Youth'07

The Health and Wellbeing of Secondary School Students in New Zealand

Students Who Truant: What Makes a Difference?

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YOUTH'07

The Health and Wellbeing of Secondary School Students in New Zealand

Students Who Truant: What makes a difference?

Table of contents

Introduction

Young people who truant are a problem for schools, for the community, and especially for themselves. By absenting themselves from school they risk missing out on their education, getting into trouble on the streets, and facing future problems as a consequence.

What can be done about it? What might work to reduce truanting?

How much is truanting influenced by school factors – the way a school is run, the way teachers relate to students, the whole social and educational atmosphere of the school?

On the other hand, how much is truanting determined by student factors – the personal propensities and problems of the individual student?

Research internationally suggests that a combination of both school and student factors influence truanting behaviours among students. In this report we look at school factors, student factors, and the interplay between them – whether different students respond differently to school factors. In practical terms, do the strategies that schools might use to reduce truanting work the same for different kinds of students?

We investigated this by analysing information drawn from Youth'07, the large national survey of secondary school students throughout New Zealand that we carried out in 2007.

The survey

Youth'07 surveyed 9,107 randomly-chosen students from 96 randomly-chosen schools. This represented about 3% of the total New Zealand secondary school roll in 2007. Students answered questions about a wide range of issues relating to their health and wellbeing. For this report we have drawn on the results from questions relating to basic demographic information (age, gender, ethnicity, and socio-economic factors), school attendance, emotional wellbeing, relations with staff and students at school, and the general school 'climate'.

At the same time we surveyed 2,901 teachers in the same 96 participating schools about their school climate – what the school was like and what supports there were for students and teachers.

Participation in the student and teacher surveys was voluntary, and we took care to ensure confidentiality so that no participant or school would be identifiable. For details of how the survey was carried out see the Youth'07 reports available on www.youth2000.ac.nz

Demographic measures

Students were asked their age, gender and ethnicity. Students who indicated more than one ethnicity were assigned to one ethnic group by the prioritisation procedure used by Statistics New Zealand in the 2005 census. Apart from a slightly raised percentage of male students, the students surveyed were similar demographically to the national population of secondary school students in New Zealand.

The socio-economic status of each student was determined based on their answers to questions about how often they moved home; how often their parents worried about having enough money to buy food; whether their family had a car, telephone, mobile phone, computer/laptop or television; and whether people in their home slept in rooms other than bedrooms (garage, caravan, living room etc). These results were combined with a standard measure of socio-economic deprivation for the student's home neighbourhood, the New Zealand Deprivation Score 2006 (NZDep), which is based on census information for each neighbourhood.

Note that NZDep scores are calculated in a similar way, using the same census data, as school decile ratings, except that NZDep is scaled in the opposite direction–a **high** NZ Deprivation score corresponds to a **low** School Decile rating.

Measuring truancy

Students were asked 'This year have you wagged or skipped school for a full day or more without an excuse?' Students who answered 'yes' were asked a further question: 'About how many days altogether have you wagged or skipped school this year?', with response options '1 to 2 days', '3 to 9 days', '10 to 20 days', 'more than 20 days', 'not sure'. As the survey was conducted at different schools at various dates from March through to October, different criteria for 'truancy' in terms of the number of days away in that school year were used: students who were surveyed in March and April were counted as truant if they indicated they had skipped one or more days that year; students surveyed from May through to September were counted as truant if they had skipped three or more days; and students surveyed in October if they had skipped ten or more days in that school year.

The particular definition of 'truancy' we are using has thus been determined by the exigencies of our survey results, and may be slightly different from the definitions used elsewhere. Consequently, the results we give for truancy rates may not be exactly comparable with those in other reports. However, the results for absolute levels of truancy are less important than the comparative results – the comparisons of truancy rate between different kinds of schools and different kinds of students – and these do have more general validity. When we indicate that some factor is associated with a decrease in truancy, then this should hold true for truancy however it is measured.

Results

Truancy rates of students, broken down by demographic factors, are given in Table 1. This gives, for each category of student, the percentage who had truanted, and the confidence interval for that percentage result (ie the interval within which we can be 95% confident that the 'true' rate of truanting for all students of that category lies). When making comparisons between results for two different ages, genders etc, if their confidence intervals do not overlap then the difference between them is significant at the 5% level – ie likely to be a real difference.

Looking first at all students in all schools, 15% of secondary school students reported truanting as defined above.

Breaking this down to look at truancy rates for different categories of students, we find that male and female students had similar truancy rates, but older students were more likely to truant than younger students; Maori and Pacific students were more likely to truant than NZ European and Asian students; and students from more socio-economically deprived backgrounds were more likely to truant than students from less deprived backgrounds.

Table 1: Rates of truanting among different categories of students

Category of student	Truancy rate
	% (95% Confidence Interval)
All students (n= 8628)	15.4 (14.0 - 16.8)
Age	
13 years and younger	8.5 (7.2 - 9.8)
14	12.6 (11.1 - 14.0)
15	16.0 (14.4 - 17.7)
16	19.9 (17.9 - 21.8)
17 years and older	22.1 (19.9 - 24.3)
Gender	
Female	15.5 (13.6 - 17.3)
Male	15.3 (13.8 - 16.9)
Ethnicity	
Māori	27.6 (24.8 - 30.4)
Pacific	21.1 (17.9 - 24.2)
Asian	10.6 (8.8 - 12.4)
NZ European/ Other	11.7 (10.4 - 13.0)
Level of socio-economic deprivation*	
i (low deprivation; equivalent to high decile)	12.2 (10.8 - 13.5)
ii	12.9 (11.5 - 14.3)
iii	15.1 (13.6 - 16.6)
iv (high deprivation)	21.6 (19.9 - 23.4)

*Note that this scale runs in the opposite direction to school decile rating

Then if we look at truancy rates in different categories of schools (see Table 2), we find that students at co-educational schools were more likely to truant than students at single-sex schools; students at publicly-funded schools were more likely to truant than students at privately-funded schools; students at low decile schools (ie coming from neighbourhoods of high deprivation) were more likely to truant than students from high decile schools; and students at larger schools were more likely to truant than students at small schools.

Table 2: Rates of truanting at different categories of school

Category of school	Rate of truancy among students in these schools
	% (95% Confidence Interval)
All schools (N= 96)	14.6 (13.1 - 16.1)
Gender composition	
Co-educational	16.5 (14.9 - 18.1)
Single sex	12.8 (10.5 - 15.2)
Funding source	
Public	16.7 (15.3 - 18.2)
Private	9.2 (4.0 - 14.4)
Integrated	9.7 (6.9 - 12.5)
Location	
Rural	13.7 (11.5 - 16.0)
Urban	15.5 (14.1 - 17.0)
Socio-economic composition (school decile rating)	
Decile 8 - 10	14.0 (12.0 - 16.1)
Decile 4 - 7	15.6 (13.7 - 17.4)
Decile 1 - 3 (high deprivation)	20.2 (17.5 - 22.9)
Size (school roll)	
0 - 301	11.1 (8.4 - 13.8)
301 - 584	12.4 (9.5 - 15.3)
584 - 927	16.7 (13.8 - 19.6)
> 927	16.4 (14.4 - 18.3)

Another way of looking at truancy rates

The variations in truancy rates between different demographic subgroups of students, and between different types of school, have been pointed out many times. The Ministry of Education in its reports on 'Attendance, Absence and Truancy in New Zealand Schools' regularly notes the same patterns in truancy rates between different types of schools.

But looking at the situation this way is not very helpful – especially if you are trying to deal with truanting at a large, co-educational, low decile, publicly-funded secondary school. Pointing out these disparities does not help understand the problem or suggest what approaches or interventions might be used to reduce truancy.

We looked at the results in another way. We looked at other properties of students and of schools that might influence a student's propensity to truant.

Looking first at students, we examined whether students with behavioural problems were more likely to truant. In our survey the best indicator of behavioural problems was part of a wider measure of emotional and behavioural health and stability, and so we looked at emotional as well as behavioural factors.

Analysing students' emotional and behavioural symptoms and their associations with truanting

The Youth'07 survey included one of the standard tools used to assess symptoms of emotional and behavioural problems among young people: the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire, or SDQ. The SDQ covers emotional symptoms, impulsive/aggressive behaviour problems, hyperactivity-inattention symptoms, problems with peer relationships, and pro-social strengths. It has been well validated as a screening instrument in many different communities and populations of young people.

We analysed the SDQ results for the students surveyed in Youth'07, using a statistical technique called latent class analysis to separate out different groups of students on the basis of their levels of emotional health concerns and behaviour problems, and their propensity to truant.

This analysis separated out four distinct groups or clusters of students. While these groups or clusters are statistical constructs they do tell us something important about real students and their different behaviours and responses.

Table 3: Different groups of students based on their levels of emotional health concerns and behavioural problems, and their propensity to truant

	Group 1 ('Mainstream')	Group 2 ('Problem behaviour')	Group 3 ('Anxious/ depressed')	Group 4 ('Compound')
Proportion of all students:	45%	25%	20%	10%
Truanting behaviours				
Rate of truanting:	6%	25%	16%	42%
Strengths and Difficulties scales				
Emotional symptoms:	low	low	very high	high
Impulsive/aggressive behaviour problems:	low	high	high	very high
Hyperactivity/inattention problems:	low	high	high	very high
Peer problems:	low	high	high	very high
Gender balance:				
	both	mainly male	mainly female	both
Socio-economic background				
% from high deprivation (ie 'low decile') backgrounds:	14%	26%	28%	36%

1. **The 'mainstream' group** makes up the bulk of students (45% of our sample) and are those without any significant emotional health symptoms, behaviour problems, hyperactivity-inattention symptoms or peer problems. These are the ordinary students, the ones with few problems, who have friends, get on with others, and generally pay attention in class. They do sometimes skip school, but only occasionally – in our sample their rate of truancy was 6%.

2. **The 'problem behaviour' group** makes up about a quarter of students (25% of our sample) and are those without significant emotional health symptoms, but with moderately high levels of behaviour problems, hyperactivity-inattention symptoms, and problems with peer relationships. They are predominantly male and are twice as likely as 'mainstream' students to come from backgrounds of high levels of deprivation.

   The 'problem behaviour' students are usually boys; they are often impulsive and inattentive, and their aggressive behaviour makes them few friends and gets them into trouble. These students are much more likely to truant – in our sample their rate of truancy was 25%, four times higher than that of the 'mainstream' students.

3. **The 'anxious/depressed' group** makes up about a fifth of students (20% of our sample) and are those with very high levels of emotional health symptoms, along with moderately high levels of behaviour problems, hyperactivity-inattention symptoms and problems with peer relationships. They are predominantly female and, like the 'problem behaviour' group, they are twice as likely as 'mainstream' students to come from backgrounds of high levels of deprivation.

   The 'anxious/depressed' students are usually girls; they have difficulties with anxiety, depression or other emotional problems and are also often impulsive, not very attentive, and don't get on easily with others in the class. These students are also much more likely to truant – in our sample their rate of truancy was16%, nearly three times higher than that of the 'mainstream' students.

4. **The 'compound' group** are the small number of students (10% of our sample) with all the problems of both the previous two groups combined: very high levels of behaviour problems, hyperactivity-inattention symptoms, and peer relationship problems; and high levels of emotional health symptoms as well. They include both males and females, and are even more likely than the 'problem behaviour' and 'anxious/depressed' students to come from backgrounds of high levels of deprivation.

   The 'compound' students are those with the highest levels of emotional and behavioural problems: they are often aggressive and destructive, can't concentrate in class, don't have friends to help them and keep getting into trouble. These students very often truant – in our sample their rate of truancy was 42%, seven times higher than that of the 'mainstream' students.

   These students pose the greatest challenge for schools: they truant often, but their behaviour makes them so difficult and unpopular that the classroom is likely to be easier for teachers and for other students without them.

As the above analysis makes clear, students are not all the same in their tendency to truant. The students with emotional or behavioural problems truant more, and those students with high levels of both emotional and behavioural problems truant the most.

When we separate out these different groups of students and look again at the effects of school variables, then a rather different pattern comes into focus.

School structure and truanting revisited

First, looking again at the different 'structural' categories of schools, we recall that when the students were considered a whole, comparisons between different types of school showed distinct differences in truancy rates. However, when comparisons between schools are made for each of the groups of students separately, most of those apparent differences in truancy rates between schools of different types disappear. There were no differences in truanting in single-sex compared to co-educational schools, or in schools of different socio-economic composition (ie low decile compared to high decile) in any of the groups of students. Truanting was slightly higher in public than in private schools among 'mainstream' students, but not among 'problem behaviour', 'anxious/depressed', or 'compound' students. Truanting was higher in urban than in rural schools among 'anxious/depressed' students, but not among any of the other groups of students. The only factor where there was a significant difference in more than one of the four groups of students was in school size: truanting was higher in large schools than in smaller schools among 'mainstream' and 'problem behaviour' students, but not among 'anxious/depressed' or 'compound' students.

When we checked the numbers of students in each group at schools of different types we confirmed what many school principals will have suspected: that the publicly funded, co-educational, and especially the low decile schools have disproportionately more of the 'problem behaviour' and 'compound' students.

It thus appears that the higher overall rates of truancy seen at publicly funded, co-educational, or low decile schools are largely because these schools have more of the students with emotional and behavioural problems, who truant more often.

However, this does not explain all the differences between schools, in particular the difference between larger and smaller schools. There are evidently other factors at play as well. What other factors that vary between schools might influence truanting among their students?

Other school factors

Researchers who have investigated truancy have argued that it is influenced by the social and educational atmosphere at the school – or what is often referred to as the school 'climate'. Researchers have looked at one aspect of school climate in particular and argued that truancy is indicative of students not being engaged at school, either socially or academically. As the Youth'07 survey confirmed, one of the main reasons young people enjoy school and want to attend school is for the social connectedness – to be with their friends there. Therefore, the researchers argue, students without friends at school, who do not have that social connection or engagement, will be those more likely to truant. Academic engagement is a separate but related notion, associated with academic achievement, educational stability, positive schooling experience and supportive relationships with teachers. Students who are academically engaged gain enjoyment and satisfaction from their learning and again would therefore be less likely to truant.

Various other factors that have been suggested as influences on truanting behaviour can also be seen as aspects of the school climate: high academic expectations of students, positive teacher-student relationships, student participation in sports, arts or cultural activities, the level of safety of students at the school, and the availability of resources for students with behaviour problems and health concerns. We examined a range of these factors, based on Youth'07 survey data for students' perceptions and on the associated survey of teachers for their perceptions of the climate at the same schools.

School climate and truanting

We obtained measures of various social engagement factors and other school climate factors from students' and teachers' responses to relevant questions (see these in the appendix), and examined how the truancy rate of each of the emotional/behavioural groups of students varied with different levels of each school factor.

Table 4: School climate factors and truanting rate among different groups of students

	Group of Students (for each group √indicates the school climate factors that are associated with a significantly lower truanting rate)			
	'Mainstream'	**'Problem behaviour'**	**'Anxious/ depressed'**	**'Compound'**
School climate factor				
Students get on well	√	√	√	-
Student participate in sports etc	√	-	-	-
Students feel part of the school and feel teachers care	-	-	√	-
Students feel safe	-	-	-	-
Teacher-student interactions	-	-	-	-
Family involvement	-	-	-	-
Innovation	-	-	-	-
Support for disruptive students	-	√	-	-
Support for ethnic diversity	-	-	-	-
Health and support services provided	-	-	-	-

The results are complex but some clear patterns can be seen. In particular, this analysis confirms the suggestion that social connection or engagement in school is important:

- Schools where the students reported that they got on well together had lower rates of truanting than schools where students did not get on well together. This held for the 'mainstream', 'problem behaviour' and 'anxious/depressed' groups of students, but not for the 'compound' group.

Another aspect of social engagement in school had a more limited effect:

- Schools where students participated more in other activities beyond the classroom (in sports, cultural groups, or activities helping other students) had lower rates of truanting – but only among 'mainstream' students.

Examining the results for these two social engagement factors more closely, we find that, paradoxically, they had the greatest effect on those students who already had the lowest rate of truanting – the 'mainstream' group. This group's average rate of truanting across all schools was 6%, but in those schools where students got on well together, their truancy rate was less than half that: 2.5%. Similarly, in those schools where students participated more in other activities beyond the classroom (in sports, cultural groups, or activities helping other students), the truancy rate of 'mainstream' students was only 2.7%.

The effect of these social engagement factors was smaller with the 'problem behaviour' and 'anxious/depressed' groups of students, and they had no effect at all on the highest-truanting 'compound' group.

Some of the other school climate factors we looked at had limited effects:

- Schools where students felt part of the school and felt that teachers cared about them, treated them fairly, and expected them to do well had lower rates of truanting – but only among 'anxious/depressed' students.
- Schools where teachers reported that they made greater efforts to address the needs of disruptive students had lower rates of truanting by 'problem behaviour' students (who were indeed disruptive students).

However, many of the school climate factors that we looked at were not associated with any significant reductions in truanting rates at all. These included one factor reported on by students (whether they felt safe at the school), and four factors reported on by teachers (whether the school had open teacher-student interactions, encouraged family involvement in the school, supported ethnic diversity, or provided health and support services for students). These factors did not appear to reduce truanting among any of the groups of students.

Altogether, the results confirm that some aspects at least of student social engagement are important – schools where students get on well together have reduced rates of truancy among most of their students, with the reductions in truancy generally being greater among the lowest-truanting 'mainstream' students, and with no reduction at all among the highest-truanting 'compound' students. Schools where students participated in activities beyond the classroom and where they felt that teachers cared about them and expected them to do well – such schools also had lower rates of truancy, although only among particular groups of students.

With these results in mind we can look again at the differences in truancy rates between different categories of school, in particular between small and large schools.

When we look at student social connection in schools of different size, it is probably no surprise that students at small schools, on average, reported that they got on together better than students at large schools did. So the difference in truancy rates between small and large schools can be explained, at least in part, by the greater social connection that comes more easily in a smaller school.

Conclusions & summary

Conclusions: positives and negatives and what they mean

So far we have concentrated on the positive results – the combinations of school factors and student factors where there are lower rates of truancy. But there is also an important negative result. For the 'compound' students, those with the highest levels of emotional and behavioural problems, not one of the school factors we examined, neither the school structural factors nor any of the school climate factors – not even the engagement factors – had any significant effect on their truanting.

For these students, changes in school policies, practices or approaches have little effect; instead, these students need individual treatment. They need intensive targeted mental health services to provide treatment for their emotional health concerns and behavioural problems.

This highlights the importance of evaluating students with school attendance problems for mental health disorders. Given that none of the approaches available to schools – modifying the school structure or school climate – appear to make much difference with students with high levels of emotional and behavioural problems, it is important that there are mental health services for these students. Effective interventions are available for their emotional health concerns and behavioural problems.

However, for most students, those who don't have major emotional or behavioural issues, the social climate at the school does make a difference. Schools that foster positive student relationships and high levels of participation in school activities do keep these students more engaged, and truanting less.

Summary

The main conclusions of this report can be simply summed up:

- Students differ considerably in their propensity to truant – students with emotional or behavioural problems are much more likely to truant than students without such problems.
- Most of the apparent contrasts between truanting rates at different types of schools (private vs publicly-funded; single-sex vs co-educational; high vs low socio-economic decile) are explained by the higher proportions of students with emotional and behavioural problems at publicly-funded, co-educational, low-decile schools.
- Most students – those with low to moderate emotional or behavioural problems – are less likely to truant from schools where students get on well together, join in activities beyond the classroom, and feel part of the school. School policies which enhance this climate of connection and engagement are likely to reduce truanting among these students.
- However, this is not the case with students with high levels of both emotional and behavioural problems. They are very likely to truant from any type or condition of school, whether there is a climate encouraging engagement or not. For these students, targeted mental health services are needed to provide treatment for their emotional health concerns and behavioural problems.

Appendix: Questionnaire wording of school climate measures

1. Student survey

Measure	Questions or statements students were asked to respond to
School engagement	'Teachers go out of their way to help students', 'Students try to get the best grades that they can', 'How often do the teachers at your school treat students fairly?', 'How much do people at school care about you?', 'Do you feel like you are part of your school?', 'Do people at your school expect you to do well?
Student relationships	'Students in this school have difficulty getting along with each other'
Student participation in extra-curricular activities	'Do you belong to any school sports teams?', 'Do you belong to any clubs or teams other than sports teams at school? (e.g. musical or singing group, cultural club, library group)', 'Do you do any activities to help others at school? (e.g. peer support, tutoring, coaching, being a leader, helping others with work')
School safety	'Do you feel safe in your school?', 'During this school year, how often have you been afraid that someone will hurt or bother you at school?', 'This year how often have you been bullied in school?'

2. Teacher survey

Measure	Statements teachers were asked to respond to
Innovation culture and vision	'Staff are encouraged to be innovative in this school', 'There is a high degree of consensus within the staff with regard to what the school is trying to achieve', 'Staff at this school like to try new strategies to increase student competencies', 'New and different ideas are being tried in this school'
Family involvement	'Staff value parent/care-giver participation in school activities', 'This school creates opportunities for interaction between staff and parents/care-givers', 'Parent/care-giver participation is encouraged at this school', 'The senior management encourage parent/care-giver participation through a range of school activities'
Teacher-student interactions	'Students in my classes share their concerns with staff members', 'Students in my classes ask for comfort and support when needed', 'Students in my classes express their feelings', 'Students in my classes talk about their homes and families', 'Students in my classes join class discussions'
Support for ethnic diversity	'Most staff have a good understanding of working with students from other ethnic groups', 'The staff at this school have the skills required to address the needs of an ethnically diverse student population', 'Staff are encouraged to learn effective skills for working with students from other ethnic groups', 'The needs of students from different ethnic groups are addressed effectively at this school'
Supports for disruptive students	'There are effective mechanisms for dealing with disruptive students in this school', 'There are support staff who are able to help with disruptive students in this school', 'The needs of disruptive students are not well addressed in this school' (reverse scored), 'This school puts special emphasis on dealing with disruptive students'
Health and welfare services	'The health and welfare staff (e.g. guidance counsellor, nurse, social worker) are generally available to help students', 'I feel comfortable referring students to the health and welfare staff', 'The health and welfare staff provide effective assistance for students who need help', 'I have referred students to the health and welfare staff'

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