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EVIDENCE BRIEF

The **Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council** in collaboration with **Employment and Social Development Canada**

SSHRC's Imagining Canada's Future initiative mobilizes social sciences and humanities research to address emerging economic, societal and knowledge needs for Canada, and help guide decision making across all sectors, toward a better future. This evidence brief addresses the Future Challenge Area of: **The Emerging Asocial Society**.

Roll call: A scoping review of research pertaining to school attendance problems

About the project

Across much of the world, children spend a large portion of their waking hours in schools. To benefit from the rich social context of schools, children must attend. But what happens when attendance is significantly disrupted? School absenteeism has emerged as a complex problem in multiple research fields, given empirical findings pointing to numerous adverse consequences of absenteeism for children. To date, there has been limited integration of knowledge across fields in which school attendance problems (SAPs) have been studied. We synthesized the literature on SAPs using a scoping review methodology. We focused specifically on how school absenteeism is conceptualized, operationally defined, assessed and measured across various disciplines that usually do not intersect, including psychology, education, medicine, criminology, social work and sociology.

A search of five databases was conducted in August 2022. Studies included in our review met the following criteria: (a) published in English between 2012 and 2022 inclusive; (b) peer-reviewed; (c) school absenteeism was a central concept in the article; and (d) study subjects were in elementary school. The search of databases yielded 1,050 articles for screening. At the end of our two-step screening process, we identified 73 studies for inclusion in the study. Data coded into the spreadsheet included study characteristics and SAPs-relevant information (conceptualization, operational definition and measurement). School absenteeism was conceptualized as refusal, truancy, withdrawal or exclusion (Heyne et al., 2019). Finally, studies were coded according to the subject domain of the research (medical, educational, mental health or social-economic).

Key findings

- Research on the topic of SAPs is overwhelmingly quantitative in design, and only a minority of these studies are longitudinal studies, examining SAPs in relation to other important variables over a given time frame. Our study identified that only a very small percentage (>8%) of studies on SAPs in the last 10 years are qualitative in design.
- Most studies have been conducted in school settings. Very few studies have been conducted in clinical settings, even though, as shown through our own work with community partners and agencies related to SAPs, this issue is of high importance to service providers in community settings. Our own experience in combination with the findings of this scoping review indicates to us that this issue is very much understudied outside of school contexts.
- Most of the data used in the research originated in official school attendance records, followed by a smaller group of studies that deployed researcher-developed scales for the unique purpose of the particular study. Only a very small fraction of studies used established and validated scales for their research. Related to this, we observed that nearly all studies on SAPs have been conceived and designed in a theoretical vacuum. This is not surprising given the reliance on administrative school records as data sources for most of SAPs research.



- The majority of studies on SAPs originate in the United States, and a substantial minority comes from Europe. It is noteworthy that not one Canadian study emerged in our search strategy.
- The measurement of SAPs was differentiated among the four different types (withdrawal, truancy, refusal and exclusion) in the majority of studies, but a substantial minority of studies did not make any conceptual differentiation of SAPs.
- Most research on SAPs has been conducted in relation to medical/health variables, and the smallest grouping of study variables that have been linked to SAPs fall in the domain of mental health. Again, relative to our own experience of working with community mental health agencies on SAPs, this underrepresents the prevalence and importance of SAPs in the mental health sphere.
- In terms of differentiating SAPs from non-problematic attendance, the most common approach to measurement was simply identifying a particular threshold of school days missed. A somewhat less common approach to demarcating SAPs involved specifying a threshold of missed days in combination with a particular type of absenteeism (e.g., truancy).

Policy implications

- New research in the Canadian context is urgent, so we can learn about the experiences and impacts of SAPs on Canadian children and families. Canadian research on SAPs will be highly relevant to schools and family-serving agencies to inform their own policy and intervention work related to school attendance.
- It is both expected and at the same time limiting that most research on SAPs is conducted in school settings using school records as secondary data sources and, consequently, typically lacks a theoretical grounding. The field would benefit greatly from more high-quality research on SAPs conducted outside of schools and using data and sources that are aligned with theoretical and conceptual foundations that integrate critical health and social constructs.
- We situated this scoping review theoretically on human attachment and relational connection, constructs that are intimately tied to mental health and wellness. There are significant social-emotional and developmental risks to children when their school attendance is significantly disrupted. With so few studies on this topic, more research is required on the links between SAPs and mental health. This would provide vital findings to policy makers and service providers, who are limited in their ability to leverage SAPs clinical data in their service offerings.

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FURTHER INFORMATION

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