



How To... Understand Truancy

WHAT IS TRUANCY?

- An unexcused absence from school
- States enact school attendance laws which determine:
 - the age at which a child is required to begin attending school
 - the age at which a child may legally drop out of school
 - the number of unexcused absences which make a student legally truant
- In many states, youth missing more than 10 days of school are required to repeat the entire school year.
- Truancy is a major problem nationwide, yet states do little to prevent it and little to re-engage truant youth

IS TRUANCY A CRIME?

- Truancy is a *status offense*—an act that is an offense only because of the offender’s age, meaning the same conduct by an adult would not be an offense or involve law enforcement and the courts.
- Status offenses including truancy, running away from home, failure to obey parents and curfew violations, are generally understood to reflect family problems.
- Federal law forbids locking up youth charged with status offenses.

In some states, when youth violate probation orders requiring school attendance, judges can order youth be locked up.

- Some states charge parents for failing to ensure their children’s school attendance.

PREVALENCE OF TRUANCY

- There are no national statistics about truancy.
- Boys are only slightly more likely than girls to be sent to court for truancy.

WHY SHOULD POLICE BE CONCERNED WITH TRUANCY?

- Police are most effective in reducing truancy when they recognize that truancy is not a crime. It is a symptom of a youth’s troubled adjustment to school for educational or social reasons.
- Police participation in community responses to truancy are most effective when police:
 - Communicate with schools and parents
 - Do not criminalize truancy
 - Intervene immediately when youth under the age of 12 are truant
 - Work with schools to promote re-engagement of truant youth

CAUSES OF TRUANCY

- Truancy has evolved from Mark Twain’s description in *Huckleberry Finn*: “a joyous rebellion against authority and responsibility.” Today, truancy of youth under 14 is viewed less as failure by youth to do well in school, and more as a failure by a school to meet a student’s needs.
- Common causes include:
 - Undiagnosed or mistreated learning disabilities
 - Victimization by school bullies, teachers, or school staff
 - Fear of school
 - Family issues, like abuse and neglect, or obligations to care for parents or younger siblings
 - Mental health issues, like post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), which are sometimes punished instead of treated, and can force youth to leave school
 - Failure of schools to tell parents of students’ absences: some school systems tell parents after one absence, others wait 30 to 40 days