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## Youths' Perspectives on the Reasons Underlying School Truancy and Opportunities to Improve School Attendance

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## Youths' Perspectives on the Reasons Underlying School Truancy and Opportunities to Improve School Attendance

### Abstract

School truancy is common in the United States; however, youths' perspectives on the underlying reasons for and the best ways to curtail this phenomenon are lacking. This project sought to better understand what factors contribute to youths' decisions to skip classes or ditch full days of school over time and to solicit youths' recommendations on how to reduce truancy and improve system functioning. We used a community partnered qualitative descriptive approach to conduct in-depth interviews with 39 youths with a history of truancy from South and East Los Angeles. Youths' experiences and recommendations illustrate the multiple factors that influence school truancy and suggest potential leverage points for reducing truancy, including modifications to the school environment to increase student engagement; a more effective school response to address truancy; and further involvement and engagement of parents. Researchers, policy makers, and school practitioners can use results to help inform efforts to address school truancy.

### Keywords

Truancy, Chronic Absenteeism, Qualitative, Community-Partnered Research

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*School truancy is common in the United States; however, youths' perspectives on the underlying reasons for and the best ways to curtail this phenomenon are lacking. This project sought to better understand what factors contribute to youths' decisions to skip classes or ditch full days of school over time and to solicit youths' recommendations on how to reduce truancy and improve system functioning. We used a community partnered qualitative descriptive approach to conduct in-depth interviews with 39 youths with a history of truancy from South and East Los Angeles. Youths' experiences and recommendations illustrate the multiple factors that influence school truancy and suggest potential leverage points for reducing truancy, including modifications to the school environment to increase student engagement; a more effective school response to address truancy; and further involvement and engagement of parents. Researchers, policy makers, and school practitioners can use results to help inform efforts to address school truancy. Keywords: Truancy, Chronic Absenteeism, Qualitative, Community-Partnered Research*

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School truancy, defined as any intentional unauthorized or illegal absence from school, is a significant problem in the United States. Truancy contributes to the related problem of chronic absenteeism, which refers to students missing 10% or more of a given school year, including authorized and unauthorized absences (NCCP, 2008). A recent study estimated that nationally, 11% of adolescents between the age of 12 and 17 skipped class in the past 30 days (Vaughn et al., 2013). High absenteeism has garnered increased attention from a variety of stakeholders, including the California Attorney General who has defined reducing truancy, and thereby chronic absenteeism, as a priority (Harris, 2013).

Previous research suggests that truancy is a complex phenomenon. Kearney's (2008a) interdisciplinary model of school absenteeism – based on a synthesis of research studies – describes six proximal and distal factors related to truancy and chronic absenteeism, including characteristics and circumstances related to the child, parents, family, peers, school, and community. Other studies have also identified associations between truancy and home environments, social relationships, school variables (e.g., student-to-teacher ratio, educational style, safety and disciplinary procedures) and individual characteristics such as students' level of engagement with learning (Freudenber & Reglis, 2007; Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009).

Previous studies examining the determinants of school truancy have primarily utilized quantitative methods (Kearney, 2008b) and have therefore lacked an explicit focus on understanding youths' perspectives and lived experiences, for example, the combinations of factors that contribute to youths' decisions to skip class, youths' emotional reactions to truancy

interventions, or how truancy patterns changed over time. What qualitative work has been conducted to date provides important perspectives on the central role of relationships with teachers, school climate, peer relationships, and school/community partnerships in promoting school attendance (Attwood & Croll; 2006; Bridgeland, Dilulio, & Morrison, 2006; MacDonald & Marsh, 2004; Rodriguez & Conchas 2009; Ventura & Miller, 2005). Unfortunately, the majority of this work has been conducted in the context of a specific program evaluation or outside of the United States. Qualitative perspectives from underserved youth of color in the United States, who are at disproportionate risk of not graduating from high school, are particularly limited.

A better understanding of youths' perspectives could help contribute to the development of effective truancy-reduction strategies. As shown in a recent systematic review, despite the decades of work to better understand the causes of school truancy, relatively little is known about how to effectively reduce it (Maynard et al., 2013). Unfortunately, many truancy-reduction interventions have been designed without explicit input or feedback from the target population and few qualitative studies of truancy or related behaviors (e.g., drop out) have combined efforts to understand youths' experiences and elicit opportunities for system improvement (Bridgeland, Dilulio, & Morrison, 2006). A more in-depth understanding of youths' perspectives on system functioning and target areas for intervention could inform program and policy implementation.

To help address these gaps in the literature, this project sought to explore the experiences and perspectives of youths with a history of school truancy in Los Angeles County (LAC). This work was guided by three research questions:

- 1) what factors contribute to youths' decisions to skip classes or ditch full days of school over time?
- 2) how do youths who skip or ditch perceive the school's and other's (e.g., family, legal system) response to truancy? and,
- 3) what recommendations do youths have for reducing truancy?

Since we strove to use youths' experiences and input to inform intervention strategy development, we focused our inquiry on what youths perceived as modifiable contributors and intervention points to address truancy.

## **Methods**

We used a qualitative descriptive (QD) approach, which aims to provide a rich description of an experience or an event, because it allowed us to balance our aims of obtaining an understanding of youths' perspectives on truancy and identifying practical implications for system reform (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Neergaard et al., 2009). In order to ensure that our project was rooted in community experience, we worked in close collaboration with the Youth Justice Coalition (YJC) – a community-based organization in South Los Angeles. We chose three youths currently employed as YJC advocates to serve as project research assistants. The research assistants were between the ages of 19 and 23 and all had previous personal experience with school truancy. Research assistants participated in a daylong training in basic research and interviewing skills. As partners on the study team, they provided input on the study scope, helped define research questions and methods, recruited study participants, conducted qualitative interviews, and assisted with the interpretation of results.

## **Participants and Recruitment**

To maximize the scope of the information obtained, we used purposive sampling techniques, aligned with the QD approach (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Neergaard et al., 2009), to recruit youths who had experience skipping or ditching school. In order to ensure youths could provide in-depth information to address the research questions, we included participants in the study if they: (a) were a current middle or high school student in LAC or had stopped attending a LAC middle or high school in the past year, (b) reported skipping class or ditching school at least once per month currently or in the past year, (c) reported experience with at least one school-, community- or law enforcement-based truancy reduction approach, and (d) spoke English or Spanish.

We recruited participants two ways. First, the trained youth research assistants distributed a one-page screening instrument to potential participants in their existing school and community networks, which requested potential participants’ contact information (phone or email). Research assistants gave completed screening forms to the study coordinator, who assessed eligibility and (if the youth was eligible) scheduled an in-person interview. Second, in order to increase variation in the types of youths included in the study, we partnered with five community-based organizations in South and East Los Angeles to recruit and interview study participants. During an agreed upon time, the research team went to the community-based partners’ space, gave a brief presentation on the research goals, and distributed screening forms to interested youths or youths identified by the organization as being potentially eligible. We immediately reviewed screening forms, asked eligible youths to participate in an interview, and (if they agreed and provided written informed assent) conducted an interview at that time. We completed all recruitment and interviewing over a period of three months.

**Data Collection**

One of the youth research assistants, with support from one (of two) members of the study team, led the in-person in-depth interviews. The interview team used a 16-question opened-ended interview guide, developed based on the study research questions, that asked participants to describe their “story,” beginning with when they first started skipping or ditching and ending at the present day (Table 1).

**Table 1.** Questions Used During In-Depth Interviews with Youths, Los Angeles County, 2014

Category	Questions
Truancy patterns, reasons, and response	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• When was the first time you cut or skipped class?*</li> <li>• What caused you to begin cutting or skipping class at first?</li> <li>• What happened as a result of you cutting or skipping class at first?</li> <li>• What was the next grade in which you continued to cut or skip class?</li> <li>• What caused you to continue to cut or skip class?</li> <li>• What happened as a result of you cutting or skipping class?</li> <li>• When was the first time that you were confronted about your absences?</li> </ul>
Experiences and expectations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What’s the worst thing that happened to you because you cut or skipped school?</li> <li>• How have you benefited from cutting or skipping class?</li> <li>• How have your parents been involved with you cutting or skipping class?</li> <li>• How has the school been involved with you cutting or skipping class?</li> <li>• How have the police been involved with you cutting or skipping class?</li> <li>• Have you participated in a program at a community center or at the Probation department to increase school attendance?</li> <li>• Do you plan to continue to cut or skip class? Why/why not?</li> <li>• Do you think you will graduate high school? Why/why not?</li> </ul>

Recommendations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What would help/has helped you increase your school attendance?</li> <li>• What could have been different?</li> <li>• How could the system be changed?</li> </ul>
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\*The terms “cut” and “skip” were originally used in the interview guide, but results reflect interviewee preference for the terms “skip” or “ditch.”

To help participants visualize their story, we used a data elicitation technique in which participants selected a character and moved him/her along a road map. We conducted all interviews in a location agreed upon by participants (e.g., classroom, room at a community center); we made every effort to ensure privacy during the interviews. On average, interviews lasted 30 minutes. We audio recorded participant responses and compensated participants with a \$20 gift card. The Los Angeles County Department of Public Health and the University of California, Los Angeles Institutional Review Boards reviewed and approved all study protocol and instruments prior to implementation.

After every set of interviews, all members of the study team present during that set of interviews discussed their impressions and thoughts about emerging themes, ways to improve the design and interview guide, and thoughts on how to obtain maximum variation among future study participants. The study coordinator kept detailed notes during the process. In addition, each team member kept a reflexive journal throughout the study period.

### **Data Management and Analysis**

One team member transcribed all audio-recorded interviews verbatim, after which time she destroyed the digital files, and uploaded transcripts into ATLAS.ti version 7. In accordance with the QD paradigm, we analyzed data using a two-stage, bottom-up inductive coding process in which codes and themes were developed solely from the data in order to remain as close as possible to participant perspectives. First, the two full-time members of the study team (who had been involved in conducting the interviews) read each interview and used close coding to assign descriptive codes that reflected the participants’ language and worldview (e.g., “no one cared,” “teacher told to get out,” “ditching as a habit”) to short segments of interview text. Team members took turns independently using this technique with batches of three transcripts, which were then reviewed by the second team member. The two met after each batch to discuss and reconcile differences. After analysis of 18 interviews (when codes were approaching saturation), the two team members did a detailed code review, using pattern coding to sort the codes into themes based on relationships among code content (e.g., codes of “bullying,” “gang involvement,” and “conflict within the school” were grouped into a “school safety” theme). The two then worked together to develop a draft description for each code (which described the code and provided examples of its use) and a visual (which became Figure 1) to depict the inter-relationships between the themes. The full study team reviewed and provided feedback on these drafts. The two analysis team members then used the list of defined and thematically sorted codes (coding scheme) to code the remaining interviews and iteratively refine the themes using the constant comparison method.

In addition to this close-coding approach, the two analysis team members analyzed each interview from a holistic perspective to identify a set of key influences, events and recommendations. Each team member independently read the entire interview and wrote an analytic memo which summarized (a) the major events and factors that influenced the youth’s truancy behaviors over time, (b) what the school (or other actors) did in response to truancy, and (c) how that response influenced the youth, cognitively and emotionally. Team members’ combined their holistic summary memos (for each interview) and refined them through discussion. In addition, each team member read each transcript and completed an analytic memo cataloguing youths’ recommendations for reducing truancy. In developing the draft

results (narrative description and Table 3 summary), the study team consulted close codes, themes, holistic summaries, analytic memos, study notes, and reflexive journals.

In addition to internal discussions, the study team completed two structured member checks with the youth research assistants. First, we solicited input from research assistants during a study team meeting after all interviews were completed, but prior to analysis, to summarize themes they heard during the interviews. The study coordinator summarized results of this meeting in an analytic memo, which was used during the data analysis process. Second, the team presented a draft of the results to the research assistants for their input and feedback. During the second meeting, research assistants provided feedback that supported the research team's interpretation of the data, with youth-led discussion focused primarily on generating action steps to implement the recommendations.

## Results

We conducted interviews with 39 youths between the ages of 13 and 19. All interviews were conducted in English. Most youths (37) were currently enrolled in school, the majority (26) at a continuation school designed for students who were too low on credits to attend a traditional public school (Table 2). Overall, the sample represented a group of youths who reported significant problems with skipping or ditching school in the past (as opposed to current truancy) and had been able to overcome their truancy problems and continue (or re-enroll) in school.

**Table 2.** Characteristics of Youths Who Participated in In-Depth Interviews, Los Angeles County, 2014 (n=39)

Characteristic	Number (Percent)
Recruitment site*	
School	30 (77)
Community-based organization	5 (13)
Other	4 (10)
Gender	
Male	19 (49)
Female	20 (51)
Race/Ethnicity	
Hispanic/Latino	31 (79)
African American/Black	8 (21)
Age	
13 or younger	5 (13)
14-16	7 (18)
17-19	27 (69)
Current school	
Traditional middle/high school	11 (28)
Continuation middle/high school	26 (67)
Not enrolled	2 (5)
Grade first started skipping/ditching	
Elementary (5 <sup>th</sup> or lower)	6 (15)
Middle (6 <sup>th</sup> – 8 <sup>th</sup> )	21 (54)
High (9 <sup>th</sup> – 12 <sup>th</sup> )	12 (31)

\* Four of the five community-based organization recruitment sites had schools associated with or located within the organization. If a participant was a current student of the school at the site, he/she was categorized as having been recruited from the school.

The results are presented as follows: first, we introduce participants' descriptions of the major influences on skipping or ditching. Second, we describe characteristics of the school and its response to truancy and how participants responded, cognitively and emotionally, to these factors. Finally, we summarize participants' recommendations to reduce truancy (Table 3). Because the primary goal of this paper was to inform intervention strategy development, we focus on describing factors youths perceived as amendable to intervention; major influences on truancy (peer pressure, family turmoil) that youths did not identify as leverage points for intervention are not described.

**Table 3.** Youths' Description of Factors that Influence Truancy, Cognitive and Emotional Responses, and Recommendations for Improvement, Los Angeles County, 2014

Major Influence on Truancy	Strength and Direction of Influence on Truancy*	Youths' Cognitive and Emotional Responses*			Youths' Recommendations
		Academic Engagement	Perception that School Cared	Perceived Severity	
<b>School Factors</b>					
School curriculum: boring, irrelevant, or difficult	Medium, increase	Low	---	---	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Schools should provide curriculum that is interesting, has practical applications for the future, and is culturally relevant to students.</li> <li>Schools should include programming that provides opportunities for hands-on or group learning, before, during, and after school.</li> <li>Counselors should work with individual students to place them in courses that match their abilities and interests.</li> </ul>
Instructional style: impersonal or not engaging	High, increase	Low	Low	---	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Schools should reduce class sizes to allow for more individual academic attention from teachers.</li> <li>Teachers should employ a variety of instructional styles that encourage active participation by all students.</li> <li>Teachers should be aware of and provide extra attention to students who are struggling academically.</li> </ul>



Negative relationship or conflict with teacher	High, increase	Low	Low	---	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Teachers should be aware of and attempt to understand students' personal struggles.</li> <li>Teachers should respond to problematic behavior in a way that is empathetic and solution-focused.</li> <li>Teachers should work to establish positive personal relationships with all students.</li> </ul>
Positive relationship or friendship with teacher	Medium, decrease	Medium	High	---	
Infrequent contact with school counselors	Medium, increase	Medium	Low	---	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Schools should decrease the counselor to student ratio so as to increase the number and quality of contacts for each student.</li> <li>Counselors should provide support to address students' social and emotional needs, in addition to providing academic guidance.</li> </ul>
Large school or class size	Medium, increase	Low	Low	---	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Schools should implement administrative models that allow for frequent and meaningful staff contact with each student.</li> <li>Schools and counselors should work together to provide smaller classes, especially for students who are struggling academically.</li> <li>School staff should consistently establish and enforce clear standards for attendance and behavior on campus.</li> </ul>
Chaotic or unsafe environment	High, increase	Low	Low	---	
<b>Spectrum of School Response</b>					
No reaction	High, increase	Low	Low	Low	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Teachers and school staff should take roll and track per-period absences and tardies.</li> <li>Schools should develop and implement clearly articulated protocols to respond to truancy.</li> <li>Schools should respond with</li> </ul>

					established protocol to the first unexcused absence or tardy and each successive instance using a staged approach.
Automatic notifications (automated calls home, letters)	Medium, increase	Low	Low	Low	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Schools should clearly articulate expectations for attendance to families, beginning in Kindergarten or as soon as the family enters the district.</li> <li>Where possible, school staff should communicate personally (via phone or in person) with families and students regarding unexcused absences and tardies.</li> <li>Schools should identify and address logistical, cultural, and language barriers to communicating with families.</li> <li>Schools should partner with police, probation, and legal agencies to provide consequences that are tailored and meaningful to students and families.</li> <li>Teachers, counselors, school administrators, and other agencies should follow through on consequences when they are offered.</li> <li>Schools and other agencies should collaborate to provide consequences that are sustained over time to address the complex and recurrent nature of truancy.</li> </ul>
Staff calls home and speaks to family	Low, decrease	Medium	Medium	Low	
Meeting at school with parents	Low, decrease	Low	Medium	Medium	
Detention or Suspension	Low, decrease	Low	Low	Medium	
Legal Consequences	High, decrease	Medium	Medium	High	
Expulsion	High, increase	Low	Low	Medium	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Counselors should regularly meet with students, before truancy or other behavior triggers forced transfer or expulsion.</li> <li>School staff should be aware of and respond to the root causes of students' behavior.</li> </ul>

Family Support and Engagement					
Superficial or minimal engagement	High, increase	Medium	Low	Low	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Schools should provide consistent and personal communication regarding students' attendance and academic progress</li> <li>• Schools should identify barriers to family involvement and provide appropriate support and education.</li> </ul>

\* Ratings of strength and direction of effect and level of cognitive and emotional response were assessed independently and agreed upon by two full-time members of the study team who conducted the interviews and primary data analysis.

### Major Influences on School Truancy

School factors, including school curriculum and instructional style, relationships with teachers and counselors, and school structures and climate, were the most frequently reported influences on truancy. Participants also described the school's response to truancy and the ways in which it influenced their decision to skip or ditch (Table 3).

**School curriculum and instructional style.** Issues relating to the school curriculum (i.e., subject matter) and instructional style – cited by 23 youths as contributing to school truancy – were frequently intertwined. Frequently cited reasons for skipping class included not liking the subject matter (e.g., not interesting or enjoyable), the class was not useful to them (e.g., pointless, not relevant for their future), the class being too difficult, or not feeling engaged or challenged by the teacher or the material. Conversely, youths would choose to attend classes where they understood the material or did well, were interested in the topic, or perceived the class to be practical or helpful (e.g., directly applicable to their future). The interconnections between these factors in influencing truancy is illustrated by one 10th grade male as he talks about the differences between his traditional high school and his continuation high school:

I love the way they do things here [current school]. They make you work with each other, not individual, like one guy sitting in one seat. They make you work in groups, and you all sit together, and you all get the knowledge. I'm pretty sure if other schools had the techniques they had right here, they'd get motivated, like, "man, like they really showed me something today, like, I want to be successful, like get a job, like we're not gonna live forever." That's what this school really makes you think about, the what after. So if they had a what after thing in the public school, I think it would be better. More people would start coming to school, getting more motivated and inspired to be successful in life. (#6)

As illustrated in this quote, the youth chose to attend school because he was able to work with his peers, felt like he was learning something at school, and saw the application of the material for his future. An engaging instructional style often tended to override the subject matter. Passive activities (e.g., copying material from a book, completing work sheets, writing long essays) were highly criticized. After being asked to explain why he chose to attend certain classes and not others, a 12th grade male described the importance of the teacher, including her teaching style and dedication, in helping him to understand math,

It [whether to attend class] depends too on the teacher, like the way they teach. 'Cause I remember this teacher. I hated math, like I don't like math at all. And then one day she teach me and I was like "oh this is easy".... I was doing good, but then, like, harder subjects came along and then she moved out, so I'm like "damn." I like the way she teach too cause she taught me how to do it, like, the easy way. She was like "it's easy, just pay attention, focus, and keep practicing." That was the reason. I kind of did like math, but in that class only, and it was because of the teacher...She taught me just one-on-one... 'cause I needed help so she just taught me, and I'm, you know, like "this is easy." (#25)

As illustrated by this quote, youths would attend subjects that they did not like or found challenging because of their relationship with the teachers or the style that they used. Overall, when youths did not feel engaged in the material, it was easier for them to become academically disconnected and ditch class because it was more "fun" or "worthwhile" than attending class.

**Relationships with teachers and counselors.** Interactions with teachers were at the center of youths' experiences with school and had a big impact on whether they chose to attend. In our interviews, youths reported both extremely negative and positive interactions with teachers. Youths frequently reported not liking many of their teachers as a reason why they skipped class. Not liking teachers was related to both instructional style (as described above) and personal relationships. Youths perceived that some teachers did not care to be good at their job (e.g., they were only there for the paycheck) or have genuine interest in the students. Sometimes this general dislike was associated with specific conflicts or confrontations. For example, when asked about what contributed to her decision to start skipping class in 9<sup>th</sup> grade, one female described the following interaction with her teacher:

R: One of my teachers didn't want me in my class, so I stopped going in there. That's when I started ditching for the rest of the day.

I: How did you know the teacher didn't want you in there?

R: Because I had band class and he told me that I wasn't playing good so I needed to get out.

I: Really? So then you started ditching that class all the time?

R: Yeah, like I would leave for that period out of school, and I just wouldn't come back for the rest of that period. (#2)

As illustrated in this quote, the conflict with the teacher caused the girl to feel unwelcome in that class and contributed to her decision to leave school for the rest of the day. This was the story with which the girl began her history of skipping and ditching, subsequent gang involvement and juvenile delinquency. In total, 10 youths reported a specific interpersonal conflict with their teacher as a reason for skipping class.

In reflecting on their experiences, 11 youths reported a positive relationship with at least one teacher. Youths gave examples of teachers asking them about the reasons for their skipping/ditching, calling their parents/guardians, and even coming to their house to pick them up for school. One 12th grade male described a positive relationship he had with one teacher:

One teacher that I had, which was Italian class, she really cared about me because she would ask me you know oh, how are you doing you know, why you always ditching? So when the teacher told me that you know, she was like the only class that I wouldn't ditch, because I figured oh she cares about me and to let her down is kinda like you know, I don't want to let her down. But even

though I didn't pass her class, she made me realize you know, she actually cares.  
(#8)

As illustrated in this quote, the teacher's desire to find out the root causes of the student's behavior gave him a sense of being cared for. The idea that the teacher cared for him motivated him to attend that class; however, it was not enough to help him succeed academically. This type of pattern was common. Individual teacher actions were helpful and appreciated by youths, but not always enough to help them change their attendance patterns because of the complex determinants of school truancy.

Youths were also asked about interactions with school counselors in relation to truancy. Interaction with counselors was infrequent (e.g., meeting one or two times) and primarily related to academic advising and discussions about needing to leave the school because of low attendance, grades, or credits. Only three youths described positive interactions with counselors, for example helping them to improve their attendance. One 12th grade male described the role his counselor played in communicating with his parents and helping him to reengage with school:

He [school counselor] actually helped me out...he would actually call my parents but he wouldn't tell them in a bad way "oh you know, like your son he decided to do this instead of going to class," you know, he would look for like a different solution. Instead he'd be like "so let's get him back on track and let's give him all the work he missed, and then hopefully he doesn't do it again" and then he signed me up for anger management and like therapy, and that's when I began to change little by little, I took like baby steps. (#5)

As illustrated by this quote, while the youth did not necessarily expect the counselor to interact with him to help address his challenges, the counselor had the opportunity to serve as a positive influence.

**School structures and climate.** Youths described the importance of the size of the school in influencing their skipping and ditching behaviors. Consistently, youths described skipping and ditching less at smaller schools due to structural (e.g., closed campus with nowhere to escape) and staff factors (i.e., staff knew everyone, so they would notice when a student was missing). Large campuses provided more opportunities for youths to wander around, jump the gates unnoticed, or hide.

Youths also described the importance of class sizes. Smaller classes allowed for calmer, controlled classroom environments and more opportunities for students to interact one-on-one with teachers. When asked to describe the differences between his previous high school and his current continuation high school, an 11th grade male described the differences in the classroom environment as such:

[At current school] you learn more and it's a much more subtle environment. Like, you could actually pay attention, not like in traditional high school everything is so crazy and rowdy and you can't understand or hear what the teacher's saying. Here is a totally different story, because the classes are small...You get a better learning experience. You like actually want to go to school ever since I came here. (#17)

As illustrated in this quote, the youth felt that he was better able to learn in a smaller classroom environment. Many of the youths we spoke to (the majority of whom attended non-traditional, smaller continuation schools) appreciated the feel of the small school, in terms of the attention

they received from teachers, the flexibility in school structure (e.g., fewer classroom hours, classes later in the day) and pacing (e.g., more ways to get credits, finish assignments at own pace).

In addition to classroom environment, youths also mentioned the importance of the broader school environment in encouraging attendance. Youths described fighting and bullying as leading to a dangerous school climate. Although many youths reported directly being involved in conflicts and fights with other students, only seven youths characterized it as bullying. Most of those who mentioned bullying were current middle school students or described instances that occurred during middle school. When the term “bullying” was explicitly used, it was fairly severe and directly resulted in school avoidance. One 10th grade female described leaving school in 8<sup>th</sup> grade because of being bullied:

It [bullying] affected me badly because, to be honest I didn't graduate from middle school because of all the things I went through, so like people bully me and mess with me and stuff like that and I couldn't take it. It's like when I be trying to do my work, they be like making me focus on them and not my work so it's like, hey, I'm not concentrating. Yeah, I told them [school administrators] that I was being bullied, that people were messing with me, please switch my classes and stuff like that but they didn't do nothing and I told my parents that they didn't do nothing about that and then like it was over, I didn't graduate, I didn't get to do nothing. I just left school. (#29)

Six youths in the sample directly discussed involvement with gangs. Youths who joined gangs tended to experience greater and more rapid exposure to drugs and violence. Gangs and other peer situations created a dangerous school climate and exposed students to violence inside and outside of school. Twelve youths, even those who were not clearly affiliated with a gang, described school as being filled with too much “drama” (i.e., territorial or racial conflicts) that made school unsafe for them or prevented them from being able to focus academically.

### **School Response to Truancy**

More than half of the youths in our sample described first skipping or ditching in elementary (6) or middle school (21). When asked what happened as a result of their first few acts of skipping or ditching class, 23 youths characterized the school's response as “nothing.” They often reported that the school did not notice when they first started skipping and, therefore, that their parents were not informed. As skipping and ditching progressed, most youths (26) reported that the school attempted to notify their parents through letters or phone calls. Youths were often able to manipulate these lines of communication, for example by giving the school their incorrect phone number, erasing the messages on the machine, or throwing away the letters.

Almost all youths described having meetings at the school with school staff (e.g., principals, counselors) and their parents at some point. While these meetings sometimes led to temporary reductions in truancy, they were rarely sufficient to get a youth to change his or her behavior. For example, when asked if there were any meetings at the school with her parents, a 9th grade female reported:

Yeah, but they [the meetings] didn't help out. Like all they said was “why did I do it?” and “what was the reason for it?” And I just kept saying it wasn't important and they was like “ok, just come to school.” And then I would always do the same thing all over again. (#15)

As seen in this quote, for many youths, the meeting itself was not always enough. As a result of meetings, five youths had to sign contracts or carry sheets for their teachers to sign to demonstrate their attendance, which seemed to improve attendance over and above a meeting alone. In 17 cases, youths mentioned being connected to resources such as counseling, anger management, or academic make-up and development programs. Youths' experiences with these programs varied. One 12th grade girl who reported being in several fights at school, was asked if anyone at school had done anything to address the fights she was getting into:

I was supposed to take anger management classes, but I didn't...my counselor, he told me that it was better if I was to go to those. And I had told him, like, he had signed me up and make the meeting for me. But I never showed up and I told my parents that I didn't want to go because I didn't need to and told my parents that I wasn't gonna go if I didn't want to go. So I didn't go. (#20)

This quote helps to illustrate the fact that the school can only do so much in connecting students to external resources, suggesting that helping address student behavior problems and truancy issues will take involvement from both schools and parents.

Nineteen youths reported receiving detentions or suspensions for missing school or other problem behaviors (e.g., fighting). Many youths seemed to place little importance on these types of punishments. Phrases such as “I *just* got suspended” were common. For some youths, suspensions issued for truancy or other behavior problems were perceived as being counterproductive. Suspensions contributed to youths feeling unmotivated to go to school and also contributed to a continued cycle of academic disengagement because of the work that they had missed.

Ten youths were presented with legal consequences – the threat of either themselves or their parents having to go to jail – if they did not reduce their truancy. For most, this resulted in behavior change because they were afraid. For example, when asked if she was planning to continue to skip or ditch, a 12th grade female responded:

R: No, because um the lawyers meeting was like 2 months ago so I can't anymore, like I can't miss even if I'm sick.

I: Can you tell us a little more about what happened at the lawyers meeting?

R: Well it was my mom and, well it was just the parents and the lawyer because it was school time. And they told them like if we would miss anymore, they would give a citation or arrested and, like to clear our absences or stuff.

I: And how do you think that meeting went?

R: Well it kinda scared us more than like kinda motivated us. It motivated us by scaring us.... It's like showing that they [school] are, like proactive about what they're actually talking about instead of just, sending letters home. (#13)

As illustrated in this quote, youths described being motivated by fear to change their behavior. Similar types of fears and behavior change were echoed by youths who had been placed on probation. Of the five youths who had been on probation, three found it “helpful” in changing behavior because the consequences of violating the terms of probation were seen as serious. For example, after one 10th grade girl was put on probation and her officer was monitoring her school attendance, she began attending class in order to avoid getting into further legal trouble (#37). In these cases, behavior change usually occurred while youths were being actively monitored; once youths completed their probation and no one was “paying attention,” skipping and ditching often started again.

## Cognitive and Emotional Responses to School Factors

Youths described three emotional reactions to school characteristics and responses to truancy: academic engagement, perception that the school cared, and perceived severity (Table 3).

First, school factors influenced youths' level of academic engagement. As previously described, characteristics such as teaching style and school curriculum influenced youths' level of motivation and desire to learn. These factors appeared to be very important in initial decisions to begin skipping class. As youths began to miss class, almost all described decreases in their grades. As grades began to fall, youths felt even less engaged in school – it became a vicious cycle. Exclusionary school discipline measures (e.g., suspension) helped reinforce this cycle of disengagement, causing youths to fall even more behind academically.

Second, school factors influenced youths' perceptions about whether anyone at the school cared about them. When youths described negative aspects of the school environment (e.g., teachers did not provide one-on-one academic attention, the school staff did not attempt to contact parents when students ditched) it was frequently accompanied by a statement about these individuals not caring. When asked to describe the difference between his current school and his previous school, one 10th grade male stated:

I think that here [current school] the teachers are more determined to help you out. Cause [at] the traditional school, they [teachers] would only care about the people that do well in school and if they see that you're slacking off or not doing work, you just fall behind. It just seems like they push you to the side and not pay that much attention to you. But here, if you're falling behind or anything they try to have talks with you and like help you out, try to get you to that diploma...If they [teachers] actually pay more attention to the students that aren't doing good it would help them out cause a lot of them don't get the attention they need and they just feel like "oh they don't care about me" and "my education ain't important to them" so that's probably the reason why they slack off. (#36)

As this youth describes, teachers not addressing students' problem behaviors and needs was associated with feeling that teachers do not care. Youths felt that if the school cared, then school staff would do something in response to their behavior. As also illustrated in this quote, dialogues of the school not caring were accompanied by youths' descriptions of feeling "pushed to the side" or being "written off" because of their previous actions. The ultimate expression of this rejection by school appeared in youths' accounts of expulsion and forced school transfer.

Finally, the schools' response to truancy influenced youths' attitudes about the severity of skipping or ditching, which contributed (alongside peer influences) to social norms related to truancy. As previously described, many youths did not perceive routine school punishments (e.g., calls and letters home, detention, suspension) as being severe. For many youths, their behavior did not change until the punishment from the school was seen as meaningful and serious (e.g., threat of fine or jail).



## Youths' Recommendations to Reduce Truancy

Youths' suggestions for reducing truancy aligned with the school factors previously described and fell into three categories: the need for modifications to the school environment, the need for an improved school response to truancy, and the need for further parental engagement (Table 3). In addition to these recommendations, youths mentioned the need for young people to take ownership of their actions to change their behavior.

**Modifications to the school environment.** As previously discussed, youths described many school-related factors as influencing their decision to skip or ditch. It is not surprising, therefore, that the most frequently cited recommendations for reducing truancy focused on improving school curriculum and instructional style, the number and quality of the teachers and counselors, and school structures and climate.

A more engaging instructional style was mentioned by 16 youths as a strategy for reducing truancy. Interesting classes and instructional style were cited by youths as helping to keep students academically engaged. When asked to reflect on what would have helped increase her school attendance, one 12th grade female described the importance of an engaging instructional style:

Maybe getting teachers, probably like fun, not fun teachers because it's not being fun, but being challenged. If I felt like I was a little more challenged, you know with the curriculum they provide you, if there was more to it than, you know, doing worksheets. It's like why am I doing work sheets, you're a teacher, teach me something, stop taking credit for worksheets you downloaded off the internet, you know, you're getting paid for a reason. (#3)

As illustrated by this quote, youths want to feel like they are learning something in class and engaged with the material. This includes stimulating class activities as well as one-on-one attention and instruction.

Seventeen youths expressed the desire for more individual academic help from their teachers, while 10 expressed the need for more attention from their counselors. The quotation below, from an 11th grade female, illustrates her desire for academic counselors to connect more with students about their personal struggles and challenges:

R: If they [counselor] see a kid ditching they should like offer him a program. Probably like hey don't ditch, you need school, or try and figure out the reason for them ditching or for them just being tardy cause most of the time some kids are tardy cause they have, they have problems at their, at home. Like sometimes, like, you know like I know a student that would be late to school a lot he'll be truant a lot because his mom was like in the hospital. And nobody cared to like ask him like hey, why haven't you been coming? And when they do ask you, they ask you in, IF they do ask you, they ask you all mean like why haven't you been coming?! What's been going on?! They ask you like, you're like doing bad.

I: Did they ever talk to you about, like that?

R: Never, the counselors, like I remember one time I went to my counselor and I'll be like, oh can I talk to you? Like this is what, I've been having problems. He's like no, no, no. He's like I don't deal with problems. He's like, I don't deal with problems, I deal with classes. He's like I give you your classes but I don't deal with problems. I

was like OK, and that's it. That was the last, that was the first and last time I ever talked to a counselor. (#10)

As illustrated in this quote, the youth perceived the counselor's reaction as not interested in her problems. This interaction closed the girl off from being able to open up with other counselors, and potentially receiving the services she needed, contributing to a continued cycle of school disengagement.

Finally, youths described changes to improve school climate, including addressing issues related to chaotic classrooms and school campuses. This included smaller classes and more enhanced efforts to reduce bullying and violence on campus.

**Improved school response to truancy.** Youths provided suggestions for how the school could improve its response to truancy. First, 17 youths commented on the need for more consistent and appropriate consequences and boundaries that were enforced. Wanting the school to "stay on me," "push me to succeed," or "teach me a lesson" were common phrases. The need for the school to more effectively respond is illustrated in the following quote from a female in 7th grade:

They need like new people that work here because they don't even know how to run their own classrooms. They don't know how to run their own schools. They don't be knowing what to do. Like if you be late they used to do stuff about it but now they don't do nothing. So I think that they want us to fail because they don't do nothing about it. (#31)

The youth goes on to describe the importance of clear consequences for students being late in order to influence her and other students' behavior. Youths also expressed the need for teachers and administrators to follow-through on punishments or threats. One 12th grade female described the importance of following through on consequences in helping to address truancy:

But if they [teachers] threaten to call your parents and they don't, then the kid is going to already be like "oh yeah," when she says she's gonna call them and then she doesn't call them, then the kids is going to be like "I can just walk out of class and she not going to tell nobody." 'Cause I had a teacher like that in 9th grade, she's be threatening all the kids, "if you don't do that I'm gonna call your-," she never did, so a lot of the kids were like "you talk a lot, but you don't do"... That's another reason I ditched 9th grade a lot, because my teacher would be like "if you don't stay in class I'm gonna call your parent," but I would walk out of class and my mom never heard about it. So, if there are some teachers like that, then kids are never gonna learn. (#24)

Here, the youth seems to be asking for stricter boundaries. While youths expressed a desire for more boundaries and consequences, they also reported a desire for the school to understand their personal struggles. Fifteen youths reported dealing with complex personal and family situations that influenced truancy (e.g., parental relationship turmoil, death in the family, deportation, unstable living situation, parental mental illness) and 18 youths reported mental health (e.g., anger issues, excessive stress, lack of motivation, sadness) or substance abuse issues. Youths expressed a greater desire for school administrators and teachers to understand their struggles and help them address the root causes of school truancy behavior. One 12th grade male articulated the need for greater understanding and involvement from the school to help address personal issues:

Every school should have more counselors in schools. It's so low. There's only, like I said before, only like four counselors in every high school, and every high school like, there's like thousands of students, you know so those students need help. Even though you don't see it they need help. They might have some personal, personal problems. You know things that people don't know cause people just criticize. Like oh, like oh, look at that kid you know, he looks like a gang banger you know oh don't talk to him like he's not going to be no one in life... You can't be criticizing, you gotta talk to that person, and then if he's like that, THEN you can say that but if he's not like that you don't know how he is, you don't know what people are going through. Cause people having different problems like in their lives. And people don't see that. They just criticize. (#8)

As previously discussed, youths sometimes reported being offered services through schools. While some youths accepted these services, others were hesitant to participate in mental health treatment. Four of the nine youths who were offered mental health services through school described reluctance to participate, leading some to either not enroll or discontinue services.

**Family support and engagement.** Youths reported a range of parental involvement in monitoring or encouraging their school attendance. As previously described, many youths reported that their parents were not notified about their truancy, especially when they first started skipping or ditching. When youths described their families as being highly involved in monitoring their behavior, it tended to have a big impact on truancy. Thirteen youths expressed desire for increased involvement and monitoring from their parents. Youths reported wanting parents to be more proactive (e.g., attend school meetings) and provide support. However, youths reported that their parents sometimes lacked the resources or capacity to help them, for example, because of their own low level of educational attainment, immigrant status, limited English proficiency, or lack of knowledge of available resources. When asked what her parents could have done differently, one 11th grade female spoke to the need for schools to connect more with parents in order to build their capacity to understand the education system and engage with their children:

Be more involved, like the school to involve more parents. You know how like now at like normal, like traditional schools, like they have like all these parent centers and all this stuff...make them like have like this programs where the parents work with their kids in school...Like help me out, like tell me what to do... I think they [parents] need help, not just us, but also parents controlling us and like leading us in the way. And also cause, my mom, she's not from here. She's from a different country. She doesn't really know the law like that. And I think I took advantage of that cause I'd be like mom they don't care, it's okay, like they don't do anything. (#7)

The youth speaks both to the need for more guidance from her parents and for her parents to receive more guidance and resources from the school. In addition, she acknowledges her role in deceiving her parents about the consequences of truancy.

**Role of students in determining behavior.** Overall, when asked how things could have been different, youths cited many ways in which their schools or families could have been changed to help support them; however, many youths also recognized that they had played a strong role in their current situation. Despite some very negative school experiences, 16 youths concluded that the school "did the best they could" or explicitly mentioned their role or choices in skipping and ditching, describing the negative consequences associated with school truancy

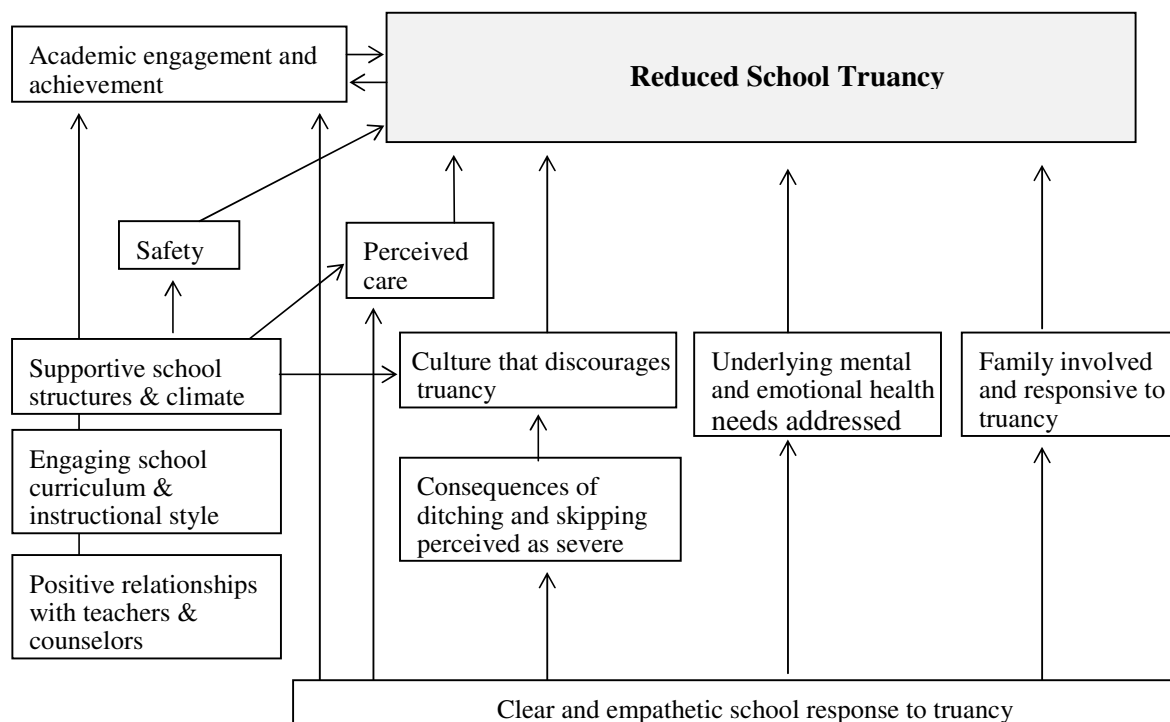
as being “my fault.” Some even commented on the two-way nature of the relationship between school factors and students. When invited to expand on what his previous teachers could have done differently, a 10th grade male described the relationships between students and teachers as such:

I mean, it’s just like a feed on sort of thing, like if this kid don’t come to school, they’re just like “don’t come to school,” you know, like “I’m not gonna waste my time telling him to come to school” and him not coming. It’s hard for a teacher too, they want to teach so bad, but if you’re not coming to school, you’re not on their list. You have to be on their list, you know, you have to be coming to school, every day, in order for them to give you some feedback, like “this kids really good, I’m gonna’ try all my will to make sure he’s successful.” (#6)

## Discussion

Youths’ experiences help illustrate the complex array of factors that contribute to school truancy and the central role that school instructional style, student/staff relationships, student services, and school climate have in influencing school attendance. Youths’ reflections on their decision-making processes, emotional responses, and leverage points for change can help to inform what an ideal system to prevent and respond to truancy might look like (Figure 1). As envisioned by youths, within a fully functional system, the school’s curriculum, staff, and climate contribute to students feeling safe, cared for, and academically engaged, thereby preventing truancy before it starts. The school’s structures and response to truancy set clear expectations about school attendance that contributes to a culture where truancy is not acceptable. Students perceive clear and meaningful consequences for truancy and are supported by a school system that addresses their emotional and mental health needs and engages their families as part of the solution.

**Figure 1.** Youths’ Perspectives of a Well-Functioning System to Reduce School Truancy in Los Angeles County, 2014



Results suggest that schools have an opportunity to prevent truancy by promoting school engagement. Disengagement with specific classes because of subject or teacher-related factors was found to be a common starting place for a trajectory of skipping or ditching, academic failure, and subsequent delinquency among youths in our study. Indeed, the association between school engagement and school attendance has been demonstrated in previous work (Maynard et al., 2012). When asked to reflect on what could have been changed to modify their skipping and ditching trajectory, the majority of youths pointed to the importance of policies and structures that kept them engaged. In our study, many youths felt that the required subjects were not relevant to their lives, and these perceptions were critical to the process of disengagement, suggesting that among this population (e.g., minority youth from low-income or immigrant communities), there may be a particular need to provide curriculum that is culturally relevant and tailored to youths' interests and experiences. While these findings align with truancy-reduction models that call for universal, school-wide prevention measures (Bye et al, 2010), they suggest that these efforts should target school climate broadly, beyond modifications directly related to attendance.

Additional efforts are also needed to more effectively respond to truancy. As seen in our study, truancy often begins early in a student's life and can lead to a cycle of school disengagement if left unaddressed. While a paucity of past studies with rigorous designs have focused on truancy in younger age groups (Maynard et al., 2013; McCluskey et al., 2004), emerging evidence suggests that a significant number of students are habitually truant beginning in elementary school (Harris, 2013). Our data reinforce these findings, indicating that students may benefit from interventions that establish clear boundaries and consequences for truancy early on in students' lives. Furthermore, while previous studies have criticized interventions with a punitive component (Mueller & Stoddard, 2009), our work suggests that youths may be looking for boundaries and consequences, as long as they are implemented within the context of a solution-oriented approach.

Youths in our study emphasized the importance of an approach that brings students "in" to identify the root causes of problem behavior such as family turmoil and mental health issues. Previous research suggests that many youths go without the mental health services they need and that schools can provide a crucial point for identification and linkages to needed services (Paternite, 2005); however, we found that some youths were uncomfortable sharing personal struggles or receiving services in this context, indicating that without strong relationships with school administrators or teachers, students may be unwilling to access services. Proactively identifying needs may be particularly helpful, instead of waiting until youths enter into an acute situation (e.g., being put on probation). In helping to address youths' needs, it is important to also consider the need for sustained involvement, as youths' challenges are often complex and chronic in nature, and are, therefore, unlikely to disappear completely with a short-term intervention. In a climate of sustained budget shortfalls, maintaining low staff-to-student ratios and retaining staff that are trained to address the needs of at-risk youth should remain a priority.

Finally, results suggest the importance of engaging parents as key partners in addressing truancy. Parent involvement is crucial in encouraging dialogue with youths about the importance of education, helping to monitor attendance, and ensuring follow-through on delivery of services. Studies support the benefit of parental involvement and parental engagement strategies, including increased attendance-focused communication (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002; Hill & Tyson, 2009). Unfortunately, our data mirror previous research indicating that many parents are themselves experiencing turmoil, and are in need of additional support or education to navigate school systems (Diggs Reynolds, 2011; Rodriguez, 1992). These factors present significant barriers to involvement and, in our sample, school efforts to

engage parents that did not also address these realities were often ineffective. Innovative models of parent engagement, such as the Alhambra Unified School District's Gateway to Success Program, which helps educate parents and link them to resources, may be a promising approach (SATF, 2012).

Our study has a number of limitations. First, like most qualitative research, results are not intended to be generalized. Our sample represents a subset of youths who has been able to overcome school attendance struggles and is on a path towards graduating from high school. While the youths in our sample may have different experiences than youths who are completely disconnected (e.g., high school dropouts), their reflections on the ways in which they have been able to overcome their struggles provide insight into how youths can be re-engaged with school. Second, the youth research assistants led many of our interviews. While this helped build rapport and a sense of peer-to-peer communication, the youth interviewers did not have professional training or extensive experience in interviewing, thus, creating potential gaps in data collection for some participants. Finally, it was not feasible to fully analyze transcripts concurrently with data collection.

Overall, our study highlights the complex array of factors that influence school truancy. As policy and decision-makers examine ways to reduce truancy and improve associated outcomes, the youths' experiences and recommendations described in our study point to the importance of modifying the school environment to increase student engagement, implementing effective school responses to address truancy, and engaging parents to help support school-based efforts. While this work provides insights into strategies for system improvement, additional research is needed to continue to identify effective practices. By incorporating youths' perspectives into intervention design and development, researchers and practitioners might be able to better meet youths' needs and implement mutually reinforcing strategies that address the complex, inter-related factors that impact school attendance. Grounding future research and policy work in youths' experiences can hopefully contribute to changing a challenging, yet crucial, area that fosters youth success.

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