Scared smart or bored straight? Testing deterrence logic in an evaluation of police-led truancy intervention

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SCARED SMART OR BORED STRAIGHT?
TESTING DETERRENCE LOGIC IN AN
EVALUATION OF POLICE-LED TRUANCY
INTERVENTION

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Student truancy in secondary schools has increasingly been identified as an issue that merits the attention of the criminal and juvenile justice systems. This paper presents evaluation results from a recent study of a

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A criminal justice presence has been a notable feature of the secondary education landscape since the initial placement of school resource officers (SROs) in many of the nation's high schools two decades ago (Staples, 1997). More recently that presence has expanded significantly. Some have attributed the expansion to zero tolerance school disciplinary policies and various "get tough" approaches that have increased the degree to which criminal justice is involved, refocused that involvement from education and support to discipline and surveillance (Staples, 1997; Trulson, Triplett, & Snell, 2001), and changed the relationship between criminal justice agencies and schools.

With these changes has come a growing erosion of the informal authority and decision making discretion of educators (Trulson et al., 2001; Reistenberg, 1996, 2001). In this context, new criminal justice interventions to reduce unexcused absences (i.e., truancy) appear to be significant components of the broader relationship between schools and the justice system (Ingersoll & LeBoeuf, 1997; Baker, Sigmon, & Nugent, 2001). Such an aroused emphasis on truancy among justice agencies provides the basis of a critical case study in the mobilization of formal social control resources to address a problem once seen primarily as a concern of schools, families, or communities.

Once criminal justice agencies become involved, it is also likely that the lead agency charged with implementing and administering new interventions may influence both the definition of the problem and the prescribed solution. For example, when police organizations assume a lead role, they may emphasize the risk that youth not in school during daytime hours present and suggest enhanced enforcement. Alternatively, when juvenile justice agencies assume a lead role, they may emphasize problems in student adjustment to school and suggest additional treatment or remedial services. Court professionals might emphasize the lack of compliance with attendance requirements and suggest specialized courts (Svirdoff, Rottman, Ostrum, & Curtis, 1997; Garrity, 2002) or other interventions to reinforce such compliance. Each of these represent contrasting criminal justice perspectives, but as a group they differ most sharply from the less formal intervention
objectives that educators and community-based organizations might have—e.g., enhancing student achievement, increasing family and community involvement in schools, or even encouraging holistic approaches to cultural and structural reform (Ingersoll & LeBoeuf, 1997; Braithwaite, 2001).

A recent truancy intervention initiative led by the sheriff's department in a large urban county (hereafter Southeastern County) provides an opportunity to assess the impact of one criminal justice-oriented approach. Initially supported by a multiple agency collaborative including the school board, social service agencies, the state Department of Juvenile Justice, and the prosecutor's office, this initiative was originally envisioned as a comprehensive partnership featuring a range of intervention approaches. Specifically, the protocol called for: (1) sheriff's deputies and officers from a number of municipal police departments to take students determined absent from school without approved excuses to a central Truancy Unit; (2) processing and assessment by social service professionals at the unit to determine the need for follow-up and then make appropriate referrals for remediation and other services to school staff and community-based agencies; and (3) eventually, either taking students to school, releasing them to parents at the center, or returning them to their homes. As implementation progressed, however, a more narrow strategy—grounded in one primary theory of intervention, specific deterrence—began to dominate. We examine the program's effectiveness in achieving its two primary goals: improving subsequent attendance and reducing subsequent delinquency of youths processed through the Truancy Unit. We also assess this deterrence theory in response to truancy and delinquent behavior while considering the implications of expanded criminal justice responsibility.

The literature review sets the context for this analysis by examining the issue of truancy against the backdrop of recent criminal justice involvement in schools, the rise of zero-tolerance policies, and growing support in some jurisdictions for a new juvenile justice focus on status offenders (Shiraldi & Soler, 1998; Bazemore & McLeod, 2002). We then summarize the literature on truancy causation, intervention approaches, and related policy considerations. After that we describe the Southeastern County truancy intervention initiative, giving special attention to officer

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1 Sheriff's office proponents also promoted the initiative as a way to reduce daytime crime in affected neighborhoods, based on the assumption that truant youth were committing offenses and that processing would reduce opportunities for crime, as well as subsequent criminal involvement.
decision making and how the collaborative gradually narrowed its focus to deterrence by defining truancy through a crime control "policy lens" (Ingram & Schneider, 1991). Finally, we present evaluation findings that contrast youth processed through the truancy center with youth stopped but not processed by police. We discuss the findings in the context of specific deterrence logic, and use the initiative as a case study in criminal justice boundary change, role adaptation, and expansion into areas previously addressed more informally.

LITERATURE REVIEW:
THE CRIMINALIZATION OF SCHOOLS

Justice Professionals in the Schools

In the early years of criminal justice involvement in schools, school resource officers (SROs) introduced a range of preventive and educational programs, and often functioned as supporters or advocates for students and their families. Although this criminal justice presence clearly reinforced the discipline and security of schools, the initial role was arguably a nonintrusive one (Shepard & James, 1967). Recently, however, according to some observers:

The partnership of criminal justice officials and schools is shifting to one emphasizing crime control. This change in emphasis can be demonstrated in four ways: the language used to refer to criminal justice officials, their role activities, the changing architectural environment of schools, and the panoply of rules and restrictions emphasizing the suppression and control of criminal activity in the school setting (Trulson et al., 2001: 576).

Consistent with zero tolerance policies, the shift in language, for example, is replete with such terms as "combating" victimization, "fighting" campus crime, and "enforcing" discipline. In some jurisdictions, the job titles currently given to what were once "resource officers" or "school liaisons" are now "security officers," "guards," "gang intelligence officers," or "drill instructors." Moreover, this language is consistent with an apparent role change in which activities of criminal justice professionals in schools focus on identification and investigation, drug sweeps, surveillance, and controlling access (Staples, 1997; Trulson et al., 2001). In this context, it is not surprising that skipping school, like other forms of rule violation and order disruption, is increasingly viewed as a criminal/juvenile justice problem that requires strict and formal enforcement.
Although enforcing truancy statutes was historically part of the mandate of the pre-Gault juvenile court (Platt, 1969; Whitehead & Lab, 1996), by the 1970s, new policies and statutes resulting from Supreme Court decisions and the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act of 1972 slowly began to erode the court’s jurisdiction over truants and other status offenders. By making detention and jailing of truants off limits, these policy initiatives had, by the 1980s, made truancy a problem outside the range of court intervention in many jurisdictions.

Two decades later, it now appears that truancy is again being viewed as an issue to be addressed using criminal justice resources. The broader context for the new focus is expanded use of criminal and juvenile justice penalties—including confinement and other sanctions such as school suspension or expulsion—for a range of behaviors such as smoking, underage drinking, and running away (“New Juvenile Crime Bill,” 1997). Providing a sense of legitimacy to justice system intervention in response to a wide range of noncriminal youthful misbehavior, such responses have recently taken the form of programs targeting status offenders and specialized courts. Debate has resumed, however, about the role of the justice system in enforcing parental discipline and school attendance (Shiraldi & Soler, 1998). Perhaps most important, the renewed focus on truancy has attracted political attention by the increasing, though often unsubstantiated, claims of a linkage between high rates of truancy and daytime burglary and vandalism (Baker et al., 2001).

Yet, to raise critical concerns about expanding system involvement in the educational process is not to underestimate the scope of the problem that truancy may present to local criminal justice authorities. Although the proportion of truancy cases processed through juvenile courts remains relatively small, some have observed that the juvenile justice system is increasingly:

- the final stop for truants, and (is becoming) a primary mechanism for intervening with chronic truants... in 1998, truancy accounted for 26% of all formally handled status offense cases, representing an 85% increase in truancy cases in juvenile court since 1989 (from 22,200 cases in 1989 to 41,000 cases in 1998) (Baker et al., 2001:2).

Although this pattern is now well documented, less attention has been devoted to the social control issues and implications for criminal justice professionals of their new role in regulating school attendance. Moreover, while substantial evidence has been
compiled on truancy causation, research addressing the likely impact of various intervention approaches is still scant.

Causes and Impact of Unexcused Absences

Although not always considered a significant social problem, chronic truancy without doubt represents the tip of an iceberg of social isolation that separates young people from the educational mainstream and has direct implications for productive participation in the conventional labor market (Polk, 2001), as well as for human and social capital and the well-being of youth and families. As far as public safety and social control are concerned, truancy has been identified in a number of empirical studies as a risk factor associated with substance abuse, gang activity, and a variety of criminal activities, as well as serious behavioral disorders in adulthood (Bell, Rosen, & Dynlacht, 1994; Dryfoos, 1990; Garry, 1996). Although the causal order and robustness of some of these effects have been at issue, truancy, like dropping out or expulsion (Elliot & Voss, 1974), may be one critical indicator of alienation and failure issues directly related to subsequent negative outcomes such as crime (Polk & Kobrin, 1972; Gottfredson, 1990).

Regardless, the predictors of truancy have been rather well established. Etiological research is clear, for example, that the problem is a complex one (Bell, et al., 1994), and efforts to identify personal characteristics that set truants apart from other students tend to also implicate families and schools. For example, truants are often found to be living in “multiple disadvantaged” circumstances (Galloway, 1982), to have a parent suffering from alcoholism (West & Prinz, 1987), and to experience family histories of abuse (Familiar, Kinscherff, Fenton, & Boldur, 1990), maltreatment, or neglect (Garry, 1996).

With regard to school-related variables, bullying, lack of attention to learning styles or disabilities (Berger & Wind, 2000), reading scores well below their grade level (Galloway, 1983), poor skills in a number of academic subjects (Farrington, 1985), frustration with school, isolation from the school culture (Rood, 1989), boredom with school, and negative encounters with teachers (Sommer, 1985) have been implicated in various studies.

It is therefore not surprising to find researchers concluding that effective responses to the problem of chronic absenteeism require looking beyond individual truants. In that regard, Harte (1995) noted that since 1985, the literature on absenteeism has shifted from emphasis on the student to a multidimensional focus on school, community, and family-related factors ranging from
domestic violence to teacher neglect and negative role models (Ingersoll & LeBoeuf, 1997; Bell et al., 1994:206). Notably, the school is commonly depicted as part of both the problem and the solution. But despite this growing consensus in the scientific literature, truancy-reduction policies and practices most often target individual students for remedial services, counseling, and sometimes simply punishment.

TRUANCY INTERVENTION IN ORGANIZATIONAL CONTEXT: POLICY LENSES, THE STRUCTURE OF RESPONSIBILITY, AND LEADERSHIP

The concept of a more broadly based, holistic response to truancy extends beyond enforcing truancy statutes and builds on research that suggests the need to target intervention toward families, communities, and school structure as well as students (Baker et al., 2001; Harte, 1995). The dominant reality of truancy intervention, however, is typically influenced by two “policy lenses” (Ingram & Schneider, 1991) that provide a framework for an agenda that in turn defines intervention parameters and shapes the dominant view of the truant youth. The policy lens may also influence criminal justice boundary definition (Friel, 2000)—i.e., the responsibility for strategy management and implementation, as well as the primary locus of leadership and distribution of roles and responsibilities in the intervention (Ingram & Schneider, 1991). Unfortunately, these lead to rather narrow, limited, student-targeted strategies that vary only in their assessment of what motivates unexcused individual absences.

First, a social welfare/therapeutic lens emphasizes social deprivation and the psychological problems or learning disabilities that might arise from it. Both problems prevent the student from keeping up with his or her age group, make adjustment to school difficult, and in turn, encourage withdrawal in the form of truancy. Intervention strategies targeting what are believed to be psychologically based behavioral problems typically include some form of counseling or therapy. Learning problems are considered deficits to be addressed by remedial education. Both responses are often implemented as individualized, reactive interventions directed at young people, many of whom are already chronic truants (Pasternak, 1986; Garry, 1996).

Second, through the crime control lens, motivation for truancy is understood as part of a general pattern of commitment to youth crime, and the truant is thus viewed primarily as a public safety risk. This view is expected to be more dominant in programs that criminal justice agencies initiate, and may lead to a variety of
responses focused on enhanced enforcement. Current examples of such responses include pre-adjudicatory detention of truants, temporary incapacitation in a variety of truancy intake centers such as the one examined in this study, appearance before “truancy courts” (Garrity, 2002), in-school boot camps (Trulson et al., 2001), and parental sanctioning approaches (Baker et al., 2001; Ingersoll & LeBoeuf, 1997).

Alternatively, truancy rates could be broadly viewed as part of a more systemic pattern of breakdowns in educational policy and socialization, focusing on the structure of schools and communities (Lawrence, 1998). Consistent with this view and in contrast to the individualized counseling and remedial approaches associated with the social welfare/therapeutic lens, strengths-based approaches (Saleebey, 2002; Benson, 1997) are more likely to assume differences in learning styles than learning deficits. As a result, they tend to promote educator efforts to build on assets of students, families, and communities. Associated strategies would seek whole-school approaches to failure and student alienation and focus on reforming the organizational culture of schools, increasing family and community involvement, and building flexibility into curricula and student support approaches (e.g., Pasternack, 1986). Successful holistic reform models include, for example, Comer’s School Development Program (1989), a systemic change process that engages internal and external civic and community leadership, and Pearl and Knight’s (1999) democratic classroom model of civic engagement, which features youth development strategies that design new positive roles for marginal young people in school and community settings, while promoting effective citizenship and a sense of “ownership” of the school.

In contrast to traditional disciplinary responses to absenteeism, alternative disciplinary and social support intervention models based on restorative justice decision making processes (e.g., family group conferencing, peacemaking circles) engage multiple affected parties in problem-solving resolutions. Focused on repairing the harm associated with student conflict and rule violations (rather than on punishment or service referrals), such approaches may also have a positive effect on school retention, and theoretically affect overall school culture and climate (Bazemore, 2000; Braithwaite, 2002; Karp & Breslin, 2001; Reistenberg, 2001). From the perspective of leadership and responsibility, truancy reduction programs are most appropriately initiated and led by the school as the socializing institution most responsible for addressing them. Educational leadership might also actively engage families, community organizations, and criminal
justice professionals in a collaboration aimed at institutional reform affecting school culture and climate. At the other end of the leadership continuum, the crime control perspective in its purest form places the least responsibility on the school itself. Moreover, when law enforcement agencies assume primary leadership roles, truancy is likely to be defined as a primary risk factor for involvement in daytime crimes and intervention therefore is likely to focus on deterrence and incapacitation.

The Southeastern County Truancy Intervention Initiative

Although staff had gained 3 years of experience conducting a more limited truancy pick-up program, the first year of operation of the fully funded, multicomponent truancy center was the beginning of the 1999–2000 school year. Staffing and space during that year allowed the center to accommodate more than 100 truants per day. Consistent with the program mission statement to move beyond a one-dimensional approach, the center also added a case management component with clinical services.

State statutes provided authorization for the Truancy Unit and outlined the general framework for center operation and admission requirements. These eligibility requirements allowed for processing of youth who met specified formal criteria: were between the ages of 6 and 17 and currently enrolled in a Southeastern County public or private school, were not enrolled in a G.E.D. program; not in a court-ordered program; not in a home or work study program; were not a runaway, and were not currently suspended or expelled from school.

Police Encounter and Processing

The decision making process begins when sheriff's deputies or other local law enforcement officers encounter youth not

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2 In an effort to progress beyond both generic and one-dimensional approaches, some jurisdictions are focusing on a multifaceted combination of holistic problem-solving techniques targeting specific needs of truants, families and schools with a “menu” of programmatic responses that can take the form of attendance-supporting assistance ranging from providing health care to making arrangements for transportation, child care (for younger siblings), school clothing, and even such fundamental essentials as access to washing machines or a quiet place to do homework (Haslinger, Kelly, & O'Lare, 1996). School-based intervention programs have also been found to be more effective if, along with attendance monitoring and student counseling, they also involve parents and other citizens and community groups (Harte, 1995; Reistenberg, 2001; Lawrence, 1998; Pasternak, 1986).

3 A state statute implemented in 2000 changed one important criterion for admission: youths who are suspended or expelled from school and are not under the supervision of an adult can now be picked up and taken to the Truancy Unit. Though apparently illogical, the new statute may well reinforce the more implicit, but increasingly dominant, goal of crime suppression.
accompanied by an adult during school hours. The officer is then expected to call the school to confirm that the youth has not been granted an excused absence and to verify the legal criteria for admission to the unit. In fact, the vast majority of unaccompanied youth on the street did meet such criteria, and those who did not were ineligible because they were either runaways (thus taken to shelters) or under court-ordered supervision (thus taken to delinquency intake). Because exclusions by virtue of excused absence from the school, home schooling, or GED enrollment were extremely unlikely for youth unaccompanied by an adult, release dictated by statute was rare, and officers were granted a great deal of discretion in processing decisions. Officers had to evaluate the credibility of reasons that youths provided for being late for school. Although some established their own guidelines for decision making, such as distance from school and allowed a “grace period” for tardy versus truant, there were no formal policies to guide these decisions. As a result, officers encountered in this study allowed grace periods ranging from 15 minutes to 2 hours.  

The experience of being processed through the truancy intake unit, a holding area where youth wait to enter the facility, evokes a sensation similar to being arrested and taken into custody. In this sense, it is not unlike many other juvenile justice processing experiences dominated by an emphasis on security, confiscation of property, depersonalization, regimentation, and authoritarian discipline. The intervention itself during the time at the center is minimal: a basic assessment, interview, and enforced silence, possibly followed by informal counseling with clinical staff. Rules of conduct at the center are that students must: (1) place their heads on their desks while they are seated, (2) raise their hand if they have a question, and (3) not talk to anyone unless asked a question by a staff member. The regulations also note that failure to follow the rules may result in disciplinary action. Students may stay at the facility for a maximum of 6 hours, at which time they must be released to a parent, guardian, or competent adult willing to sign for their release.

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4 Discretion in favor of processing was influenced by an incentive system to increase truancy referrals to the center and to deliver students quickly in order to allow time for processing, even if the youth would later be released. Disincentives for processing and discretionary decisions not to deliver youths to the center were time-dependent, because transportation to the center after noon generally meant that the youth could not be delivered to school after processing, because school doors close at 2:30. In this case, referring officers were required to take the youth home at the end of the day. Demeanor, attitudinal factors, and other extralegal criteria also undoubtedly played a role in processing decisions.
The Logic and Implementation of Specific Deterrence Intervention

As noted, partners in the collaborative sought and secured funding for a multicomponent intervention approach that included assessment and referral for remedial and clinical services. However, despite the emphasis of truancy center clinical staff, and the fact that a substantial proportion of youth received referrals (about half of our processed sample), independent surveys of parents (i.e., telephone interviews) conducted in conjunction with the current evaluation study revealed that a relative handful of these youths (33, about 8% of our study sample) could be confirmed to have received any follow-up services. Thus, the common dominant intervention experience became one of imposed restrictions, causing inconvenience and some discomfort by virtue of the hours spent at the center, and posing a threat to students that future truancy would result in similar or greater punishments—essentially, a deterrence model.

According to specific deterrence intervention theory (Weiss, 1997; Paternoster, 1987; Stafford & Warr, 1993), the model might be strengthened by the degree to which time in the truancy center was as unpleasant as possible. Moreover, consistent with the classic deterrence model that seeks to maximize the swiftness, certainty, and severity of punishment (Schneider, 1990; Paternoster, 1987), putting more patrols in targeted areas arguably increased the chances of truants being apprehended, and speeding up getting truants to the center and processed made punishment almost immediate. Inside the center, certainty was achieved by consistent application of strict rules of conduct (including enforced silence). Although such punishments may perhaps be considered limited in severity, staff also maintained

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5 The need to rely on the parent survey to track service delivery was a result of service provider agencies refusing to release records to the center, and similarly, no records on service follow-up being kept by the school. According to comparisons made between the small group of youth who received services and processed youth who did not, serviced youth were no more or less truant. According to a regression analysis that included service as a dummy variable, the impact of receiving services was not statistically significant (b=.04; t-score of .24). Of the 33 who apparently received some service, the typical youth had three or fewer contacts with the service agency, according to the parent survey.

6 With regard to unanticipated consequences of this emphasis, it is also notable that some students reported electing to avoid going to school if they anticipated being late and thus at risk of apprehension for truancy. In perhaps the starkest illustration of the enforcement/deterrence emphasis, truant youth were informed that if at any time their disruptive behavior inside the facility warranted, they could be transferred to the “delinquency side” of the larger assessment center facility that includes the Truancy Unit. The youth is thereby charged with a delinquent act under the state juvenile justice code. A total of 70 from the entire referred population of 7,395 were charged with disruptive behavior and moved to the delinquency side during this year of observation. None of these 70 appeared in our randomly chosen study sample of 500.
that the lack of stimulation of any kind ensured that the center
would not be perceived as in any way enjoyable or interesting—
hence, the title of this paper focusing attention on boredom
through enforced silence and restricted movement.7 Finally, most
deterrence theorists, in contrast to policy makers, place greater
emphasis on the celerity and certainty dimensions of punishments
(e.g., Paternoster, 1987; Cornish & Clarke, 1986).

Empirical studies in evaluation research literature report
mixed results for specific deterrence interventions, ranging from
moderately positive at best, to strong inverse relationships
between the threat of punishment and future offending (Cornish &
Clarke, 1986; Schneider, 1990; Paternoster, 1987). While critics
may therefore view this theoretical connection as somewhat
dubious (see Harte, 1995; Baker et al., 2001; Ingersoll & LeBoeuf,
1997), from a deterrence perspective, the truancy intervention
focus might, through various logical sequences, achieve three
possible outcomes: (1) reduce future truancy and delinquent
behavior, (2) have no effect, or (3) aggravate truancy and
delinquent behavior. For example, to simply avoid another day of
enforced silence (and the general aggravation of processing) may be
enough to deter some students from skipping school or committing
crimes. For them, the experience itself may also serve as a "wake-
up call" that decreases the problem behavior. Alternatively, a
response as serious as police intervention and confinement, even
for a short period, might trigger parental and/or other adult
supportive responses that steer the youth back to regular
attendance. In this case, the so-called "deterrent" effect may be less
about the threat of spending the day in the center and much more
about what might happen if parents find out, or how knowledge of
their stay at the center might affect their status at school.

From a labeling perspective (Becker, 1963; Schur, 1973), the
initial intake encounter alone may be emotionally disturbing, even
somewhat traumatic, and thus stigmatize or create a deviant
identity as a "troublemaker" for an otherwise low-risk young
person. Conversely, the experience may enhance some reputations

7 This specific deterrence focus was also coupled with a general deterrence
emphasis which assumed that potential truants would soon learn that skipping
school could result in apprehension. Law enforcement personnel directing the
initiative assumed that the threat posed by officers patrolling neighborhoods for
truants would also deter youth planning daytime crime. But this general deterrence
hypothesis is not easily tested without strong controls for a wide variety of
variables. Moreover, such general deterrence, and the purely incapacitative effect of
detaining youth for hours at the center could have been accomplished by any
number of alternative strategies. Simply picking up truants consistently and
returning them to school with a warning or citation, for example, might arguably
have accomplished the same result. It was therefore the specific deterrence focus
that justified the bulk of the resource allocation required to maintain this initiative.
and thus reinforce a tentative connection between truancy and more risky behaviors.

In both cases, processing might be expected to have a counter-deterrent effect (Lemert, 1971, 1981; Braithwaite & Mugford, 1994). By contrast, for chronic truants and those with prior delinquency or contact with the justice system, the experience may be either inconsequential or further reinforce deviant status. It may also provide an opportunity to network with others frequently truant and/or involved in delinquent behavior. Consistent with specific deterrence theory, another possibility is that at some point the chronic truant—perhaps confronted for the first time with genuinely negative consequences as a result of the truancy—might begin to weigh costs and benefits of skipping school and change his or her behavior.

Finally, it could be argued that officers simply make wise discretionary decisions on whom to process and whom to release, despite the absence of formal criteria. If so, those referred would be expected to differ on a number of characteristics that would presumably account for any observed variation in future truancy between processed and nonprocessed youths. Therefore, preexisting differences must be accounted for by controlling several variables, including prior attendance, prior delinquency, and relevant demographic characteristics.

**METHODOLOGY**

**Sample**

During the 1999–2000 school year, truancy center staff collected quantitative data on the population of all 12,330 youths stopped by police on suspicion of truancy. Of this group, 7,395 were processed (one sampling frame) and the remaining 4,935 (the second sampling frame) were released after questioning and completion of paperwork. In the summer of 2000, we randomly selected samples of 500 from each group and compared them to make sure that no students were included in both samples. Twenty-three were then removed from the samples. An additional 107 of the processed youths and 277 of the nonprocessed youths were removed for lack of data. Finally, an additional 20 were randomly excluded from the processed group to equalize time-at-risk for additional truancy or delinquency in the post-intervention period. This left a total of 350 in our processed sample and 200 in our nonprocessed sample.
Compared to a research design based on random assignment, the limitations of this sampling strategy are clear. We cannot unequivocally rule out the possibility that preexisting differences between processed youths and the comparison group might raise competing explanations of intervention impact. However, while we use statistical controls to account for a number of potential differences, several indicators suggest that the intervention group is not significantly different from the nonprocessed group.

First, Table 1 compares differences between the two samples on various demographic variables. As it indicates, in the sample of processed youths, 36% were female and 64% were male, and in the sample of nonprocessed youths, a somewhat smaller proportion (28%) was female and a somewhat larger proportion (72%) male. The percentages for both samples are also very comparable to the gender percentages for the entire population of 12,330 (34% female and 66% male). Blacks were the majority of both processed (53%) and nonprocessed youth (66%). The race/ethnicity profiles for both samples are also relatively close to the profile of all 12,330 (which was 1% Asian, 58% black, 7% Hispanic, and 33% white).

The distributions for age and grade are almost identical for both samples. The exact percentages for school level categories and age for all 12,330 youths were not available for comparison purposes. In summary, both samples are quite similar to the general population and to each other—at least on these demographic characteristics. In addition, it is interesting to note that the two sample groups show little difference on another risk
indicator—prior record of delinquency. Significant percentages of both processed (42%) and unprocessed (39%) youth had one or more prior contacts with the state Department of Juvenile Justice (DJJ). Finally, both groups had what appears to be a substantial and almost identical number of unexcused absences in the year prior to this study (i.e., 1998–99): on average, 17 for the processed group and 16 for the nonprocessed group.

Measures

Dependent Variables. Dependent variable measures for this analysis attempt to gauge the impact of the truancy intervention on two sets of intended outcomes—reduction in unexcused absences and subsequent delinquency. To assess this impact, three attendance variables were used: (1) a simple dichotomous measure based on whether the youth returned to school the day after processing at the Truancy Unit (processed youths) or being stopped by an officer (nonprocessed youths), (2) a comparison of the total number of unexcused absences 30 days before and after the encounter, (3) the total number of days missed for the remainder of the school year following intervention.

Delinquent involvement is measured in this study by referral to DJJ, the state agency responsible for most juvenile justice services. Because only a relative handful of both samples (8%) had more than one referral, or had additional referrals following processing (15–16%), a simple dichotomous measure indicating DJJ involvement or noninvolvement for the entire year after contact with officers was created to assess the impact on subsequent delinquency.

The greatest potential threat to the internal validity of our inferences about impact of the truancy intervention on long-term attendance and subsequent offending is a possible difference between the intervention and comparison groups in time-at-risk, or number of school days remaining in the post-intervention follow-up period. In fact, the initial distribution indicated that nonprocessed youths were somewhat more likely to have been apprehended early in the school year, at about (3%) higher rates for October and November. To remove this bias, we equalized risk times between the two samples by randomly eliminating 20 from the sample of 370 processed youth. As Table 2 indicates, the distribution of differences used in our analyses shows essential equivalency in post-intervention risk time for accumulating new unexcused absences or offenses.

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8 This was accomplished by selecting every fifth case from the group processed in these early months, leaving 350 in the intervention group.
Independent Variables. Throughout this analysis, comparisons are made between youths processed by the Truancy Unit and youths stopped by officers, but not processed (simply warned and/or perhaps escorted to school). This processed/nonprocessed distinction is the independent variable for the bivariate and multivariate analyses that compare the two groups on both truancy and delinquency outcomes. It does not imply that nonprocessed youth represent a pure control group, and as suggested in the description of the processing decision, the definition of "truant" for purposes of this intervention is often quite subjective. Indeed, because of the discretion involved in officer decision making, it is possible that many nonprocessed youth were indeed skipping school, and the high rate of unexcused absences for this group in the prior school year certainly makes this a logical possibility. Prior unexcused absences for the current year is therefore an important statistical control variable. It is also possible that a number of processed youth were really on their way to school and therefore falsely accused.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Truancy Encounter</th>
<th>Processed Youth</th>
<th>Nonprocessed Youth</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>September</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>October</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>November</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>December</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>January</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>February</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(N=350)</td>
<td>(N=200)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Control Variables. Primary control variables used to statistically equalize possible preexisting differences between processed and nonprocessed youth included a prior attendance variable based on number of unexcused absences in the current year before the encounter with an officer, prior involvement with DJJ, and four demographic variables (age, race, gender, and school level). Age is coded as an interval level variable for the multivariate analysis. Race and gender are coded as dummy variables (0=nonwhite, 1=white; 0=female, 1=male). School level was available only as an ordinal variable with three categories: elementary, middle, and high school, and is only used in the
bivariate analysis. Prior involvement with DJJ is a dummy variable (0=no involvement, 1= involvement).

Analysis

In the presentation of findings, we first provide bivariate comparisons between processed and nonprocessed groups at 30-day and school year intervals, showing the entire percentage distribution of processed and nonprocessed students, with unexcused absences broken down into 5-day intervals ranging from 0 to 31 days or more.

For the multivariate analysis, logistic regression was used to examine the impact of independent and control variables on attendance, using a dichotomous measure of improved attendance based on whether the student missed fewer days during the 30-day period after the intervention than were missed 30 days before. Following this, where long-term truancy or total days missed in the period following intervention is the dependent variable, ordinary least squares regression is used in multivariate analyses. Although we have fewer measures and measurement points for delinquency outcomes, we essentially repeated most of these procedures for analyses in which subsequent delinquent involvement is the dependent variable.

Table 3. Number of days absent for processed and nonprocessed youths post intervention

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Days Absent</th>
<th>Processed Youth %/n</th>
<th>Nonprocessed Youth %/n</th>
<th>Processed Youth %/n</th>
<th>Nonprocessed Youth %/n</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>9 (32)</td>
<td>26 (52)</td>
<td>5 (17)</td>
<td>21 (42)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1–5</td>
<td>43 (151)</td>
<td>38 (76)</td>
<td>19 (67)</td>
<td>21 (42)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6–10</td>
<td>21 (72)</td>
<td>18 (36)</td>
<td>17 (60)</td>
<td>19 (38)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11–15</td>
<td>10 (35)</td>
<td>8 (16)</td>
<td>9 (32)</td>
<td>13 (26)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16–20</td>
<td>11 (39)</td>
<td>5 (10)</td>
<td>9 (32)</td>
<td>8 (16)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21–30</td>
<td>6 (21)</td>
<td>5 (10)</td>
<td>13 (45)</td>
<td>10 (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31 or more</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>28 (98)</td>
<td>9 (18)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

FINDINGS: REDUCING TRUANCY

Bivariate Analyses

For those youths who were processed at the Truancy Unit, 71% returned to school the next day, but 29% did not. Among those who were stopped but not processed, 63% returned to school the
next day and 37% did not. While this suggests a minimal short-
term impact in favor of processing, Table 3 indicates that youth not
processed through the center were more likely to have perfect
attendance (26%) during the 30-day period after being stopped
than processed youths (9%). Moreover, the pattern of difference in
favor of nonprocessed youths continues over various intervals of
days absent after processing—though these differences are not
significant.

Regarding long term impact, Table 3 suggests (see right
columns) that for the remainder of the entire school year after
youth were either processed at the Truancy Unit or stopped by an
officer, only 5% of the processed youths had perfect attendance,
while 21% of nonprocessed youths had no absences after being
stopped and questioned by officers. Table 3 also indicates that the
pattern of difference in long-term attendance in favor of
nonprocessed youth generally continues in various categories,
though differences are minimal for some comparisons. Perhaps
most disturbing is the contrast between percentages of youth in
each group who missed 31 days or more, where we see rather
dramatic differences in favor of nonprocessed youth. The mean
number of days absent for the entire school year after intervention
for the processed youth sample was 21 days, with a standard
deviation of 19 days. The mean number of days absent for the
nonprocessed youth sample was only 11 days, with a standard
deviation of 13 days (Chi-square = 50.41, significance level = .000).

On the other hand, it is noteworthy that 43% of the processed
group missed fewer days after intervention than before, compared
with 28% of the nonprocessed youth (48% of both groups had more
absences in the 30 days after). Those differences in favor of the
processed group could be a result of nonprocessed youth being
more likely to have perfect attendance before and after the
intervention, and hence more likely to be classified as having no
before/after change in attendance (24% of the nonprocessed group
had no change, compared with 9% of the processed group). One
logical explanation for these somewhat conflicting results is that
nonprocessed youth were less inclined toward truancy to begin
with, and officers simply made wise discretionary decisions about
processing.

In summary, this bivariate analysis of the impact of Truancy
Unit intervention on attendance records indicates mixed results. A
larger percentage of processed youths returned to school the next
day and missed fewer total school days 30 days after processing
than did nonprocessed youths. But when analyzing the number of
days absent for the entire year after the youths were either
processed or stopped, the nonprocessed youths missed fewer days and were more likely to have perfect attendance. The apparently negative impact on long-term attendance could be due to the fact that the Truancy Center intervention actually aggravated truancy among processed youth. However, it could also be due to other factors, including the possibility that processed youths were, for a variety of reasons, more prone to long-term truancy prior to intervention than nonprocessed youths. We now explore these and other explanations in the multivariate analyses that control for prior absences and other possible confounding variables.

**Multivariate Analyses**

To account more systematically for the possible impact of preexisting differences between the two groups, it is necessary to take into account other variables likely to be associated with the dependent variable. To understand fully which variables have the most impact on reducing truancy, a logistic regression was completed using all of the independent and control variables in the model. The dependent variable for this analysis was a dichotomous measure of improved attendance (missed fewer days during the 30 days after intervention than during the 30 days before) coded as a 1, and no improvement (missed more days during the 30 days after intervention than during the 30 days before), coded as a 0. The independent variable is processed/nonprocessed (coded as 0=nonprocessed, 1=processed), and control variables include prior involvement in the juvenile justice system (0=no involvement, 1= involvement), prior attendance (total number of days missed before the intervention), age (actual age), race (0=nonwhite, 1=white) and gender (0=female, 1=male). These results are summarized in Table 4.

The Chi-square was statistically significant for this model, and 65% of the outcomes were correctly predicted. The unstandardized beta for the processed/nonprocessed variable (1.18) indicates that the youths who were processed were more likely to have improved attendance at the 30-day interval (p<.03) when the impact of the other variables was held constant. The only other statistically significant variable was gender: males were more likely to have improved attendance during the 30-day follow-up.

To examine the impact of processing on long-term truancy, another multivariate analysis was completed using ordinary least squares regression. The total number of days absent (for the entire year) after being either processed at the truancy unit or stopped by an officer was used as the dependent variable. For this analysis, we again examine the impact of processing, involvement in the
juvenile justice system, prior attendance, age, race, and gender. The regression results are shown in Table 5.

Table 4. Logistic Regression Results with 30-day Improved Attendance as the Dependent Variable

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Independent Variables</th>
<th>Unstandardized Beta</th>
<th>Standard Error</th>
<th>Significance</th>
<th>Log Odds Ratio</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Processed/nonprocessed</td>
<td>1.18</td>
<td>.55</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Juvenile Justice Involvement</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>.53</td>
<td>.84</td>
<td>.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prior Attendance</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.25</td>
<td>.98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>.15</td>
<td>.91</td>
<td>.98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race</td>
<td>-.93</td>
<td>.51</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>2.55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>1.27</td>
<td>.60</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.28</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Model Chi-square: 13.17 Significance: .04
Percent of Outcomes Correctly Predicted: 65.66%
-2 Log Likelihood: 116.60 Goodness of Fit: 95.41
(N=550)

Table 5. Regression Results with Total Number of Post-intervention Days Absent as the Dependent Variable

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Independent Variables</th>
<th>Standardized Beta</th>
<th>T-Test</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Processed/Nonprocessed</td>
<td>.24</td>
<td>5.70*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Juvenile Justice Involvement</td>
<td>.14</td>
<td>3.17*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prior Attendance</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>2.90*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>-.008</td>
<td>-.18</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

R² = .12    F-test = 10.92*  
* = Statistically significant at .05 level  
(N=550)

First, on the whole, the regression results show that all these variables combined explain 12% of the variation in the total number of days absent for the entire year after the intervention (as noted by the R²). Most important, however, the standardized beta of .24 for the processed/nonprocessed variable indicates that the processed youths missed significantly more days than the nonprocessed youths for the entire remainder of the school year after being processed. In addition, the standardized beta coefficient for prior involvement in the juvenile justice system shows that youths who had delinquency records were more likely to miss more days throughout the year after they were either processed or
stopped by officers. Finally, the impact of prior attendance is also relatively strong and statistically significant: the greater the number of days absent prior to the intervention, the greater the number of days absent after the intervention. The impact of the demographic variables—age, race, and gender—was not statistically significant.

**REDUCING ARREST AND REARREST**

As noted, delinquency was reflected in large percentages of both processed (42%) and nonprocessed (39%) samples, as indicated by Department of Juvenile Justice records before processing at the truancy center. One basic test of the deterrent effect of processing would therefore be to examine the extent to which initially delinquent processed youth (N=147) decreased their delinquency relative to the delinquent youth who were not processed (N=78). In fact, 27% of the processed delinquent youth had no delinquency afterward, and 23% of the nonprocessed youths had no such involvement, indicating general equality in the post-processing delinquency of the two groups. Similarly, a simple test of the presence of a criminogenic or counterdeterrent effect would be a finding that nondelinquents in the processed group were more likely to become delinquent after processing. There was, in fact, virtually no difference in the percentage of nondelinquents who became delinquent after processing: 7% of the nondelinquents in the processed group and 8% in the comparison group became delinquent during the follow-up, and equal percentages of both groups who were delinquent before continued to be so after the truancy encounter.

To more rigorously examine the impact of processing and other variables on subsequent delinquency, each of the independent and control variables were included in a logistic regression analysis using post-intervention delinquent involvement as the dependent variable. These results are shown in Table 6.

The Chi-square was statistically significant for this model, and 86% of the outcomes were correctly predicted. The unstandardized beta for the processed/nonprocessed variable (-.43) is not significant, indicating that processed youths were neither more or less likely to be involved in the juvenile justice system during the rest of the school year when other variables (including prior delinquency) were controlled. As might be expected, prior juvenile justice involvement was the best predictor of subsequent delinquency (B=3.48). The unstandardized beta for age (-.33) indicates that older youths were less likely to be involved in the juvenile justice system after the intervention than younger—
relationship that may be an artifact of older youth, by virtue of turning 18, simply having less time available as juveniles to be referred to DJJ for subsequent offenses (or perhaps being prosecuted as adults). No other independent variables were statistically significant in this equation.

Table 6. Logistic Regression Results with Involvement in the Juvenile Justice System as the Dependant Variable

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Independent Variables</th>
<th>Unstandardized Beta</th>
<th>Standard Error</th>
<th>Significance</th>
<th>Log Odds Ratio</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Processed/Nonprocessed</td>
<td>-.43</td>
<td>.30</td>
<td>.14</td>
<td>.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prior DJJ Involvement</td>
<td>3.48</td>
<td>.44</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>32.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prior Attendance</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.34</td>
<td>1.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>-.33</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race</td>
<td>.26</td>
<td>.29</td>
<td>.37</td>
<td>1.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>-.06</td>
<td>.30</td>
<td>.84</td>
<td>.94</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Model Chi-square: 135.23 Significance: .00
Percent of Outcomes Correctly Predicted: 86.32%
-2 Log Likelihood: 116.60 Goodness of Fit: 95.41
(N=550)

Consistent with the bivariate results, the multivariate analyses of involvement in the juvenile justice system indicate that processing had little impact on subsequent delinquency. In addition, only prior delinquent involvement and age had any significant impact on post-intervention involvement in the juvenile justice system. Given the crime control assumptions of a truancy/crime relationship that informed the Southeastern County initiative, the clear lack of a relationship between prior attendance and subsequent delinquent involvement is also notable.

**DISCUSSION OF QUANTITATIVE FINDINGS**

With regard to truancy impact, overall, our analyses show mixed results. When examining bivariate relationships and multivariate logistic regression results using improvement in school attendance during the 30 days after the intervention as the dependent variable, it appears that being processed by the truancy unit decreased subsequent truancy. However, the analysis using attendance for the entire year after the intervention as the dependent variable indicates that being processed actually appears to have increased attendance in the longer term.

Processing had no impact on delinquency. The lack of a positive effect is perhaps not unexpected, given the rather unclear theoretical relationship between the truancy
intervention and motivation for participation in youth crime. However, proponents of the truancy center and funding agencies nonetheless had argued that such processing might provide pre-delinquent youth or those already involved with a "wake-up" call concerning the consequences of law violation and thus reduce delinquency. On the other hand, neither did processing increase delinquency, despite a number of logical reasons why this might have been a reasonable expectation.

A limitation of these analyses is that both results, while initially convincing, may be a function of unmeasured preexisting differences between the two groups. Despite processed and nonprocessed groups being very similar in terms of demographics, prior attendance, and delinquent involvement, other possible differences can only be unequivocally controlled through random assignment procedures in an experimental design. Nonetheless, with regard to truancy outcomes, even when controlling for the impact of a number of variables, processing continues to have the strongest impact—an effect that is clearly negative in the long term. Although there are multiple interpretations of these findings, at best, the results suggest that positive effects on attendance achieved through deterrence and/or other unknown intervention effects are short lived, and imply that in the long run the truancy intervention may have done more harm than good.

As suggested in our discussion of intervention logic and preliminary expectations, there are two possible theoretical explanations for these findings. These are also applicable to the lack of demonstrated impact on delinquency. First, considering the specific deterrence hypothesis, young people experimenting with truancy might in a sense be "shocked" into increased school attendance by the experience of center processing (see Finkenauer & Gavin, 1999). But such shock, were it to occur, would presumably be less salient the second or third time around, a presumption that is in part confirmed by the subsequent increase in truancy, as well as by the significant relationship between the frequency of prior and postprocessing truancy. Though there is no direct evidence that processed youth experienced any such shock or fear of future consequences if apprehended, a large body of research in criminal justice suggests that calculating the precise level of punishment severity required in the implementation of deterrence-based strategies is extremely difficult, and that even significant effects of threats and punishment are likely to be short lived (Sherman & Berk, 1984; Braithwaite, 2002). Moreover, an initial decrease in offending is
typically followed by a return to previous patterns of behavior when the threat is not followed through. It may be that after two or more punitive responses, the offender becomes so accustomed to the threatened “punishment” that it no longer generates fear. Regarding delinquency outcomes, the finding that prior delinquency is the primary predictor of subsequent delinquency is also consistent with this result.

Additionally, according to some research, punishment may also produce a counterdeterrent effect when those individuals whose behavior is the target of change exhibit a “defiance reaction” (Sherman, 1993). Other counterdeterrent effects more consistent with labeling (Schur, 1973; Becker 1963) or peer learning theories (Elliot & Menard, 1996) might also explain the increase in truancy among processed youth. Regarding labeling theory, for example, it might be that a young person experiencing some loss of social standing or status degradation might increase involvement in truancy. Specifically, the experience of being processed internalizes a dominant identity as a troublemaker and thereby normalizes truancy, or encourages continuing the behavior as a form of secondary deviance (Lemert, 1971; Braithwaite & Mugford, 1994). From the peer learning perspective, it might similarly be argued that exposure to youth more involved in truancy and other forms of deviance as a result of processing could increase the likelihood of future truancy. Regarding impact on delinquency, either a defiance or labeling effect might have been anticipated. To the contrary, it is fortunate that processed youth did not seem to be very much affected. In other words, though official processing may not have stopped truancy, neither did it appear to increase existing delinquency.

Without data on how students perceived the intervention, it cannot be argued that this truancy intervention is a perfect test of the deterrence hypothesis. Nevertheless, we suggest that intervention outcomes do provide a reasonable test of deterrence as a practical policy approach to truancy. The data reported shed doubt on the capacity of a strict discipline focus to deter truant youth from future truancy or delinquency, as well as the capacity of a law enforcement-led initiative to embrace a broad, multidimensional strategy.

How deterrence logic is applied in practice, and the extent to which it is viewed as part of a general multidimensional approach to crime control, as opposed to a singular or dominating strategy, largely depends on who assumes the leadership role and therefore defines the agenda. The issues of leadership and policy vision must be considered as part of the larger debate about role definitions and boundary changes among criminal justice agencies.
POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The primary policy significance of these findings is their implication for the dubious value of deterrence-focused strategies operationalized through a centralized truancy intervention approach. Additionally, as a case study, this initiative can be generalized to two broader policy and theoretical concerns: (1) the erosion of jurisdictional boundaries between independent criminal justice agencies; and (2) the erosion of boundaries between agents of formal and informal social control. To examine these issues, we briefly summarize qualitative findings based on interviews and observations involving police officers, center staff, youth, and families (Evaluator's Report, 2000).

Boundary Change and Agenda Control

In the past two decades, criminal justice agencies have seen the lines blurred between their traditional formal authority and that of other justice-related organizations and institutions (Friel, 2000). For example, the late 1980s witnessed a new movement redefining the police role to include community partnerships and problem solving tasks (Goldstein, 1990). Such boundary and role change is one indication that rigidity in criminal justice organizations may be breaking down to allow for more responsive interventions that address complex community needs, target individualized problem-solving, enhance collaborative efforts, and promote resource sharing (Coles & Kelling, 2001; Clear & Karp, 1999; Freil, 2000). Yet such role adaptation may also raise fears about an overly comprehensive and ambitious police role, as well as concerns about the separation of powers between criminal justice decision makers (see Friel, 2000). In addition, it has been argued that some of the recent emphasis on expanding the role of criminal justice professionals such as police may be a means of disguising a new, more aggressive “zero-tolerance” law enforcement focus on public disorder and the socially offensive behavior of disreputable populations (Harcourt, 2002).

One of the most important yet least frequently discussed concerns is the extent to which such boundary erosion and role innovation allow criminal justice agencies to assume broader mandates that may significantly change either the nature of their intervention or the problem definition itself. When police assume a greater role in prevention or diversion programs for juveniles, they may, on the one hand, be applauded for being responsive to community needs and flexible in moving beyond the traditional constraints of law enforcement. On the other hand, however, the
manner in which the problem is defined from this perspective may also be perceived as aggrandizing power, usurping authority, and overextending official boundaries. In the truancy intervention we assessed here, for example, narrow parameters were placed on intervention options consistent with current law enforcement protocols, and without consideration of the potential that even the most well-intentioned initiatives have for producing harmful effects.

**Role Adaptation and Organizational Incentives**

Despite the multiagency partnership to develop an intervention with a broader focus than law enforcement and the fact that the social services component provided one important rationale for funding, sheriff's office staff took the primary leadership in bringing the coalition together, managing the internal operation of the center, and intercepting and processing truants. As the initiative progressed, it appeared to move even further away from a multidimensional model and more towards a crime control model—a focus clearly illustrated in comparing expenditures for time devoted by sheriffs' deputies with the funds expended on subsequent services and assessment. Moreover, both operational practices and fiscal evidence indicate that responsibility for the overall strategy ultimately shifted further away from school and community ownership and toward criminal justice.

Based on more positive assumptions in the boundary change literature (Freil, 2000; Sparrow, Moore, & Kennedy, 1990; Coles & Kelling, 2001), it might be expected that sheriffs' deputies assigned to the Truancy Unit would not only provide traditional law enforcement services, but also to some degree modify their traditional role. As the community policing experience has in some cases illustrated, such modification is indeed possible, especially in terms of the police role in response to youth crime (Braithwaite, 2002; Bazemore & Senjo, 1997). Movement toward an interdisciplinary problem-solving approach, that is, expanding beyond traditional roles, could theoretically entail the police helping with, supporting, and lending credibility to the service component of the initiative. It could also involve the police supporting the school's broader educational and socialization mandate rather than simply establishing their own crime control agenda (Trulson et al., 2001). There were many opportunities for this, for example, during the time police spent with truant youth, school personnel, and parents—far more time than the social service workers assigned to counseling and assessment tasks.
spent. Officers had the opportunity to get to know some of the truants personally and perhaps offer informal counseling of the type noted in some studies of youth encounters with community policing officers (Bazemore & Senjo, 1997). In reality, the absence of any positive interaction, anything beyond “just the facts” questioning and warnings to sit still and be quiet during transportation to the center, suggested that such intervention was not encouraged and may actually have been discouraged.

Officers also had ample opportunity to support the service mission. They might even have been more persuasive than counselors and social workers in convincing youth to attend remedial education and persuading parents of how important their role was in monitoring subsequent attendance and ensuring follow-through with referrals. As the initiative progressed, however, case managers almost uniformly reported difficulties in getting parents and young people to follow up with service referrals—or even to return their calls—and often reported weak, if any, cooperation from school authorities. For the most part, officers did not seem to take much interest in understanding or supporting the services or remedial education component of the initiative, and virtually none of the law enforcement staffing was allocated to shore up the integrity or quality of these services.

Specifically, officers appeared to assume little responsibility for ensuring notification of parents, providing support for follow-through on service referrals, or making follow-up checks to ensure compliance with recommended interventions. Assuming such responsibility would have been unexpected, given that no organizational incentives to encourage it had been established, and to our knowledge no such incentives were forthcoming. In fact, performance incentives appeared to emphasize the number of youth processed. Officers therefore seemed to be motivated primarily by the need to take as little time as possible in informal interaction with youth, families, and school personnel, to make as many truancy arrests as possible, and to increase the speed at which youth could be transported to the center. Thus most officers we observed maintained their customary highly directive law enforcement posture.

This numbers-focused outlook was best illustrated by what became a tradition on the first Wednesday of the month known as “sweep day.” In contrast to routine patrols, sweep day involved large scale pickups in which sheriff’s deputies, local police forces in the county, and school resource officers presented a “show of force.” The result: a four- and sometimes five-fold increase in the number of youth intercepted and processed that day. Symbolically, sweep
day indicates in more extreme form the ongoing operation of a quota system that appeared to give ultimate priority to getting young people off the streets based on an incapacitation logic. Processing was also intended to gather basic information quickly, with monitoring in the center focused primarily on maintaining order, contact with educators limited to what was legally necessary, and contact with administrators similarly emphasizing efficient delivery back to the school with appropriate signed paperwork to officially discharge the student into school custody. In sum, though the expectations of social service and school professionals were to some degree adjusted to fit the crime control agenda, little if any adaptation in the law enforcement role was apparent. Combined with this reluctance to adapt or “stretch” professional roles, the sheriff’s office leadership became a major factor in determining the primary focus of intervention.

The Relationship Between Formal and Informal Social Control

Though criminal justice boundary change issues between agencies will remain an important topic for the future, we suggest that concerns with the extent to which law enforcement officers, judges, or social service professionals push the limits of their professional roles may be less important than another kind of boundary issue. That is, when criminal justice agencies expand their focus to problems once addressed informally, or through other institutions, these problems become defined in a way that requires criminal justice tools. Rather than an issue of breakdown in socialization and informal social control, such problems are almost necessarily viewed as a gap in formal controls. For example, “zero tolerance” policies and rhetoric (Trulson et al., 2001; Reistenberg, 2001) have in the past decade begun to challenge and arguably weaken the informal authority and decision making discretion of educational professionals over student behavior. As this has occurred, the informal and quasi-formal controls of the school have been increasingly supplanted by the formal controls of police and juvenile justice.

A primary concern in this regard is that the dominance of criminal justice system leadership may encourage a “no fault” response (Jacobs, 1990) from schools and other institutions of informal social control that essentially relinquishes policy authority over the problem. In doing so, education professionals tacitly accept and further legitimize the crime suppression rationale in exchange for being absolved of responsibility for problem students. This raises concerns about the criminalization of behaviors once viewed as simply troublesome, or as simple
violations of institutional rules. More significant, possible consequences may include ever greater expansion of criminal justice mandates because, as Clear and Karp (1999) suggest:

When agents of the state become the key problem solvers, they might be filling a void in community; but just as in interpersonal relationships, so in community functioning, once a function is being performed by one party it becomes unnecessary for another to take it on ... parents expect police or schools to control their children; neighbors expect police to prevent late night noise from people on their street; and citizens expect the courts to resolve disputes... informal control systems may atrophy like dormant muscles, and citizens may come to see the formal system as existing to mediate all conflicts (p. 38).

As a case study in the erosion of boundaries between formal and informal social control (Black, 1976), the Southeastern County truancy initiative provides a clear example of the expansion of public controls exercised by criminal justice systems in place of the informal private controls of families and extended families, and the parochial controls of neighbors and community institutions (Hunter, 1985). In light of the minimal outcome benefits reflected in these results, the merits of such “mission creep” (Corbett, 1998, p. 37) should become the subject of considerable debate.

REFERENCES


