

Child Protection and Educational Neglect: A Preliminary Study

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Summary

Historically, intervention for children with school attendance problems has rested with the juvenile court system reflecting a definition of causation as an individual's pathology. More recent law changes in more than 25 states have moved the intervention for elementary age children (ages 6-11) who miss school to the child welfare system. These changes mirror research findings of absenteeism for young children having an ecological origin. These laws have resulted in child protection systems becoming involved in young truants under the definition of educational neglect. The purpose of this study is to begin the exploration of child protection intervention into educational neglect in the State of Minnesota. The findings from this study are taken from the brief period between 2000 and 2001 where the State of Minnesota collected Social Services Information System (SSIS) child protection maltreatment findings of educational neglect, providing a unique opportunity to study the attendance of these students. This study found that attendance rates improved between the first and the second year of the study for children who had been involved in the Child Protection Services system due to chronic absenteeism.

Relationship to Policy/Practice

The results suggest that the current policy of child protection intervention in educational neglect cases may positively influence the attendance of children who experience absenteeism. These results imply that some form of intervention, such as (but not necessarily) Child Protection, may help reduce chronic absenteeism in children. This study also questions whether the Department of Education should collect this type of information more consistently, so it can be studied further.

The study shows large disparities in race for maltreatment determinations for educational neglect, which has both practice and policy implications. Child protection workers could work much closer with schools in developing early identification and intervention strategies, to help curb absenteeism before it leads to truancy. These workers could begin to use the informal resources children and communities share to build strength and resilience in young truants-to-be. Training and education is also needed for both child protection and school professionals in documentation and reporting of educational neglect.

Background

For over 150 years absenteeism from schools was the responsibility of the juvenile justice system. The traditional juvenile justice model focuses on the offender's pathology, and this process led to high incarceration rates in the 1970's. Research into causes of truancy began to intimate that the problems were more than the individual. Several researchers began to conceptualize both the causations and the intervention strategies into the emerging ecological framework theories attempting to understand the relationships of not only the individual but the family, community, and the school systems (Barth, 1984; Levine, 1984; Nielsen & Gerber, 1979). The discourse in the 1980's brought together these concepts and laid the foundation for the creation of new policies and intervention models as well as informing social work research.

In 1988 the Minnesota State Legislature reworked its juvenile code to create the Child in Need of Protection (CHIPS) statute. Besides rewriting the child protection code, the CHIPS statute included non-criminal offenses (i.e. truancy, running away) which were previously covered under the juvenile delinquency codes. This fundamental change reflected the recognition of policy makers that these issues were likely family related. Despite these policy changes, intervention in Minnesota languished. The juvenile justice model used various forms of incarceration for intervention. The State policy changes made clear that truants were to be handled outside the formal arena of juvenile justice, but the local child welfare agencies were reluctant to take on the task of intervening with young truants, viewing them as outside the abuse/neglect model (P. Moses, Personal communication, July 10, 2004).

Minnesota revisited the Juvenile Code in 1993 by creating the Maltreatment of Minors Act (1993). Included in this was a more concise understanding of truancy intervention and who was responsible for action. The State reflected the family/ecological component of truancy by delineating children age 11 and under as being covered by the child protection statutes ("Educational Neglect") whereas children 12 and over would be sent on a juvenile justice track ("Truants"). The legal standard for educational neglect is 7 or more days of unexcused absences and it is a required child protection report for mandated reporters.

Project Description

The purpose of this study is to explore results of the intervention of the child protection system on those children and families who have a maltreatment finding of educational neglect. A unique opportunity presented itself within the context of educational neglect and data collection. In January 2000 the State of Minnesota began collecting child welfare data statewide on the SSIS system. At the same time there was discussion of diverting most educational neglect reports to an alternative process that did not involve the traditional child protection system (and would result in no systematic data collection).

Minnesota social services agencies eventually implemented this version and referred to it as Alternative Response, commencing in January of 2002. Thus, for one complete academic school year, 2000-2001, there is SSIS data on all traditional child protection maltreatment findings of educational neglect in the State of Minnesota, providing a unique opportunity to study the attendance of these students before similar maltreatment situations were funneled into the new process.

Methods

This study examined all confirmed “substantiated” maltreatment reports of educational neglect (defined as 7 or more unexcused absences within the school year for children ages 12 and under) statewide, (47 counties out of 87), from September 1, 2000 through June 1, 2001 (N=696). Variables for each subject included race, age, geographic location, and gender. The child protection subjects were then matched with education attendance data to calculate the attendance rate for these children during the initial school year of 2000-2001. This academic school year corresponded to the time period during which these children were identified as having a substantiated educational neglect maltreatment finding. A total of 623 children were located in the education data system.

The attendance data for this same group was gathered in the academic school year following the year in which the maltreatment finding was substantiated (the 2001-2002 school year). A subsequent comparison of the attendance rates for the two school years was made to describe the attendance rates of these students over this two-year time period, over which they received child protection services.

The Data Bases

MARSS contains all attendance information for the Department of Education for students enrolled in public Minnesota schools. SSIS is the State of Minnesota’s database for child welfare. This database contains all descriptive information on child welfare cases and is the principal case management tool for Minnesota county child welfare agencies. SSIS provided the data of identified educational neglect maltreatment findings.

Attendance Rate

Students who were enrolled at any time during the school year are included in attendance computations. Attendance data is generated from the year-end MARSS database. Attendance rates for each grade, school, or district are based on the portion of time a student is enrolled in that grade, school or district. The rate is a ratio calculated by the Average Daily Attendance (ADA) divided by the Average Daily Membership (ADM). The ADA and ADM for each grade, school, or district are added together and the resulting figures are used for each grade, school, or district summary for a given student for a given academic school year. Improvement in attendance is defined as an increase in the ratio of ADA/ADM from the school year 00-01 to 01-02.

Results Summary

The principle finding of this study is that approximately 70% of the sample had improved attendance between 2000 and 2001, the year when Child Protection was used as an intervention for chronic absenteeism.

Several specific characteristics of the educational neglect sample were analyzed including age, gender, race, geographic location, and out-of-home placement. This study found a disparity of maltreatment findings for both African American and Indian children, with 44% and 12% of the children from those groups having been involved with Child Protection Services, respectively. The results for race are mirrored in other studies showing disparity in the child protection system; African American and American Indian children are seven times more likely to have maltreatment findings than Caucasian children in the State (Children Defense Fund/MN Child Welfare Report, 2000).

This study also compared educational neglect maltreatment findings to all maltreatment findings in Minnesota in 2000. There is a significant disparity in the percent totals of maltreatment findings in Caucasian, African American, and Indian children with Caucasian children having 19% of all educational neglect maltreatment and 54% of all maltreatment. African American children had 44% of educational neglect findings while having 24% of all maltreatment. Indian children had 12% of the educational neglect findings and 7% of the state wide maltreatment. Thus both African American and Indian children have a greater disparity in maltreatment determinations of educational neglect than determinations made with all maltreatments combined. The disparity shown in this study suggests that African American and Indian children are at much greater risk of being reported for educational neglect than their Caucasian peers.

Interestingly, race disparities disappear when improvement of attendance is analyzed for the year following a maltreatment finding of educational neglect. The rate of improvement is consistent for all races and reflects the rate of improvement for the total population. Thus, there is racial disparity in maltreatment findings that is not sustained in the improvement outcome of better attendance. The data analysis for this study suggests that once there is a maltreatment finding of educational neglect, there is approximately a 72% chance of all children having improved attendance when they remain in their home, irrespective of their gender, race, or geographic location with age having some variation.

What is unknown is what proportion of this 72% improvement chance is attributable specifically to the child protection intervention, what proportion occurs simply because an attendance problem is brought to the attention of the child and the family, or some unique characteristics of this particular child protection group.

Not every child improved their attendance; this study found a slight decline in attendance change as the child's age group increased. Six and seven year olds have an 80% improvement in attendance while 11 year olds have a 61% improvement. Assuming that the child protection intervention has some effect in attendance change, the age differential has implications for intervention models. The one intervention that the study was able to track was out-of-home placement. Of the total children followed for attendance change 4.2% (n=26) ended up in out-of-home placement subsequent to their maltreatment finding. Of these children, 81% had improved attendance the following year. Albeit the placement sub-sample is small, the results show that out-of-home placement may be related to improved attendance.

Limitations

This is an exploratory examination of educational neglect and attendance data; however this study is lacking a comparable group to provide an experimental design. Inferences must be made with caution. The study has very weak internal validity. Another weakness in the design is the lack of understanding of developmental sequences. It is still unknown whether truancy is a causative factor for delinquency, or if educational neglect decreased because of child protection's interventions. Perhaps educational neglect is present at high rates with other maltreatment factors of abuse or neglect and intervention in the abuse or neglect issues affects attendance. A third issue with the study is the inconsistent recording practices of educational neglect findings among counties. The statewide SSIS reporting lacks clarity in definition.

Conclusion

This study examined the school attendance of Minnesota children determined to be educationally neglected for the year in which that finding was determined and again in the year following determination. The results suggest that the current policy of child protection intervention in educational neglect may positively influence the attendance of children who experience absenteeism (approximately 70% of the sample had improved attendance). What is unknown is what specific proportion of the improvement in attendance can be attributed to the intervention provided by contact with county social services and what portion is due to error or factors affecting attendance improvement. To identify the specific effect of the child protection maltreatment a more rigorous experimental model would be needed. This descriptive study succeeded in illustrating the condition of the aggregated attendance rates for children identified with educational neglect and the resulting improved attendance rate some part of which is likely to be attributable to the child protection intervention.

Potential Guest Speakers

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