



## RESEARCH BRIEF

### **CHRONIC SCHOOL ABSENTEEISM AND THE JUVENILE COURT: TRUANCY RELATED TO DELINQUENCY OR SCHOOL REFUSAL BEHAVIOR RELATED TO MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES? IT MAY BE A MATTER OF GENDER**

The literature on school attendance difficulties tends to label chronically absent behavior in one of two ways: “school refusal” or “truant.” School refusal usually is thought to be the result of the student having severe emotional distress about attending school, and oftentimes these students will exhibit somatic complaints. In addition, parents typically know that the student exhibiting school refusal behavior is missing from school and can be found at home during school hours. On the other hand, truant students do not experience distress about attending school, but rather display little or no interest in school-related phenomena. Also, absences are usually concealed from parents, and often as not truant students are engaging in delinquent activities during school hours (often with other truant youth).

Hence, chronic school absenteeism seems to be related to one of two separate problems: mental health issues or involvement in delinquent activities. In the juvenile courts, however, the single label of “truant” typically is used to describe and categorize problem behavior associated with chronic school absenteeism. This may be the case because youth charged with “truancy” do in fact most often resemble the “truant” profile described above: engaging in delinquent activities, concealing school absences from parents, etc. At the same time, however, the increased recognition that mental health issues often are present in youth coming to the attention of the court generates an important question: to what extent are youth charged with truancy actually engaging in school refusal behavior more typically associated with psychological difficulties?

To begin to address this question, a study was conducted in order to examine the extent to which mental health issues and/or delinquent behaviors were being displayed in a sample of youth coming to the attention of the juvenile court for issues related to school absenteeism. The Global Risk Assessment Device (GRAD: Gavazzi et al., 2003) was used to assess potential threats to the numerous developmental needs of adolescents who come into contact with the juvenile justice system. This tool taps into eleven domains of risk/needs: prior offenses, family/parenting issues, peer relationships, substance abuse, traumatic events, mental health issues, psychopathy, sexual activity and other health-related risks, leisure activities, accountability, and education/work issues. For this study,

items reflecting internalizing difficulties (depression, anxiety, etc.) were used as markers for mental health issues, while items reflecting externalizing problems (acting out behaviors, gang affiliation, etc.) were used as markers of delinquent behavior. Finally, items reflecting such problems as disruptive classroom behavior and conflict with teachers were used as markers of school-related problems.

Data from a sample of youth who had come to the attention of the Cuyahoga County, Ohio Juvenile Court were used to focus attention on issues related to educational risk, mental health issues, and delinquent behavior. The sample was comprised of 563 youth (48% female and 52% male) with an average age of 14.8 years. Seventy percent of the sample was African American, 24% White, 5% Hispanic, and 1% other. The median family income was \$15,000-\$24,999, with 42% of the youth coming from families below the poverty line. Fifty-nine percent of the youth came from single-parent mother-headed families, 16% married biological parents, 7% stepfamilies, 6% grandparent-headed, 4% single-parent father-headed, and 8% from some other family structure.

Of these 563 youth, 25% (64 females and 74 males) were reported to have problems associated with chronic school absenteeism. As expected, these chronically absent youth displayed significantly greater school-related problem behaviors ( $F = 8.15, p < .0001$ ) as measured by this GRAD domain as compared with the remainder of the sample. Interestingly, there were no significant differences between these two groups on GRAD domains associated with either delinquent behavior or mental health issues. In essence, while significantly more at risk in terms of school-related problems, youth charged with truancy were engaging in similar types of delinquent behavior as were those youth charged with other offenses, and were experiencing similar levels of psychological symptoms.

Further analyses of the subsample of chronically absent youth revealed some interesting differences. First, analyses for potential gender differences generated evidence that females were significantly more likely than males to display mental health issues ( $t = 7.86, p < .006$ ). In turn, males were significantly more at risk ( $t = 2.84, p < .005$ ) than females in terms of school-related problems. Further, while not significant, there was a trend that indicated males were more likely to display delinquent behavior than females.

Subsequent correlational analyses were conducted separately for chronically absent males and females regarding the variables associated with delinquent behavior, mental health issues, and school-related problems. For males, school-related problem behaviors were significantly correlated both with delinquent behavior ( $r = .29, p < .002$ ) and with mental health issues ( $r = .20, p < .04$ ). For females, however, school-related problem behaviors were significantly correlated only with mental health issues ( $r = .28, p < .005$ ) and not with delinquent behavior ( $r = .16, ns$ ). Interestingly, the association between delinquent behavior and mental health issues was more pronounced for females ( $r = .54, p < .0001$ ) than for males ( $r = .24, p < .01$ ).

Hence, gender very well may have an impact on risk factors associated with chronic school absenteeism. For females in particular, a “truancy” charge is likely to be an

indicator of the need for mental health-related services. In turn, males with a “truancy” charge are likely to be in need of both school-based behavioral plans and interventions designed to reduce delinquent behavior. Thus, the work of school-based professionals and juvenile court staff alike may very well benefit from a more thorough examination of factors related to delinquent behavior and mental health issues in the lives of female and male youth who are chronically absent from school. In turn, court-school collaboration may be greatly enhanced through use of information generated from assessment instruments such as the GRAD that are designed to assess risks and needs across a wide spectrum of individual, family, and social contexts.

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The development of an instrument known as the Global Risk Assessment Device (GRAD) was initiated in order to assist juvenile justice professionals in making recommendations and referrals that are based on reliable and valid information about risk factors in a wide variety of relevant domains, including: prior offenses, family and parenting issues, peer relationships, substance abuse, mental health symptoms, accountability, education and vocational issues, traumatic events, and health-related risks. Currently, there are six publications that discuss the conceptual and empirical development of the GRAD. They are:

Gavazzi, S. M., Yarcheck., C. M., & Lim, J. Y. (in press). Global Risk Indicators and the Role of Gender in a Juvenile Detention Sample. **Criminal Justice and Behavior**.

Gavazzi, S. M., Yarcheck., C. M., & Lim, J. Y. (in press). Ethnicity, gender, and global risk indicators in the lives of status offenders coming to the attention of the juvenile court. **International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology**.

Gavazzi, S. M., Novak, M., Yarcheck, C. M., & Distefano, L. T. (2004). Assessing and Tracking Youthful Offenders with the Web-Based Global Risk Assessment Device. **Corrections Today**, 64-67.

Gavazzi, S. M., & Lim, J. Y. (2003). Advances in measurement of global risk indicators in lives of court-involved youth: brief evidence for concurrent validity. **Psychological Reports**, 93, 750-752.

Gavazzi, S. M., Lim, J. Y., Yarcheck, C. M., & Eyre, E. L. (2003). A brief report regarding predictive validity evidence of global risk indicators in the lives of court-involved youth. **Psychological Reports**, 93, 1239-1242.

Gavazzi, S. M., Slade, D., Buettner, C. K., Partridge, C., Yarcheck, C. M., & Andrews, D.W. (2003). Toward conceptual development and empirical measurement of global risk indicators in the lives of court-involved youth. **Psychological Reports**, 92, 599-615.