juvenile justice truancy reduction program. The purpose of this study is to determine whether the Nashville Davidson County Juvenile Court Truancy Reduction Program could intervene in the truant behaviors of students in grades K-8.

Habitual truancy, also referred to as chronic absenteeism, is legally defined under the Juvenile Offender Act of the State of Tennessee as five or more aggregate, unexcused absences in the course of a school year (Tenn. Code Ann. §49-6-3007(e)1.) When the number of unexcused absences exceeds five, a juvenile may be considered "habitually truant." The Truancy Reduction Program operationally defined students at risk of truancy as those who have 3 unexcused absences in a school year. The intent of the TRP is to intervene before the student is adjudicated habitually truant.

### **Program Implementation**

As part of the National Drug Control Strategy, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's (HUD) Public and Indian Housing Drug Elimination Program (PHDEP) provides funds to public housing agencies to support anti-drug and anti-crime efforts. Metropolitan Development and Housing Agency in Nashville, Tennessee has used these grant funds to fight crime and provide residents with alternatives to crime and violence. PHDEP funds have been used to increase security patrols and police coverage and to operate drug prevention and intervention programs in targeted public housing developments. These targeted public housing

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PHDEP Evaluation results have shown success with various components of the TRP. Students who are suspended no longer have the opportunity to get into trouble during the suspension period because they are supervised at the juvenile court offices. Outcomes from the safe passage program:

- Students are not missing busses and are less likely to be suspended from riding busses.
- Walkers are getting to and from school safely.
- Thanks to Metro Police patrols there are no longer shooting incidents during Cumberland View's student arrival and departure times. Cumberland View residents reported the quietest end of school year ever in the history of the community thanks to the collaborative efforts of the Juvenile Court and Metro Police.

Finally, attendance has increased in the Stratford High School Cluster, where the program was first implemented:

Grade	4		5		6		7	
School year	97-98	98-99	97-98	98-99	97-98	98-99	97-98	98-99
Percent attendance	76	79.5	76.7	81.7	76.9	81	77.9	83.2

## Research Procedures

### Sample

The target population was child and youth residents from five public housing communities in Nashville, Tennessee who participated in the Metro Davidson County Juvenile Court Truancy Reduction Program (TRP). The public housing communities include all the communities with HUD PHDEP funded TRPs during the study period. These communities also represent the public housing communities with the highest crime rates in Nashville, since PHDEP funds target communities with high crime rates. These communities include all but one of the public housing

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### **Data Collection**

Data sources included juvenile court TRP records and metro schools attendance records. The juvenile court probation officers who conducted the truancy reduction programs submitted a list of TRP participants and their addresses to study staff. Study staff then collected the TRP entry dates from the probation officers. TRP participants who entered the program during the study years became the study subjects. Study staff then collected the attendance data from the juvenile court's terminal into the metro school system's attendance data. Each student's attendance

record for each school year of the study (1998/99 and 1999/2000) was printed from this system. Study staff then key entered the data into the study database. Data included the student's name, address, social security number, gender, ethnicity, TRP entry date, school entry and exit dates and attendance data by school day. After all the data were entered, identifying information was stripped from the database to protect the anonymity of the participants.

During the study period 489 students participated in the TRP in the study communities. Seven students did not have TRP entry dates; 115 students entered the TRP before the study began leaving 367 students who entered the TRP during the study period. The key data needed to calculate the pre and post program attendance behavior was the school enrollment date, the school completion date, the TRP entry date and the attendance behaviors. Students were lost from the study sample if any of these data were missing or if school entry dates postdated the TRP entry date (leaving the dataset with no pretest data). There was no difference between the means and standard deviations of the students that were missing some of the data and those that had all the necessary data points (see Exhibit 1).

Exhibit 1  
Mean and Standard Deviation of TRP Study Sample

	Pre N	Mean	Standard Deviation	Post N	Mean	Standard Deviation
TRP Sample	300	.14	.13	479	.12	.12
Matched TRP Sample	298	.14	.13	298	.12	.11

The final sample size was 298. The sample consisted of 151 female and 147 male students; 272 black and 26 white students. The number of students entering TRP in each grade is presented in Exhibit 2.

Exhibit 2  
Number of Students by Grade

Grade	n
K	36
1	50
2	24
3	35
4	29
5	36
6	25
7	33
8	30

## Data Analysis

The data analyses were driven by the hypotheses to be tested:

H1: Students who participate in the Juvenile Court Truancy Reduction Program will increase their attendance rates.

H2: Students who participate in the Juvenile Court Truancy Reduction Program and other community services that are part of the Public Housing Drug Elimination Program (PHDEP) network will increase their attendance rates at higher rates than students who participate in the Juvenile Court Truancy Reduction Program alone.

Truancy was operationally defined as unexcused absence, tardy or suspension. Excused absences and early dismissals were not counted as truant behavior. The proportion of days of truant behavior before TRP ( $p_{pretrp}$ ) was calculated by dividing the number of truant days prior to and including the TRP entry date by the number of days the student was enrolled in school prior to and including the TRP entry date. The proportion of days of truant behavior after TRP ( $p_{posttrp}$ ) was calculated by dividing the number of truant days after the TRP entry date by the number of days the student was enrolled in school after the TRP entry date. The possible range of  $p_{pretrp}$  and  $p_{posttrp}$  is zero to one.

The  $pdiff$  was calculated by subtracting the  $p_{posttrp}$  from the  $p_{pretrp}$ .  $pdiff$  can range between -1 and 1.  $pdiff$  is approximately normally distributed.

In summary:

$p_{pretrp}$  = proportion of truant behavior before TRP  
 $p_{posttrp}$  = proportion of truant behavior after TRP  
 $pdiff$  =  $p_{pretrp} - p_{posttrp}$

$pdiff$  is a direct indicator of success in the program. A positive difference indicates a reduction in inappropriate behavior, zero indicates no change and a negative value indicates an increase. If  $pdiff$  differs among groups, then the difference in change between the groups differs. Groups with larger changes have changed more than groups with smaller changes.

The general test of whether TRP has any effect was conducted using a t-test to test whether there was a difference in truant behavior prior to and after beginning the TRP. A difference was found beyond the .001 level of significance (see Exhibit 3).

Exhibit 3  
T-test to Determine the Difference between Pre and Post TRP Truant Behavior

	N	Mean Difference	Standard Deviation	Standard Error of the Mean	t	Significance (2-tailed)
Pre-post truant behavior	298	.027	.127	.0073	3.708	.000

**Exhibit 4**  
**T-test to Determine the Difference between Pre and Post TRP Truant Behavior**

	N	Mean	Standard Deviation
Pre-TRP truant behavior	298	.14	.13
Post-TRP truant behavior	298	.12	.11

A 3-way univariate analysis of variance was conducted to determine whether there were grade, gender or ethnic effects with regard to truant behaviors. Only the gender main effect was significant ( $p \leq .042$ ) (see Exhibit 5 and 6). No statistically significant differences were found in analyses that compared ethnicity (black, white) or grade. No interactions were significant.

**Exhibit 5**  
**ANOVA to Determine the Difference between Pre and Post TRP Truant Behavior**  
**By Grade, Gender and Ethnicity**

	df	F	Significance (2-tailed)
grade	8	1.34	.224
gender	1	4.18	.042
ethnicity	1	.065	.8
grade x gender	7	.37	.936
grade x ethnicity	7	.58	.79
gender x ethnicity	1	1.88	.171
grade x gender x ethnicity	5	.99	.434

**Exhibit 6**  
**Gender Differences in Pre and Post TRP Truant Behavior**

Student gender	N	Pre Mean	Standard Deviation	Post Mean	Standard Deviation
female	151	.13	.12	.12	.11
male	147	.15	.14	.11	.11

Additional analyses were conducted to determine whether community factors were related to reductions in truancy. No difference was found in the comparison of the truant behaviors of children who are bussed to school as compared to those who attended neighborhood schools (see Exhibit 7). No difference was found in the comparison of students who participated in prevention programs in addition to TRP (see Exhibit 8). Differences were found between the communities (see Exhibits 9 and 10).

**Exhibit 7**  
**T-test to Determine the Difference between**  
**Students Who Were Bussed to School and Those Who Attended Neighborhood Schools**

	N	Mean	Standard Deviation	t	Significance
Neighborhood Schools	111	.03	.14	2.42	.12
Bussed	184	.02	.12		

**Exhibit 8**  
**T-test to Determine the Difference between**  
**Students Who Participated in Other Prevention Programs and Those Who Did Not**

	N	df	t	Significance
Participation in Other Prevention Programs	39	296	1.063	.29
No Participation	259			

**Exhibit 9**  
**ANOVA to Determine the Difference between Communities**

	df	F	Significance
Community	3	7.29	.000

**Exhibit 10**  
**Community Differences in Pre and Post TRP Truant Behavior**

	N	Pre Mean	Standard Deviation	Post Mean	Standard Deviation
Cayce/Parkway Terrace	35	.22	.17	.11	.11
Cumberland View	27	.12	.12	.1	.1
Napier	98	.13	.12	.14	.13
Preston Taylor	138	.14	.12	.1	.1

**Findings**

Students who participated in the Truancy Reduction Program decreased their truant behaviors. There was a 14% reduction in truant behavior.

Educational neglect does not discriminate by gender. In most juvenile justice populations, males outnumber females by a large percentage. The TRP had near equal numbers of males (n=147) and females (n=152) in the study population. Boys initially had higher proportions of truancy (.15) than girls (.13) prior to participation in the TRP. Their truant behaviors decreased at a

greater rate (26%) than did the girls' (11%). Boys' post-TRP truancy proportions (.11) were lower than the girls' (.12). This finding is particularly noteworthy since boys do not usually respond as well as girls to prevention and intervention efforts.

While 63% of the general population of resident youth (aged 4-17) participated in prevention activities at Metro Parks alone during Jan - July 2000 (Platt, 2001) only 13% of the TRP study sample participated in any PHDEP prevention activities, including Metro Parks, for the two years of the study. No difference was found in the comparison of students who participated in prevention programs in addition to TRP.

Differences were found between the communities. Cayce and Parkway Terrace had the greatest truancy reduction rate (50%) of all the communities. Truancy rates decreased at both Cumberland View (16%) and Preston Taylor (24%). The truancy rate at Napier/Sudekum increased by 4%. Cayce and Parkway Terrace had the greatest initial rates of truancy (.22), almost twice that of Cumberland View (.12). Cayce and Parkway Terrace's post TRP truancy rates (.11) came down to post TRP levels similar to Cumberland View (.1) and Preston Taylor (.1). Cayce/Parkway Terrace as no-treatment follow-up had the greatest reduction rate of all the communities. This demonstrates that the program not only is effective but the reduction in truancy is sustained even after services are no longer available.

### **Policy Implications**

The Nashville, Davidson County, Tennessee Juvenile Court Truancy Reduction Program Research Study may best be summarized by discussing the policy implications which arise from the review of the literature and findings of the study:

1. Juvenile Court strategies should include prevention because it is more cost-effective than intervention.

Delinquency prevention is the most cost-effective approach to reducing juvenile delinquency beginning early in the developmental pathways to problem behavior and serious, chronic and violent offending. Intervention should be immediate when delinquent behavior occurs using effective approaches and including the family and other core societal institutions in this intervention (Howell, 1995).

The Truancy Reduction Program meets Howell's (1995) criteria. Early delinquent behavior (truancy) is identified at the prevention stage, that is, before it becomes an adjudicated offense. Juvenile court and the schools work with the students and their families to reduce the truancy. The current study has demonstrated the TRP does reduce truancy. This reduction in truancy prevents the students' entry into juvenile court as adjudicated truants. Reducing truancy has also been linked in the literature with preventing other common covariates of delinquent behavior including early and persistent school failure and dropping out of school.

2. Truant students need specific Juvenile Court intervention rather than school or community prevention services.

Truant students are not regularly attending school where most prevention and intervention programs are delivered. Since so many of the promising practices to prevent crime and delinquency are school-based, it is essential that the students who are at the highest risk of developing delinquent behavior be in school to participate in those programs. Reducing truancy is a major key to this participation.

Truancy reduction programs, however, need to be provided by the juvenile court as the students who are most in need of those programs are not in school or participating in community prevention programs.

Most of the TRP participants had not connected to the school or community prevention programs. Lack of connection to both school and community puts youth who are in high need of prevention services in double jeopardy. By the time students are identified as truant intensive measures need to be taken which specifically target truancy reduction. Parents and students respond with improved attendance at school because the Juvenile Court TRP involves legal issues and ramifications, while other types of prevention program have no such consequences.

### 3. Best practices for truancy reduction programs should be established.

Despite the wealth of truancy reduction programs being implemented, no truancy reduction programs are specified in the lists of promising practices. Since truancy is an early step into the Authority Conflict Pathway to problem behaviors, best practices in truancy reduction need to be determined. Part of this determination should include the importance of the location of delivery of services. Unique aspects of the TRP are that it is delivered within the communities in which the participants live and that at-home family involvement is a part of the program. This is in contrast with current practice of delivering truancy prevention programs in school, because the highest risk population is not regularly attending school.

## Conclusion

Most of the work of juvenile courts over the past several years has been on the most serious and violent offenders. While this application of tertiary services may enhance community safety to a small degree, it is certainly short sighted. Effective truancy reduction programs such as described in this article may, however, be a significant deterrent of later serious delinquency. The measure of this study has been improved school attendance. Juvenile courts with a longer view of delinquency prevention would be well served by exploring truancy reduction programming as an essential piece of their service delivery system. If juvenile courts can identify truant children early and can successfully reduce their truancy, the link between truancy and development of delinquent behaviors may be broken.

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