

RESEARCH BRIEF

Evaluation of Ramsey County's Truancy Intervention Programs: Policy Implications for Court Diversion Programs

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

This brief presents findings from a rigorous evaluation of whether a court diversion program in Ramsey County, Minnesota improved school attendance for chronically absent students in grades 2-10.

BACKGROUND & PURPOSE

Approximately 15% of U.S. students are chronically absent, a proportion that has remained the same for decades (Department of Education, 2016; Maynard et al., 2017). The U.S. educational and criminal justice systems have invested millions of dollars to prevent truancy and its consequences, including school dropout, unemployment, and criminal justice system involvement. Yet, the impact of this investment is unclear because truancy interventions have rarely been evaluated.

Jurisdictions across the U.S. have implemented court diversion programs to ameliorate chronic unexcused absenteeism. These programs are similar to the Ramsey County, Minnesota programs that were evaluated in this study

The Family Truancy Intervention Program (FTIP) targets unexcused absenteeism in elementary schools, where chronic unexcused absenteeism is considered the responsibility of the parent and treated as educational neglect. The Truancy Intervention Program (TIP) addresses truancy in middle and high schools, where students themselves are held responsible for their school attendance.

Both FTIP and TIP consist of three steps: 1) a required parent meeting at the school with a county attorney, 2) an individual family meeting with school staff and a county attorney to develop an attendance contract and referral to necessary services, and 3) petition to family or juvenile court for educational neglect or truancy. Students are referred to the next step only if their attendance does not improve.

The evaluation answered two questions:

1. Did FTIP and TIP reduce absenteeism in the year following referral to the program?
2. Were there racial or ethnic disparities in referral to FTIP and TIP?

Schools in Ramsey County offered a rich array of programs to promote attendance. Hence this study assessed whether FTIP and TIP improved attendance above and beyond those programs.



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METHODS

A two-step approach was used to assess program effectiveness.

First we matched students referred to FTIP and TIP in Ramsey County with similar students who attended immediately-adjacent Hennepin County, which did not have a diversion program for the time period considered.

Second, we estimated dynamic differences-in-differences regression models with fixed effects to determine the effect of FTIP and TIP on average daily attendance rates.

FINDINGS

Participation in FTIP and TIP did not improve school attendance.

Students of color had a disproportionate number of their absences coded as unexcused and thus were more likely to be referred to the intervention than White students.

Through Minn-LInK, we estimated program effectiveness using 12 years of linked student-level panel data (AY2004 - 2015) from eight different state and local agencies: the Minnesota Departments of Education and Human Services, the five largest school districts in Ramsey County, and the Ramsey County Attorney's Office.

The analysis proceeded in two steps. First, we constructed a comparison group for students who were referred to FTIP or TIP between AY2006 and AY2009. We identified the comparison group from students enrolled in adjacent Hennepin County, before Hennepin County implemented its own three-step truancy diversion program. To construct the comparison group, we matched on both district and student-level characteristics. We verified that the matched samples were equivalent on 22 student characteristics. The analytic sample contained 4,699 students referred to FTIP or TIP and a matched comparison group of 3,835, all of whom attended school in Ramsey or Hennepin County between AY2006 and AY2009.

To estimate program effects, we conducted difference-in-differences analysis. This approach is superior to comparing group means before and after the intervention because it rules out selection bias due to unmeasured student characteristic that are stable over time. The matching and analysis were conducted separately for each grade because of the heterogeneity of attendance behavior at different ages.

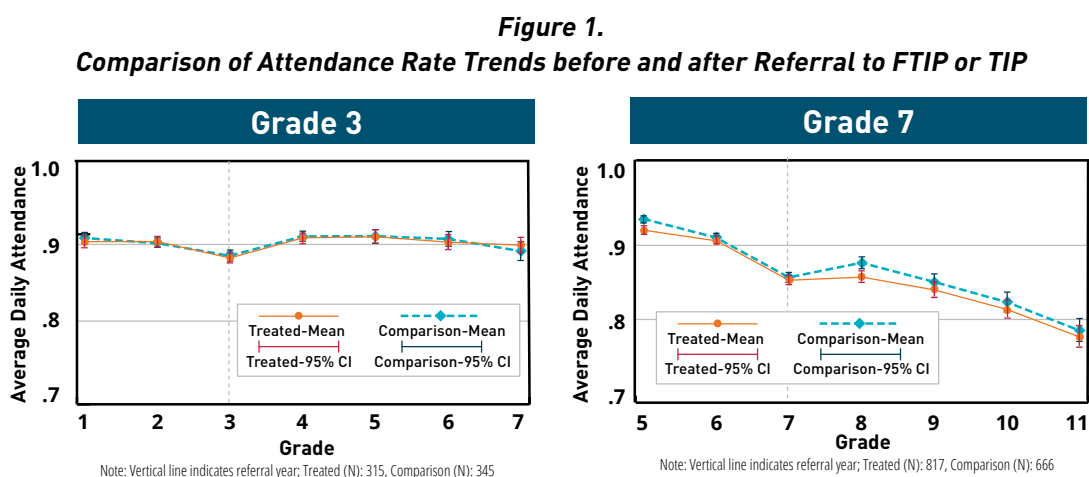
SCHOOL ATTENDANCE

FTIP and TIP did not improve the attendance of students referred to the programs in any grade compared to students from Hennepin County who shared similar characteristics but did not have the opportunity to be referred to the program (Figure 1).

Our analysis suggests that school attendance bounces back after a decline, even without an obvious intervention by the school. This bounce

back—called regression to the mean—always occurs when only students at the extreme low end of the distribution of attendance are eligible for the program. The implications of this natural bounce-back are significant. Studies based on simple pre and post comparisons of

OUR ANALYSIS SUGGESTS THAT SCHOOL ATTENDANCE BOUNCES BACK AFTER A DECLINE, EVEN WITHOUT AN OBVIOUS INTERVENTION BY THE SCHOOL.



Note. Only grades 3 and 7 were presented for brevity; trends in other grades were similar.

attendance levels among students participating in a truancy intervention may mistake natural rebounds in attendance for program effects. The magnitude of bias may be especially large when the analysis window after the referral is short and limited to within the academic year.

RACIAL AND ETHNIC DISPARITIES

Figure 2 shows that White students had a smaller proportion of their absences coded as unexcused compared to students in all other racial and ethnic groups. Across all grades and across all levels of absenteeism, White students were generally half as likely as students in all other racial or ethnic groups to have an absence coded as unexcused.

This disproportionality, in turn, created racial and ethnic disparities in program referral. Students were eligible for FTIP or TIP after five unexcused absences. Because White students were substantially less likely than students of color

to have each absence coded as unexcused, they were also substantially less likely be eligible for referral to FTIP or TIP, even when they had the same number of total absences as students of color.

Figure 3 shows the proportion of students referred to FTIP and TIP at each level of absenteeism. Elementary school staff referred Black and American Indian students to FTIP more frequently than students in any other racial or ethnic group. In this figure absenteeism is measured as the number of absent days, regardless of whether the absence is excused or unexcused. Middle and high school staff referred minority students to TIP at approximately twice the rate of White students.

Additional regression models confirmed that the differential pattern of coding of unexcused absences fully accounts for the disparities in program referral shown in Figure 3.

Figure 2.
Proportion of absences coded as unexcused (AY2006-2015)

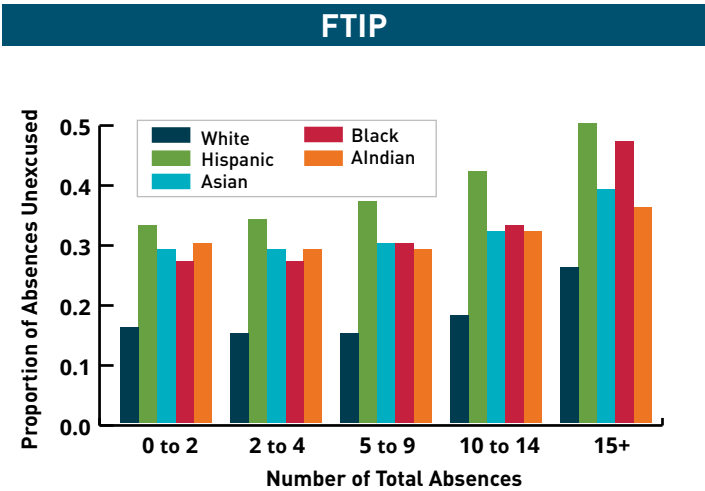
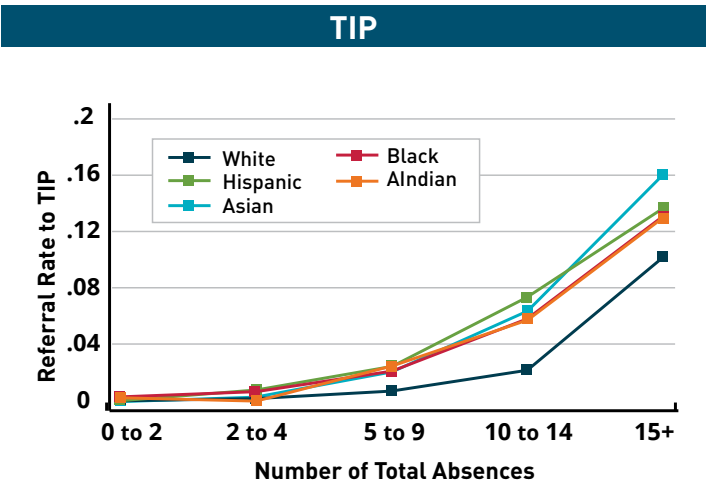
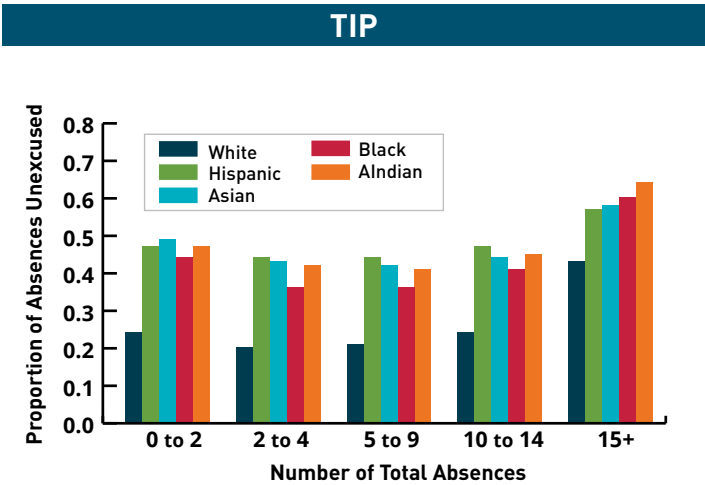
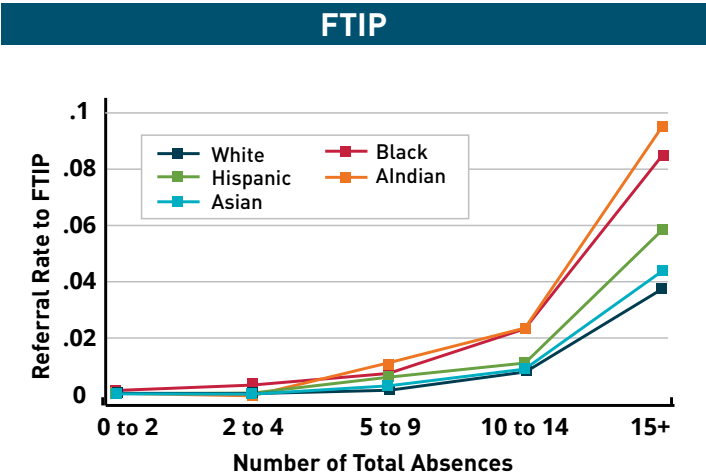


Figure 3.
Proportion of students referred to the program



Conclusion

Despite the lack of positive findings in this study, it is too early to conclude that three-step diversion programs do not improve school attendance. This is just one study, and another well-done study suggests the model is promising (Mazzerolle et al., 2017). More outcome evaluations are needed, and research also needs to be conducted on program implementation to understand families' experiences of and responses to the program.

EVALUATIONS OF TRUANCY INTERVENTIONS CAN BE MISLEADING IF THEY SIMPLY COMPARE ATTENDANCE BEFORE AND AFTER THE INTERVENTION AMONG STUDENTS ASSIGNED TO THE INTERVENTION.

Evaluations of truancy interventions can be misleading if they simply compare attendance before and after the intervention among students assigned to the intervention. Such studies will almost always overestimate program effects due to the transitory nature of absenteeism.

Schools may want to examine why absences for students of color are disproportionately coded as unexcused. One potential reason could be that the absenteeism policies themselves disadvantage non-White students and students of lower-incomes. For example, students who can afford health care are more likely than those who cannot to get notes from providers documenting extended illnesses. Such notes are required for the absent days to be excused. Similarly, more affluent students are less likely to miss school when a family member needs care, a reason for absenteeism that is typically not excused.

LIMITATIONS

There are two key limitations in this study. First, schools in both the program and comparison counties implemented strategies to improve attendance in addition to the program under study. If the two counties implemented different types and intensities of absenteeism prevention strategies that differentially influenced attendance rates over time, the legitimacy of counterfactual group would be reduced. Second, we used yearly attendance data that did not differentiate unexcused from excused absences, so we could not evaluate whether the program affected the long-term trajectory of unexcused absences—which this program targets. Although the short-term results are consistent with the null long-term findings, this analysis depended on constructing the matched comparison from students who were eligible to be referred to the program but were not. It is more likely that unmeasured selection processes occur in this matched comparison group than in the comparison group consisting of students who were never eligible for the intervention, which makes it more difficult to meet the conditional independence assumption in our matching procedure.

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The Center for Advanced Studies in Child Welfare (CASCW) is a resource for child welfare professionals, students, faculty, policy-makers, and other key stakeholders concerned about child welfare in Minnesota. **Minn-LInK** is a unique collaborative, university-based research environment with the express purpose of studying child and family well being in Minnesota using state administrative data from multiple agencies.

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