

Truancy Problems and Solutions in Ventura County

Background

The State of California Education Code Section 48260 states that students are classified as truant if they are absent from school without a valid excuse three full days in one school year, tardy or absent for more than any 30-minute period during the school day without a valid excuse on three occasions in one school year, or any combination thereof. These youth are considered status offenders under Section (§) 601 of the Welfare and Institutions Code (WIC).

Truancy is recognized as one of the most direct indicators of delinquency. Truant students are more likely to join gangs, use drugs and alcohol and engage in violent behavior. Ninety-five percent of the youngsters who are serious juvenile offenders begin their careers as truants.

Truancy contributes to an increased incidence of daytime crimes, especially vandalism and burglaries. Unsupervised students also face a high risk of victimization and involvement in youth violence.

According to the 1996 Juvenile Crime Statistics by the United States Department of Justice, 78% of prison inmates have truancy as their first arrest, 67% of truants test positive for drugs when they are detained, 57% of violent crimes committed by juveniles occur when the student should have been in school, and 82% of prisoners are high school drop outs.

Status offenders are the gateway to delinquency. (See *"Lack of Facilities and Programs for Juvenile (§) 601 Offenders in Ventura County"* in the 2001/2002 Ventura County Grand Jury Final Report.) While not every status offender becomes a delinquent, almost every delinquent has a history of status offenses or court dependency in their background.

Methodology

The Grand Jury visited the Ventura County Superintendent of Schools, attended several School Attendance Review Board (SARB) meetings, visited individual schools, police agencies, Juvenile Presiding Judge, the Agency Director of Human Services and Probation Agency Director. We also had the District Attorney's office and Oxnard's Student Truancy Offender Program (STOP) personnel visit our Grand Jury chambers. Personnel from the Los Angeles County Sheriff Vital Intervention and Directional Alternatives (VIDA) program presented a power-point presentation to the Grand Jury, and members of the Grand Jury visited VIDA's "boot camp" site in the Malibu area.

All public school districts in the county responded to the letters we sent with specific questions about truancy.

Findings

- F-1. A review of the public school districts in Ventura County shows an average attendance rate of approximately 95%, and the school districts have programs to improve these figures.
- F-2. Charles Weis, Ventura County Superintendent of Schools, estimates that truancy costs Ventura County public schools between \$25 million and \$40 million a year in lost revenue because annual state education allocations are based on a district's average daily attendance.
- F-3. SARBs became operative in the state in 1975. It was the intent of the legislature that intensive guidance and coordinated community service be provided to meet the special needs of pupils with school attendance and/or behavior problems. The school district SARB consists of representatives from each school; police agencies, the Probation Agency, the Health Services Agency, the Parks and Recreation Department, Social Services and organizations in the community at large, such as Interface. The parent(s) and truant student are also required to attend. Failure to comply with the directives of SARB can result in additional steps being taken.
- F-4. STOP is a truancy program in the Oxnard area. This program is in conjunction with the U.S. Department of Justice "Weed and Seed" Program, the District Attorney's Office, Juvenile Probation, Oxnard School Districts and local non-profit organizations. The police have the power to go to homes of students with at least four unexcused absences and cite them for truancy. In the first year of operation, Oxnard police issued 2,747 citations for truancy compared to 434 the previous school year. In the STOP program the parents are called, informed of the truancy and are required to pick up their child at the STOP Center and return him/her to school. STOP utilizes firm sanctions on truants. It holds parents accountable and has ongoing prevention programs in schools. STOP addresses underlying issues and provides counseling services and referrals.
- F-5. All law enforcement agencies have assigned officers to high schools, and some officers are also responsible to cover middle and elementary schools. Some police agencies also have Community Oriented Policy and Problem Solving (COPPS) and Sheriff's Truancy Education Program (STEP). The city of Thousand Oaks had an excellent program in which every truant was cited and required to appear in court, but the program proved to be too costly and was discontinued.
- F-6. The Ventura County Probation Agency Youth Services Unit is responsible for handling citations issued to minors for truancy throughout the County. The Probation Agency also handles minors cited for daytime curfew in Thousand Oaks and Fillmore. The agency also requires truants and their parents to attend a class on Teen Responsibilities (referred to by the Probation Agency as "601 Class"). The program covers truancy, curfew and runaway laws, responsibilities and consequences, and requires the minor to perform eight hours of community service or contribute \$25 to a charity of their choice.

- F-7 Many truant children have serious mental health problems that are not being addressed by their parents or the schools.
- F-8. The County does not have the “teeth” to deal with habitual truants (those in contempt of § 601 court orders). For the court to order incarceration, the juvenile must have been given sufficient notice to comply with the order and have understood its provisions, the violation of the court order must be egregious and less restrictive alternatives must have been considered and found to be ineffective. There also is a statutory provision barring intermingling with delinquent minors or criminal adults.
- F-9 Los Angeles County Sheriff’s program, VIDA, is for at-risk youth. This is a 16-week all-day program on Saturdays staffed by Sheriff personnel and volunteers. It also includes Thursday evening counseling and learning sessions for the youth, counseling for parents, in-school checking and drug testing of all youth attending.
- F-10. Chronic truancy has been determined to be a symptom of deeper problems within the family whether it is the juvenile who is skipping class and displaying anger or the parents who just cannot get life together enough to send their child to school.
- F-11. Truancy Habits Reduced Increases Vital Education (THRIVE) augments the STOP program and the Truancy Referral and Prosecution Program (TRPP). Existing social and preventative services are provided to the truant children and their family members through the SARB process and at the STOP site in Oxnard. Follow-up investigation and monitoring of habitual truants is conducted to ensure that attendance improves or that additional resources, including formal court action, are delivered. The District Attorney works with local police, probation officers, school officials, the Ventura County SARB, Interface, Palmer Drug Abuse Program, City Impact and those agencies which provide services to CalWORKs (the financial aid agency).
- F-12. The Probation Agency and District Attorney’s office are working with SARBs and local police by instituting the TRPP, a get-tough approach to getting youth in school. This program was started in March 2000 and won a state-wide award for its effectiveness and creativity. Students and parents have been fined or sentenced to community service and some parents have been sent to parenting classes and ordered to volunteer at their child’s school.
- F-13. CalWORKs can cut parents’ benefits if their children do not regularly attend school.
- F-14. Poor attendance often develops in elementary schools and middle schools.
- F-15. Multi-agency cooperation is very important, and the Juvenile Justice Coordinating Council (JJCC) has responsibility for setting juvenile policy and standards throughout Ventura County. The Presiding Juvenile Court Judge and the Probation Agency Director are co-chairs of this committee. The JJCC also includes the District Attorney, the Sheriff, the Public Defender, the Human Services Agency Director, the Director of Behavioral Health Department, a representative of City Impact, Ventura County Chief Execu-

tive Officer, a representative of the Coalition to End Domestic and Sexual Violence, two members of the Board of Supervisors, Chief of the Oxnard Police Department, a member of the Public Health Services, an ACTION member, citizen representative of the Juvenile Justice/Delinquency Prevention Commission and the Ventura County Superintendent of Schools.

Conclusions

- C-1. It is necessary to continue the SARB programs in individual school districts and countywide. STOP, THRIVE and TRRP are also effective programs which should be continued. (F-3, F-4 and F-11)
- C-2. It is necessary to ensure that students face firm sanctions for truancy. It is imperative that the County incarcerate status § 601 offenders who are in contempt of court when these youth can be separated from § 602s in the new Juvenile Justice Center in 2003. (F-8)
- C-3. There must be an accessible mental health system that will provide services to youth who have chronic mental health issues and control the misuse of narcotics and alcohol. Detoxification and treatment programs must be available for youth with the need. (F-7)
- C-4. Anger management, education and training should be made more widely available with the possibility of negotiating with elementary, middle and high schools to add these programs to their course content. (F-7)
- C-5. Parenting/counseling sessions should be provided for parents unable to control the actions of their children due to lack of training, education or concern, thereby creating meaningful incentives for parental responsibility. (F-10)
- C-6. Strict attendance standards and programs must be enforced in grade schools and middle schools so high school students will obtain the basic education necessary to keep up and so that youth will learn responsibility at an early age. (F-14)
- C-7. VIDA is an excellent program and should be started in Ventura County to reach at-risk youth before they become § 602s. (F-9)
- C-8. JJCC has the responsibility for setting juvenile policy and standards throughout Ventura County. (F-15)
- C-9. Individual school districts have different methods of determining truancy. This makes it difficult to compare the individual district's rates and costs of truancy. (F-1)

Recommendations

- R-1. The County must incarcerate § 601 contemnors in our Juvenile Justice Center when it opens in 2003 and there is room to separate the § 601s from the § 602s. (C-2)
- R-2. A protocol attendance measurement for all County school districts should be utilized by the Ventura County Superintendent of Schools to assure there is an accurate way to standardize truancy rates and costs. (C-9)

- R-3. Parenting and counseling classes should be provided for parents of truant children and an accessible mental health system should be created to provide services to truant youth. (C-4, C-5)
- R-4. A “boot camp” type program like VIDA needs to be established countywide to reach at risk youth before incarceration becomes necessary. (C-7)
- R-5. The STOP Program, TRPP, THRIVE and SARBs should be supported and additional personnel, energy and resources should be devoted to the programs. (C-1)
- R-6. Because interagency cooperation is necessary to combat truancy, the JJCC should be continued, and additional personnel, energy and resources would be helpful. (C-8)
- R-7. Stringent standards of excellent attendance should be stressed and measured in elementary and middle schools. (C-6)

Commendation

All agencies mentioned in this report are to be commended for their concern about truancy and for the many excellent programs they offer.

Responses

Ventura County Superintendent of Schools (R-2, R-5, R-7)

Ventura County Probation Agency (R-1, R-3, R-4, R-5)

Ventura County Behavioral Health Department (R-3)

Ventura County Sheriff (R-4)

Police Departments of: (R-4)

Oxnard

Port Hueneme

Santa Paula

Simi Valley

Ventura

Ventura County Juvenile Justice Coordinating Council (R-6)

Ventura County Board of Supervisors (R-4)