

*Roll call: A scoping review for knowledge synthesis of literatures
pertaining to school attendance problems*

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<https://www.jesswhitley.ca/crossroads-children-s-mental-health>

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Executive Summary

Background: the issue

Across much of the world, children and youth spend a large portion of their waking hours in schools. The variety and depth of social experiences they have with peers and adults in school settings make the school an influential context for psychosocial development (Roeser et al., 2000). To benefit from what this rich social context has to offer, children and youth must attend school. But what happens when their attendance is significantly disrupted? Even before COVID-19, school absenteeism had been emerging as a complex problem in multiple research fields given empirical findings pointing to numerous adverse consequences of absenteeism for children and youth. To date, there has been limited integration of knowledge across fields in which school attendance problems (SAPs) have been studied (e.g., education, psychology, criminal justice). An interdisciplinary lens is more urgent now, in light of increased SAPs related to an unrelenting pandemic that has altered the social experience of school and the changes it has imposed on schooling itself (Heyward, 2021).

Objectives

The present study synthesized the extant literature on school attendance problems (SAPs) using a scoping review methodology. It is 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. The primary outcomes of the scoping review are (a) a display of the full range of ways that SAPs are treated in the literature and (b) notable points of consensus about the nature of SAPs within and across research fields and professional disciplines. This research is guided by two theoretical frameworks that highlight the fundamental need for human connection: 1) Attachment Theory (Bowlby, 1988) and 2) Self-Determination Theory (SDT; Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Methodology (search methods, selection criteria, data collection and analysis)

A systematic search of 5 databases was conducted in August 2022. Studies were eligible for inclusion if they met the following criteria: 1) Language: published in English, 2) Year: published between 2012 and 2022 inclusive; 3) Type: journal articles; 4) Topic: school absenteeism was a central concept (a discussion of conceptualization, operationalization, and measurement was included in the text), 5) Population: study subjects were children in elementary school. The search yielded 1159 publications: ERIC (296), PsycInfo (217), Criminal Justice Abstracts (350), Medline (164), and Sociological Abstracts (132). After removing duplicates, 1050 articles were available for screening. Covidence was used to conduct a two-step screening process. At Step 1, publication titles and abstracts were reviewed according to the eligibility criteria stated above. Data extraction occurred concurrently with Step 2, the full text review process, by four independent reviewers, who have been trained in coding procedures. At the conclusion of Step 2, 73 studies had been selected for inclusion in the study and data extraction process.

Data to be coded into the spreadsheet includes study characteristics (e.g., research design, study setting, participant characteristics) and SAPs-relevant information (conceptualization,

operational definition, and measurement (e.g., scales/questionnaires, school records data). From there, the coding focused on substantive elements of the articles that provided data on the conceptualization, operationalization, and measurement of SAPs. The coding of the conceptual elements was guided by the framework proposed by Heyne et al. (2019), which organizes SAPs into four primary types: 1) school refusal, 2) school truancy, 3) school withdrawal, and 4) school truancy. The next steps in coding extracted data related to the measurement of SAPs, including information of the measurement of SAPs and the sources and informants providing the data in each study. Finally, studies were coded according the research domain that best captured the other study variables to which researchers were making links (e.g., health, educational variables)

Results

- Research on the topic of SAPs is overwhelming quantitative in design; only a very small percent (>8%) are qualitative in design.
- The large majority of studies have been conducted in school settings, very few studies have been conducted in clinical settings.
- 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.
- The majority of studies on SAPs originate in the USA, and a substantial minority comes from Europe. Our scoping review failed to identify one single Canadian study.
- Measurement of SAPs was differentiated among the 4 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.
- The most common approach to measurement of SAPs was simply identifying a particular threshold of school days missed.

Key messages

- School attendance problems are significantly understudied even while the effects of these problems can have wide ranging impacts on child development and family functioning.
- More research that is a) quantitative longitudinal, b) qualitative, and c) conducted in Canada is urgently needed to better inform the policy and intervention efforts of schools and family-serving community agencies.
- Research on SAPs is vulnerable to threats to the internal validity of the methods that have been widely used in the field to date. The development and implementation of valid and informative measures of SAPs needs to be a research priority.
- Research that explores a broader range of attendance problems is required, in order to develop richer and accurate understandings of why children miss school and how its impacts them and their families.

FULL REPORT

Roll call: A scoping review for knowledge synthesis of literatures pertaining to school attendance problems

Introduction

Background

Across much of the world, children and youth spend a large portion of their waking hours in schools. The variety and depth of social experiences they have with peers and adults in school settings make the school an influential context for psychosocial development (Roeser et al., 2000). To benefit from what this rich social context has to offer, children and youth must attend school. But what happens when their attendance is significantly disrupted? The COVID-19 pandemic focused public attention on school attendance in ways rarely seen to date. Schools closed for long periods in many parts of the world, and schooling moved to virtual platforms offering widely varying accessibility to students. In response, front page news stories reported the significant concerns of parents and educators about the impact of missed school on the academic and social development of children and youth (e.g., Histrova, 2020).

However, even before COVID-19, school absenteeism had been emerging as a complex problem in multiple research fields given empirical findings pointing to numerous adverse consequences of absenteeism for children and youth. To date, there has been limited integration of knowledge across fields in which school attendance problems (SAPs) have been studied (e.g., education, psychology, criminal justice). An interdisciplinary lens is more urgent now, in light of increased SAPs related to an unrelenting pandemic that has altered the social experience of school and the changes it has imposed on schooling itself (Heyward, 2021). The primary objective of this project is to synthesize knowledge related to the conceptualization, definition, and measurement of SAPs across diverse research domains. We expect that our findings will prove useful for researchers, policy makers, and clinical and education professionals who address the increasingly complex challenges related to SAPs in 21st century classrooms.

Literature Review

Research across a wide range of academic domains has shed light on many outcomes associated with school attendance and absenteeism. Regular school attendance has been linked to greater success in social, academic, and occupational functioning and increased quality of life among children and youth (Kearney & Albano, 2018). While occasional absence from school is typical among all children, absenteeism becomes problematic when it occurs frequently, has no justifiable reason as agreed upon by parents and school officials, and has detrimental consequences to the child (Kearney, 2001). School attendance problems (SAPs) are associated with a host of negative consequences, including lower

academic achievement, impaired social-emotional development, increased health risk behaviours, and the onset or exacerbation of mental health problems (Gottfried, 2014; Gubbels et al., 2019).

SAPs differ in etiology and presentation, and they have been studied across many academic disciplines, including education, psychology, sociology, cultural studies, social work, occupational therapy, criminal justice, and medicine. While this diversity of perspectives offers significant advantages, to date there has been very limited integration of knowledge about SAPs in these disparate literatures. As a result, perspectives on how to conceptualize and classify SAPs vary, and many different terms have been developed to capture this phenomenon. In one recent example, Heyne et al. (2019) organized SAPs into four categories: school refusal, truancy, school withdrawal, and school exclusion. School refusal is described as absence motivated by the child's emotional distress (e.g., anxiety, fear, depression). Truancy typically takes the form of skipping classes, leaving school early, or missing entire school days without parental or school permission. School withdrawal applies to situations in which parents prevent children from attending school, and school exclusion stems from disciplinary decisions made by the school authorities or a lack of willingness of a school to accommodate students' special needs. Although a comprehensive framework, it fails to account for other types of school absenteeism and limits understanding of the complex relationships between these types of SAPs and the child's environment. For example, through our current community partnership work linked to the theme of school attendance, we have learned about the positive social impacts of innovative learning hubs for Inuit youth offered by the Inuuqatigiit Centre that engage these youth collectively in culturally relevant activities and environments outside school walls (physical and virtual) (Inuuqatigiit, 2021).

Project Themes

Given the fundamental social character of schooling, and the consequences of chronic absence along with rising concerns about virtual schooling and its implications for SAPs, our project aligns directly with the objectives of the Emerging Asocial Society funding stream. Our project links to three themes related to this global challenge: (a) expressions of belonging, (b) prosocial and antisocial behaviours, and (c) historical context. In our work, these themes interrelate in multiple complex ways.

Expressions of Belonging. Converging lines of theoretical and empirical evidence from decades of research show clearly that relationships are central and fundamental to human experience inside families, peer groups, and schools and are vital to healthy development (Spilt et al., 2011). This principle is captured best by two theories that, at their core, highlight the fundamental need for human connection: Attachment Theory and Self-Determination Theory. Attachment Theory posits that children who experience warm, attuned, and reliable caring from caregivers tend to develop secure internal models of relationships, whereas early relationships marked by emotional aloofness, hostility, and unreliable caring tend to foster insecure attachment models that negatively impact a person's later relationship experiences (Bowlby, 1988). While this model is influential, it is not entirely

determinative. Children who are insecure in primary attachments can nonetheless develop secure relationships with other adults including teachers. The other theory that frames our scholarship, Self-Determination Theory (SDT), posits that human behaviour is organized by three fundamental and interconnected needs: autonomy (acting with self-direction), competence (feeling capable and developing mastery), and connection (caring, affectionate bonds with others) (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Numerous studies have revealed that social contexts like schools that provide for these basic needs are foundational to healthy psychosocial development.

Within the diverse social context of a school, teachers, perhaps more than any other actors, have the greatest opportunity to provide relationship experiences that support positive development. Evidence shows that the quality of teacher-student relationships (TSRs), particularly in the earlier grades, is foundational to students' academic success, psychosocial functioning (e.g., adjustment to school, prosocial behavior, bullying involvement), and motivation and school engagement (Sabol & Pianta, 2012). In later grades, belongingness—the feeling of being supported and accepted by others—is critical to adolescents' success in school and helps foster sociability, perceived competence, and self-esteem, and reduced hostility, anxiousness, and depression (Van Ryzin et al., 2009). In Canada, racialized and ethnic minority youth report much weaker connections and lower rates of social belonging at school (Patte et al., 2021). Fearful or conflictual relations with teachers have been implicated in school absenteeism (Wang & Holcombe, 2010). Conversely, TSRs characterized by respect, trust, and academic and emotional support have been associated with lower absenteeism rates among older students (Hendron & Kearney, 2016). The effects of positive TSRs can even extend beyond the classroom, buffering the negative effects of problematic relationships with peers and parents (Wang et al., 2013). Furthermore, vulnerable children struggling with various psychosocial issues show the largest gains on psychosocial and academic outcomes when they experience positive connections with their teachers (Sobel & Pianta, 2012). These children were also those most impacted during COVID-19, when layers of educational and community connection and support were severed (Whitley et al., 2021). Emerging research shows that TSRs have served as a crucial protective factor for students during the pandemic (Bray et al., 2021; Ye et al., 2021).

Prosocial/Antisocial Behaviours. Seen through a clinical lens, absenteeism is a highly complex issue due to its symptom heterogeneity and its numerous and diverse risk factors (Hendron & Kearney, 2016). Problematic school absenteeism is linked to many serious problems including internalizing and externalizing behavioural disorders, and youth justice system involvement. Nik Jafaar et al. (2013) found that adolescents who were chronically truant had higher scores on externalizing disorder (i.e., conduct problems, and other aggressive and delinquent behaviour). Monahan et al. (2014) studied zero-tolerance policies, which are anchored in punitive discipline strategies such as school suspension and expulsion, and found that youth who were suspended or expelled from school had increased likelihood of arrest within the same month. Furthermore, the effect was actually stronger among youth with fewer underlying risk factors (e.g., no history of behaviour problems, less delinquent peers), leading

the researchers to conclude that school exclusion used as a discipline policy places youth at increased risk for involvement in the youth justice system. Many concerns have been noted about the overrepresentation of racialized youth labelled as truant and as exhibiting anti-social behaviours, reflected in greater involvement in the youth justice system and the 'school to prison' pipeline (Weathers et al., 2021).

Historical Context. The research literature has documented the long history of disproportionate exclusion of racialized children and youth from classrooms and schools, thus exacerbating the SAPs experienced by these children and youth and adding to the multiple social risks that they already face (Evans et al., 2013). Anyon et al. (2014) found that student racial background and school racial composition remain as enduring risks at decision points in the school discipline process. They argued for school policies to promote restorative discipline practices as an inclusive strategy to counter racist trends in exclusionary discipline practices in school systems. Similarly, Skiba et al. (2011), who examined racial bias in school discipline trends, found that students from African American and Latino families were more likely than their White peers to be suspended or expelled from school for the same or similar problem behaviour. They concluded that their results were consistent with a long history of similar findings, and they called for action in the domains of policy, practice, and research to address the long-documented racial disparities in school exclusion as a disciplinary policy. Canada's history of systematic eradication of family, language and culture among First Nations, Métis and Inuit (FNMI) children and youth resonates today. FNMI youth, particularly those with a parent who attended a residential school, have far greater rates of absenteeism, suspensions, expulsions and involvement with the youth justice system and far lower rates of school connectedness and graduation than their non-FNMI peers (Feir, 2016; Rogers & Aglukark, 2021).

Objectives

The literature on school attendance problems (SAPs) across disciplines lacks complexity, consensus and clarity, and researchers, policymakers, and practitioners differ in how to conceptualize, define, assess, and measure absenteeism. As such, there remains a need in the SAP literature to conceptually synthesize the existing body of knowledge on the topic to provide greater depth, clarity, and direction to future SAP research and policymaking. According to Kearney (2021), addressing an issue as complex as SAPs requires a synthesis of analytic and systemic approaches that combines perspectives across varied disciplines. Consistent with this argument, the present study adopts an integrative, multi-disciplinary perspective to understanding school absenteeism. This integrative approach aims to consider both individual-level factors and broader contextual, systemic factors in order to not only achieve a greater understanding of this complex issue but also to adequately account for factors inherent to the broader systems in which students and their families live that serve to impact school attendance.

We propose to synthesize the extant literature on SAPs using a scoping review methodology. To ensure as much breadth as possible, we will search for relevant literature in different academic disciplines that usually do not intersect, including education, psychology, criminology, cultural studies, social work, occupational therapy, and medicine. Our review will focus specifically on how school absenteeism is conceptualized, operationally defined, assessed, and measured in different academic, cultural, and professional/clinical contexts. The primary outcomes of the scoping review will be (a) a display of the full range of ways that SAPs are treated in the literature and (b) notable points of consensus about the nature of SAPs within and across research fields and professional disciplines. We believe this review will be informative and useful to researchers, policymakers, and practitioners seeking to understand and develop effective solutions to problematic school attendance. In doing so, teachers, school personnel, and other key adults who work directly with children and youth will be better positioned to both prevent SAPs and identify and intervene when students experience SAPs.

Methods

A systematic search of 5 databases was conducted in August 2022. Studies were eligible for inclusion if they met the following criteria: 1) Language: published in English, 2) Year: published between 2012 and 2022 inclusive; 3) Type: journal articles; 4) Topic: school absenteeism was a central concept (a discussion of conceptualization, operationalization, and measurement was included in the text), 5) Population: study subjects were children in elementary school. All searches included some or all of the following subject headings and search terms to capture SAPs: school attendance, school absenteeism, school attendance problems, truancy, school refusal, school phobia, suspension, and expulsion. All of these concepts were coded as search terms (e.g., truan* was used to include all versions of the word, like truancy and truant) and as subject headings, when possible. Similarly, we used search terms and subject headings such as “elementary education”, “elementary schools”, “middle schools”, and “elementary school students” to capture students in elementary and middle schools. By combining these two searches, we limited our review of the absenteeism literature to children in elementary and middle schools (roughly grades 1 through 8). Tables 1 through 5 outline the search strategies for each aforementioned database.

The search yielded 1159 publications: ERIC (296), PsycInfo (217), Criminal Justice Abstracts (350), Medline (164), and Sociological Abstracts (132). After removing duplicates, 1050 articles were available for screening. Covidence was used to conduct a two-step screening process. At Step 1, publication titles and abstracts were reviewed according to the eligibility criteria stated above. Data extraction is occurring concurrently with Step 2, the full text review process, by four independent reviewers, who have been trained in coding procedures. Figure 1 shows the PRISMA diagram resulting from the screening process. At the conclusion of Step 2, 73 studies had been selected for inclusion in the study and data extraction.

An Excel spreadsheet was developed to code data extracted from the selected articles. The coding process was guided by the conceptual framework proposed by Heyne et al. (2019), which organizes SAPs into four predominant types: 1) school refusal, 2) school truancy, 3) school withdrawal, and 4) school truancy. Data that was coded into the spreadsheet includes study characteristics (e.g., study research design, geographical location, participant characteristics) and SAPs-relevant information (conceptualization, operational definition, measurement, and outcome variables linked with SAPs).

Table 1

ERIC OVID Search Strategy

Search line	Search term
1	Truancy/
2	School phobia/
3	Suspension/
4	Expulsion/
5	(school* adj2 (absen* or non-attend* or refus* or phobi* or truan* or suspen* or expel* or expulsion* or exclude* or exclusion* or withdraw*)).ti,ab.
6	("school attendance" adj2 (problem* or difficult* or concern* or issue*)).ti,ab.
7	1 or 2 or 3 or 4 or 5 or 6
8	exp Elementary Education/
9	schools/or elementary schools/or middle schools/or private schools/or public schools/
10	elementary school students/ or middle school students/
11	(school* or class or classes or classroom*).ti,ab.
12	((school* or elementary or primary or grade*) adj2 (student* or children)).ti,ab.
13	attendance/
14	8 or 9 or 10 or 11 or 12
15	13 and 14
16	7 and 15
17	limit 16 to (english language and journal articles and yr="2012 - 2022")

Table 2

PsycInfo OVID Search Strategy

Search line	Search term
1	School truancy/
2	School refusal/
3	School phobia/

4	Suspension/
5	Expulsion/
6	School truancy/
7	(school* adj2 (absen* or non-attend* or refus* or phobi* or truan* or suspen* or expel* or expulsion* or exclude* or exclusion* or withdraw*)).ti,ab.
8	("school attendance" adj2 (problem* or difficult* or concern* or issue*)).ti,ab.
9	1 or 2 or 3 or 4 or 5 or 6 or 7
10	Elementary Education/
11	schools/or elementary schools/or middle schools/or private schools/or public schools/
12	elementary school students/ or middle school students/
13	(school* or class or classes or classroom*).ti,ab.
14	((school* or elementary or primary or grade*) adj2 (student* or children)).ti,ab.
15	School attendance/
16	9 or 10 or 11 or 12 or 13
17	14 and 15
18	8 and 16
19	limit 17 to (english language and "0100 journal" and yr="2012 - 2022")

Table 3

Criminal Justice Abstracts Search Strategy

Search line	Search term
1	(ZU "school attendance") or (ZU "school absenteeism") or (ZU "school phobia") or (ZU "exclusion from school")
2	ZU ("student suspension") or ZU ("student expulsion")
3	TI (school* N2 (absen* or non-attend* or refus* or phobi* or truan* or suspen* or expel* or expulsion* or exclude* or exclusion* or withdraw*)) or AB (school* N2 (absen* or non-attend* or refus* or phobi* or truan* or suspen* or expel* or expulsion* or exclude* or exclusion* or withdraw*))
4	TI ("school attendance" N2 (problem* or difficult* or concern* or issue*)) or AB ("school attendance" N2 (problem* or difficult* or concern* or issue*))
5	S1 or S2 OR S3 OR S4
6	((ZU "elementary education"))
7	(ZU "schools") or (ZU "elementary schools") or (ZU "middle schools") or (ZU "private schools") or (ZU "public schools")
8	(ZU "school children") or ("ZU "middle school students")

9	TI (school* or class or classes or classroom*) or AB (school* or class or classes or classroom*)
10	TI ((school* or elementary or primary or grade*) N2 (student* or children)) or AB ((school* or elementary or primary or grade*) N2 (student* or children))
11	S6 or S7 or S8 or S9 or S10
12	S5 and S11
13	Limiters applied to 12 - Publication Date: 20120101-20221231; Publication Type: Academic Journal; Language: English

Table 4

MEDLINE OVID Search Strategy

Search line	Search term
	(school* adj2 (absen* or non-attend* or refus* or phobi* or truan* or suspen* or expel* or expulsion* or exclude* or exclusion* or withdraw*)).ti,ab.
	("school attendance" adj2 (problem* or difficult* or concern* or issue*)).ti,ab.
	1 or 2
	Education/
	Schools/
	Child/ or Students/
	("elementary school students" or "middle school students").ti,ab.
	((school* or elementary or primary or grade*) adj2 (student* or children)).ti,ab.
	(school* or class or classes or classroom*).ti,ab.
	4 or 5 or 6 or 7 or 8 or 9 or 10
	3 and 11
	8 and 16
	limit 17 to (english language and "0100 journal" and yr="2012 - 2022")

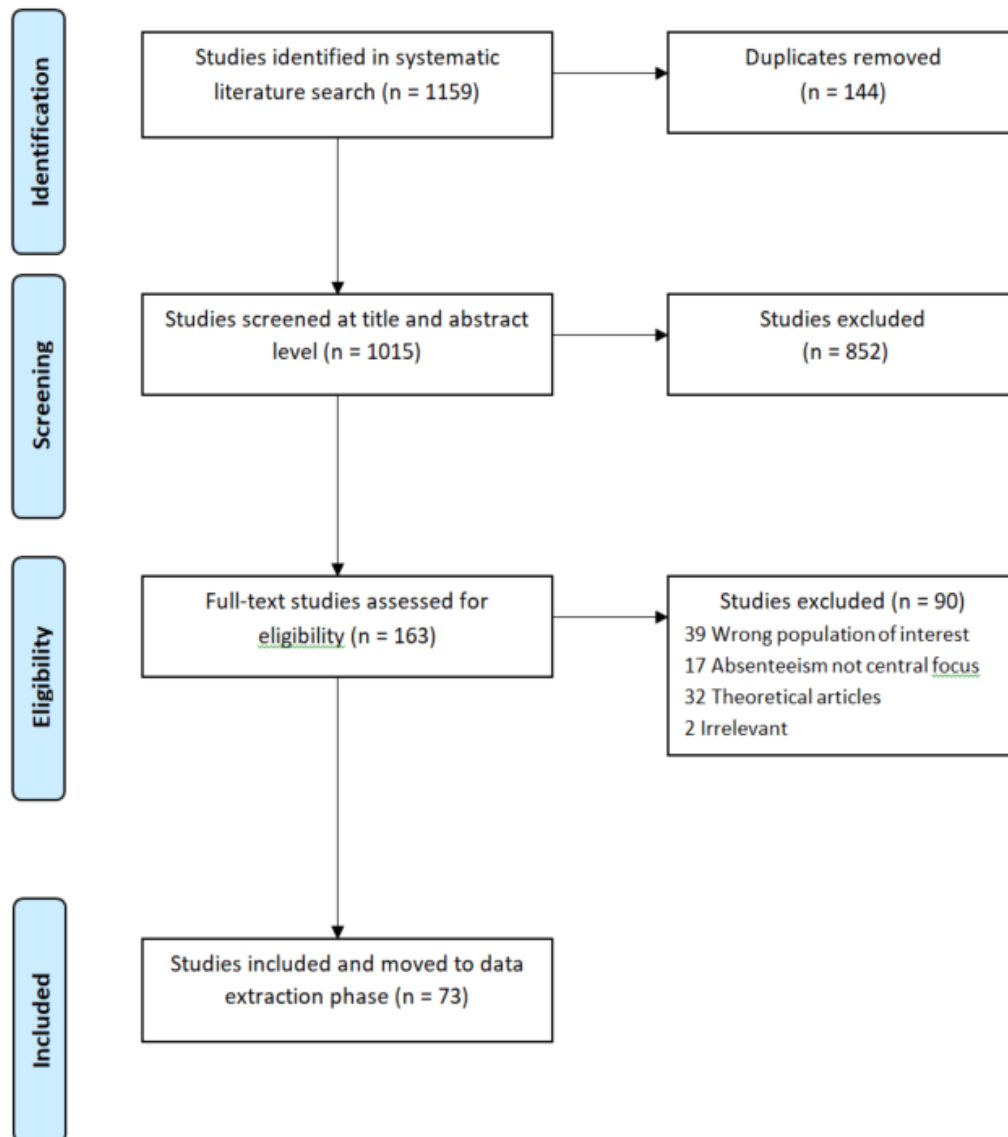
Table 5

Sociological Abstracts Search Strategy

Search line	Search term
1	MAINSUBJECT.EXACT("School Attendance")
2	MAINSUBJECT.EXACT("Absenteeism")
3	MAINSUBJECT.EXACT("Truancy")

4	TI (school* N2 (absen* or non-attend* or refus* or phobi* or truan* or suspen* or expel* or expulsion* or exclude* or exclusion* or withdraw*)) or AB (school* N2 (absen* or non-attend* or refus* or phobi* or truan* or suspen* or expel* or expulsion* or exclude* or exclusion* or withdraw*))
5	TI ("school attendance" N2 (problem* or difficult* or concern* or issue*)) or AB ("school attendance" N2 (problem* or difficult* or concern* or issue*))
6	S1 or S2 or S3 or S4 of S5
7	MAINSUBJECT.EXACT("Elementary Education")
8	MAINSUBJECT.EXACT("Elementary Schools") OR MAINSUBJECT.EXACT("Public Schools") or MAINSUBJECT.EXACT("Private Schools)
9	MAINSUBJECT.EXACT("Elementary School Students")
10	TI ((school* or elementary or primary or grade*) N2 (student* or children)) OR AB ((school* or elementary or primary or grade*) N2 (student* or children))
11	TI (school* OR class OR classes OR classroom*) OR AB (school* OR class OR classes OR classroom*)
12	S7 or S8 or S9 or S10 or S11
13	S6 and S12
14	limit S13 to (stype.exact("Scholarly Journals") AND la.exact("ENG") AND pd(20120101-20221231))

Figure 1
Study Selection Flowchart



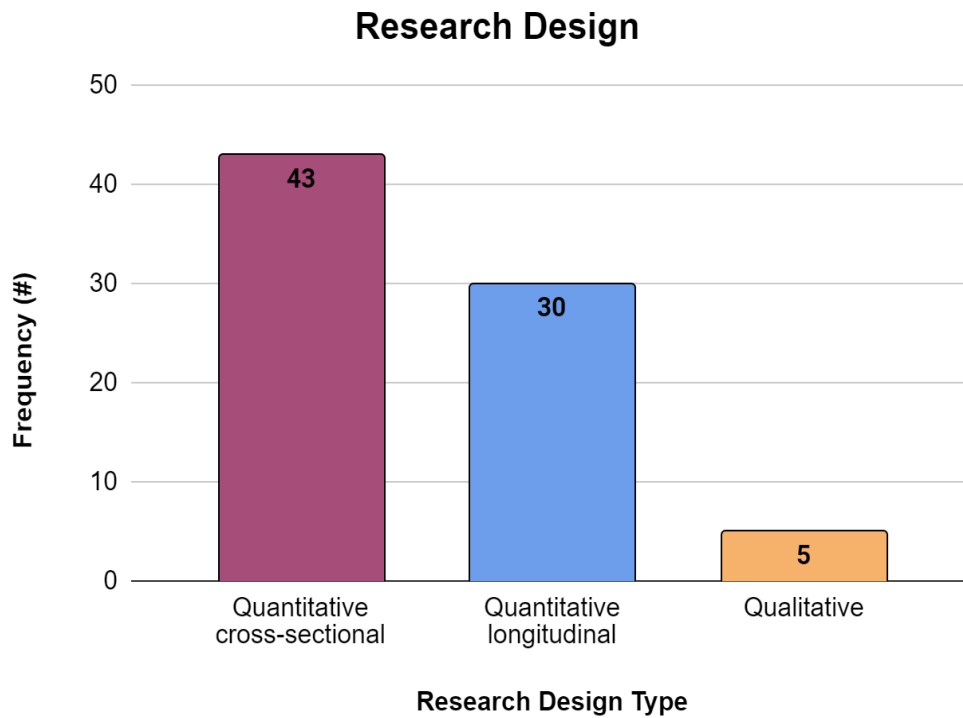
Results

Across the 73 studies reviewed, the majority used a quantitative research design (see Figure 2). The primary study setting was elementary or middle school (see Figure 3), and 56.2% of studies were conducted in the United States (see Figure 4). Participants in these studies were elementary school students (or a mixed sample of elementary and middle school students), roughly spanning grades 1 through 8. Some study samples also included parents/caregivers, teachers, or community agency workers who acted as informants. Most studies either had a sample size of 0-1000 participants or more than 4000 participants (see Figure 5).

Findings indicate that school absenteeism is conceptualized as a multifactorial and heterogeneous issue related to multiple factors, including the child, the family, and the school or learning environment. This is reflected by the fact that most studies did not explicitly define or conceptualize the reason behind participants' school absences (see Figure 6). In such cases, we conceptualized absenteeism as "undifferentiated". The second most common conceptualization of absenteeism was school withdrawal, which Heyne et al. (2019) define as parent-motivated factors for a child's absenteeism, such as long-term medical absence (e.g., asthma). Following this, the majority of operational definitions employed in studies were characterized by 1) the number of missed school days in a specified period or 2) a combination of the reason for absence and the number of missed school days in a specified period (see Figure 7). Furthermore, researchers typically used information from school records to measure absenteeism (see Figure 8). Published scales/questionnaires such as the School Non-Attendance Checklist (SNACK; Heyne et al., 2019), the School Refusal Assessment Scale (SRAS; Kearney & Silverman, 1993), and the School Refusal Assessment Scale Revised (SRAS-R; Kearney, 2002) were used sparingly to measure absenteeism. Following this, the most common informant type for information on school absenteeism were school officials (see Figure 9), and the longest reporting interval was typically one academic year (see Figure 10).

Figure 2

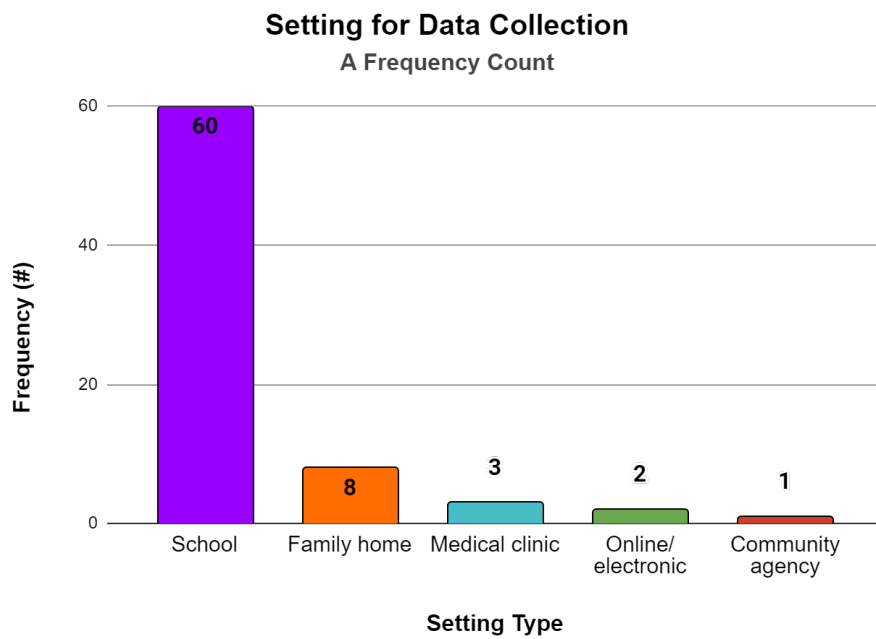
Research Design Type



Note. This bar graph depicts a frequency count for each of 3 research design types. The frequency count represents the number of instances in which a particular research design was used across the 73 studies reviewed. Please note that the total number of instances exceeds 73 because some studies used more than one research design.

Figure 3

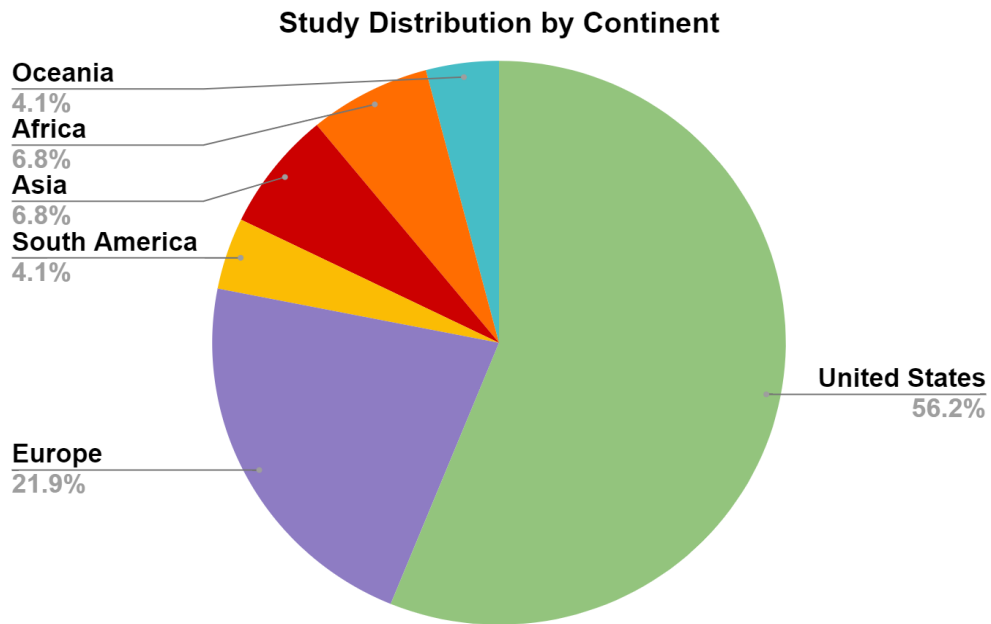
Setting for Data Collection



Note. This bar graph depicts a frequency count for each of 5 study settings. The frequency count represents the number of instances in which a particular setting was used for data collection across the 73 studies reviewed. Please note that the total number of instances exceeds 73 because some studies used more than one setting.

Figure 4

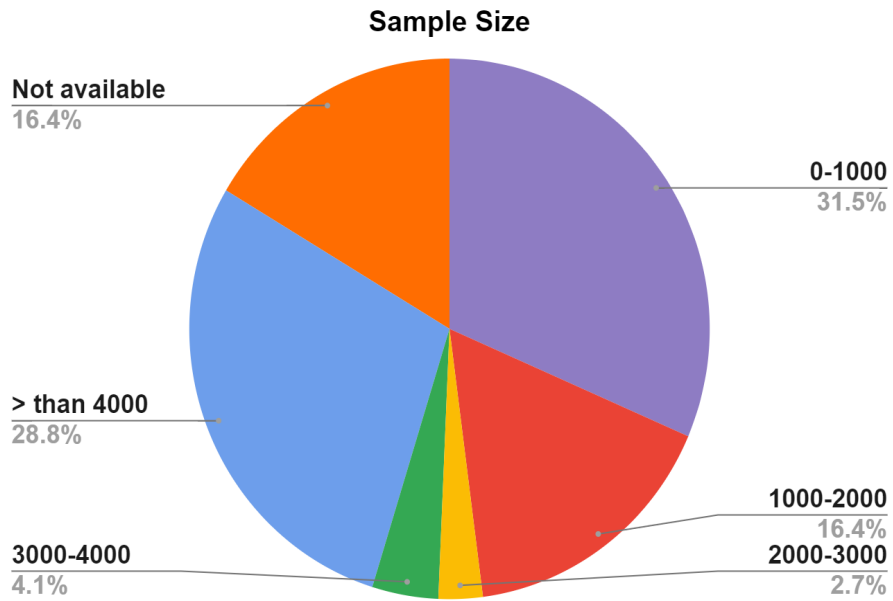
Study Distribution by Continent



Note. This pie chart depicts the percentage of studies conducted in each of 6 continents.

Figure 5

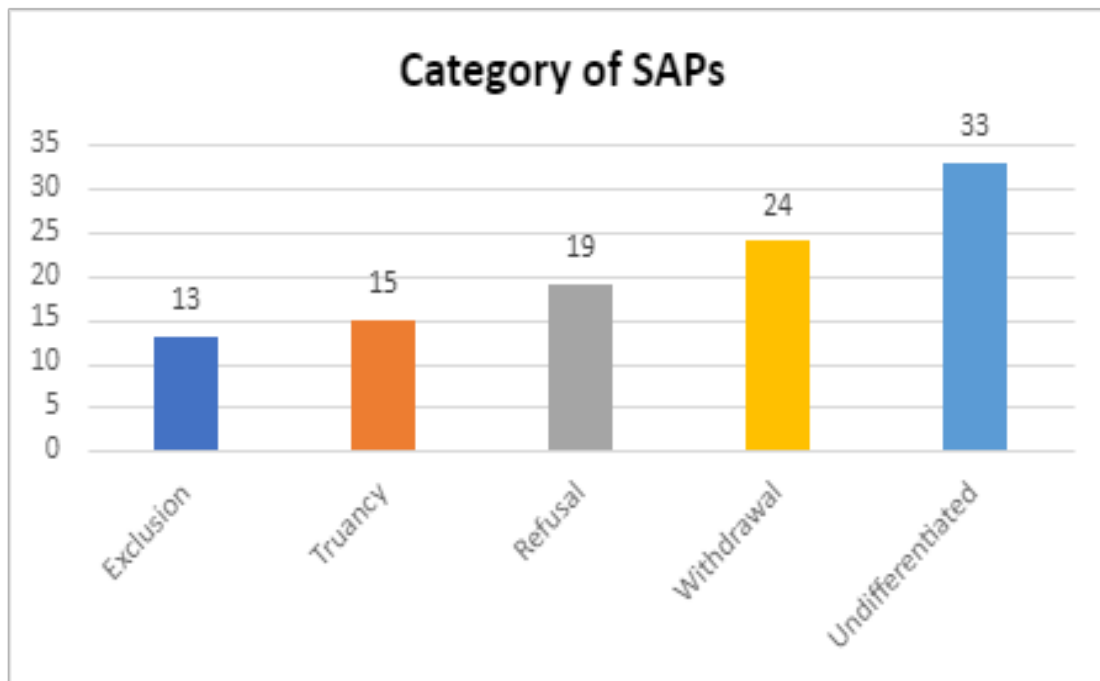
Sample Size across Studies



Note. This pie chart depicts the percentage of studies whose sample size falls into each of 6 ranges.

Figure 6

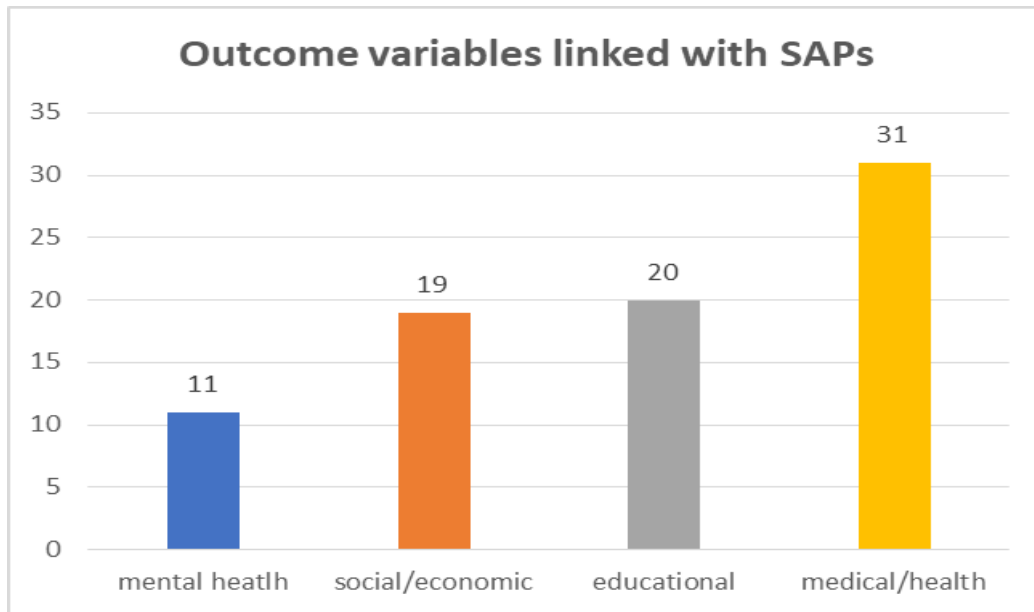
Conceptualization of SAPs by Category



Note. This bar graph depicts a frequency count for 5 different types of SAPs. The frequency count represents the number of instances in which a particular type of absenteeism conceptualization was explicitly defined and employed by study researchers. Please note that the total number of instances exceeds 73 because some studies used more than type of conceptualization.

Figure 7

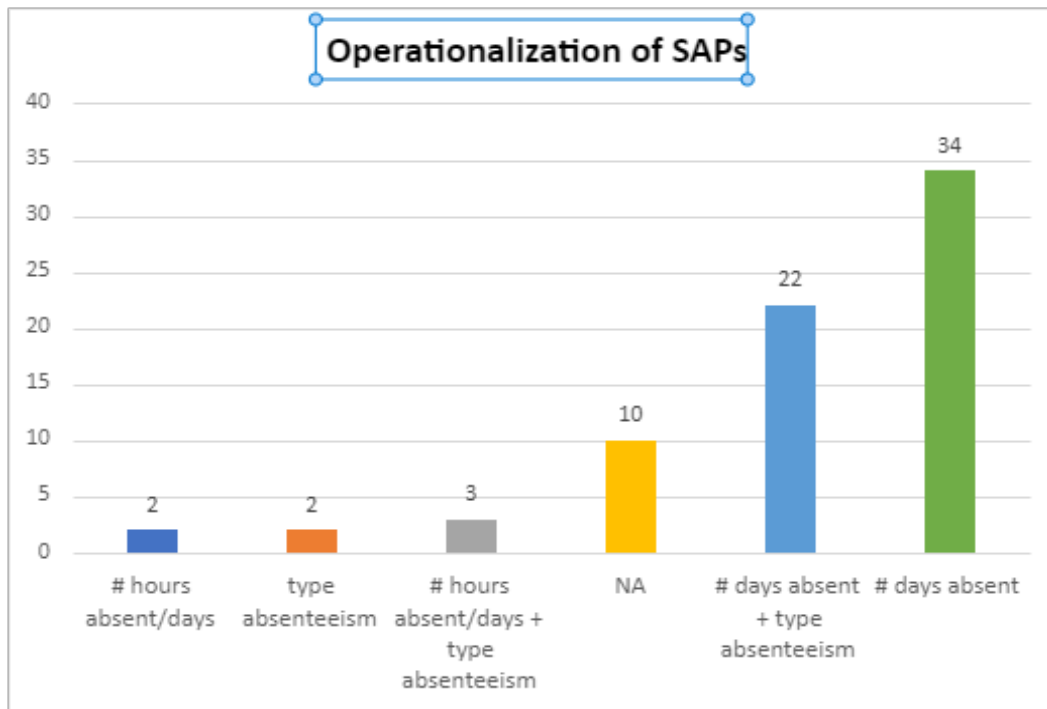
Outcome Variables linked with SAPs



Note. This bar graph depicts a frequency count for each of four domains of outcome variables linked to absenteeism. The frequency count represents the number of instances in which a particular outcome variable linked to SAPs could be categorized into one of these domains. Please note that the total number of instances exceeds 73 because some studies had outcome variables that could be categorized into multiple domains.

Figure 8

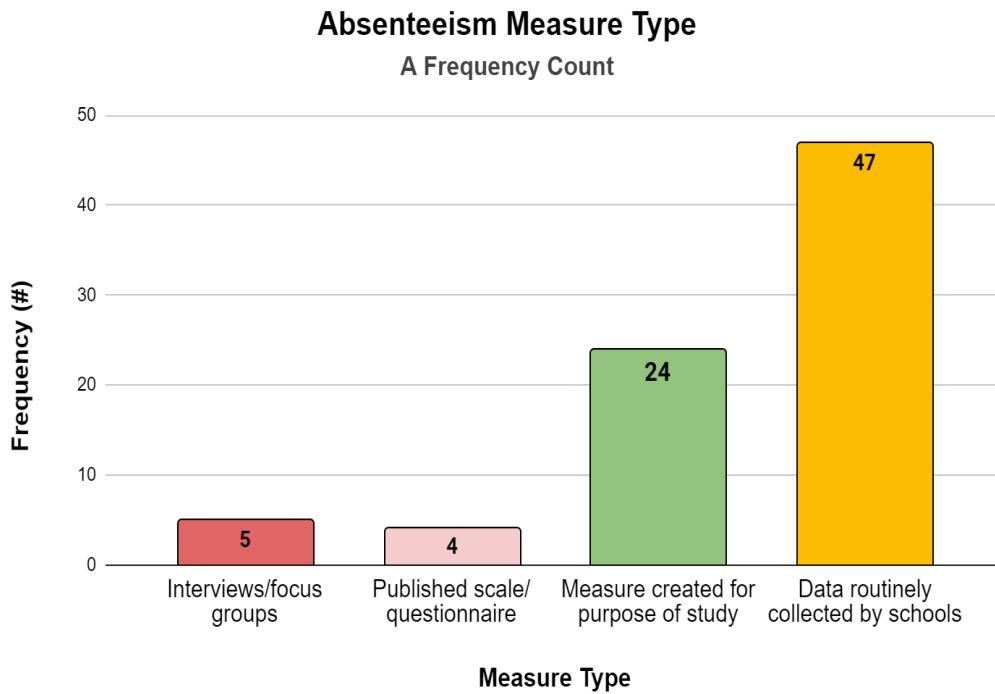
Operationalization of SAPs



Note. This bar graph depicts the 6 different types of operational definitions for school absenteeism that appeared in the 73 studies reviewed. The numbers above each bar represent how many studies used each type of operational definition. For example, 34 studies operationalized absenteeism as the number of missed school days.

Figure 9

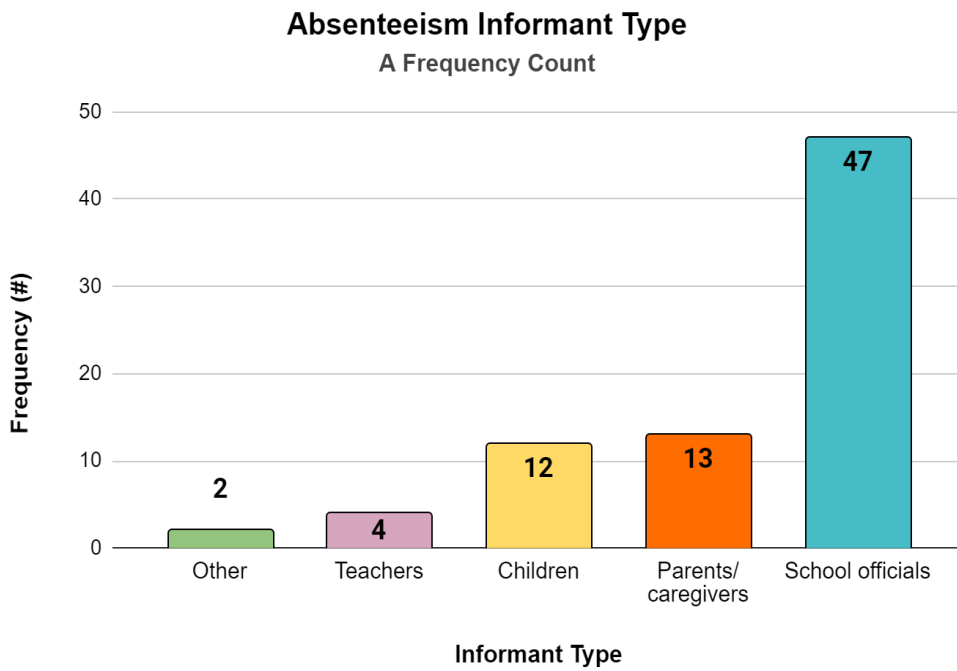
Absenteeism Measure Type



Note. This bar graph depicts a frequency count for each of four absenteeism measure types. The frequency count represents the number of instances that a particular measure type was used across the 73 studies reviewed. Please note that the total number of instances exceeds 73 because some studies used more than a single measure. Although not depicted in the table, the published scales or questionnaires that were used include the School Refusal Assessment Scale (n=1; Kearney & Silverman, 1993), the School Refusal Assessment Scale Revised (n=2; Kearney, 2002), and the School Non-Attendance Checklist (n=1; Heyne et al., 2017).

Figure 10

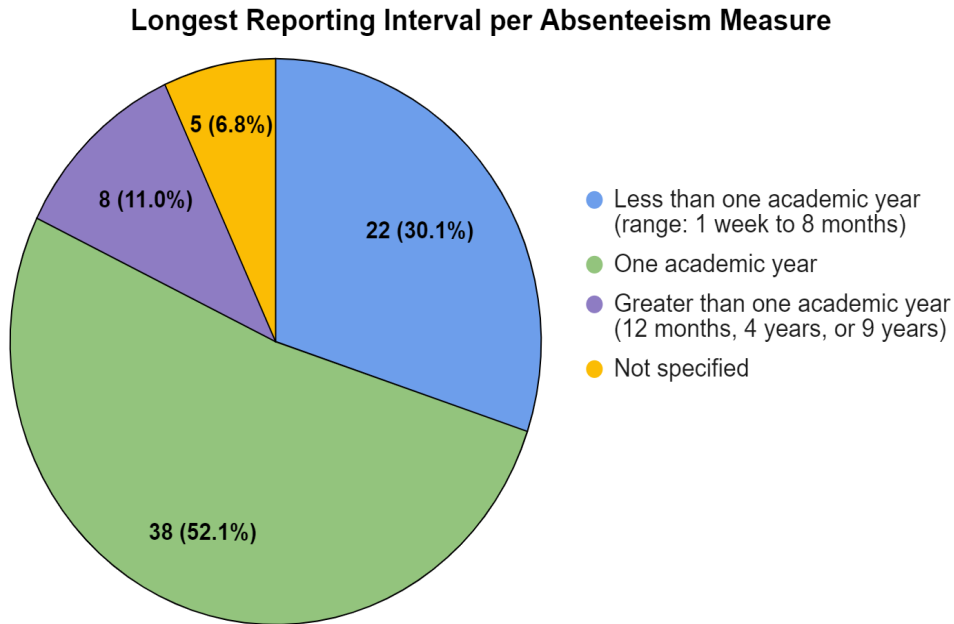
Absenteeism Informant Type



Note. This bar graph depicts a frequency count for each of five absenteeism informant types. The frequency count represents the number of instances in which a particular informant type was used across the 73 studies reviewed. Please note that the total number of instances exceeds 73 because some studies used more than one informant type. Although not depicted in the table, the "other" category includes community agency workers (n=1) and research team members partaking in the study's interventions (n=1).

Figure 11

Longest Reporting Interval per Absenteeism Measure



Note. This pie chart depicts the longest reporting interval described in each study's absenteeism measures. The longest reporting interval represents the longest timespan for which absenteeism was measured in a particular study. For example, researchers may have asked parents to retrospectively report the number of days that their child was absent from school over the past three weeks. In other instances, studies that collected their absenteeism data from school records typically measured absenteeism across one academic year.

Summary of Study Findings and Implications

Findings

- Research on the topic of SAPs is overwhelming 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 on a very small percent (>8%) of studies on SAPs in the last 10 years are qualitative in design.
- The large majority of studies have been conducted in school settings. Very few studies have been conducted in clinical settings, even though, 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 indicate 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 the very large majority of 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 USA, and a substantial minority comes from Europe. It is noteworthy that not one Canadian study emerged in our wide-ranging search strategy.
- The measurement of SAPs was differentiated among the 4 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 under-represents 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).

Implications and Conclusions

- More qualitative research that explores lived experiences of children and families in relation to school attendance problems would expand and diversify the current knowledge base on SAPs.
- Regarding quantitative research, high-quality longitudinal research on SAPs, and connections to important variables impacting children's psychosocial development, would provide high value for advancing knowledge on SAPs.
- New research in the Canadian context is urgent, so we can learn about the experiences and the impacts of SAPs on Canadian children and families. In addition, Canadian research on SAPs will be highly relevant to schools and family-serving agencies in Canada 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. Additionally, it is not surprising given these origins of most SAPs research that it typically lacks a theoretical grounding, given that existing research is largely based on administrative data. 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.
- There is a very small number of scales that have been developed rigorously to measure SAPs currently in use in the field. Unfortunately, the very large majority of researcher-developed scales have received little to no empirical validation, and this limits the value and usefulness of findings that are generated from these studies. The field would benefit from measurement strategies that are developed using more rigorous scale development methods in research.
- We situated this scoping review theoretically on human attachment and relational connection, constructs that are intimately tied to mental health and wellness. Despite the paucity of mental health-related research on SAPs, we believe that there are significant social-emotional and developmental risks to children when their school attendance is significantly disrupted. However, it is clear that more research is required on the links between SAPs and mental health and wellness variables. This would provide vital findings to knowledge users, such as the family-serving community agencies in our own partnership network, who limited in their ability to leverage SAPs clinical data in their service offerings.

Knowledge mobilization activities

Our knowledge mobilization plan is a multi-pronged approach that is consistent with our project objectives and timeframe for this project. The goals for knowledge mobilization include a) adding to limited conceptual and theoretical understanding in the area of attendance, b)

communicating practice-and policy- relevant findings for those working in related fields (e.g. education, social work, youth justice), c) informing ongoing and future research in the field.

Our plan builds off the work of our SSHRC Engage and Partnership Development Grants to translate and disseminate knowledge to various audiences. Our knowledge mobilization includes: (1) Collaborative KM Development, (2) Non-Academic Dissemination and Social Media Strategy, and (3) Academic Dissemination. These elements reflect planning for diverse audiences and modalities but also layering, which involves “strategically determining the level of detail, complexity, and language required to effectively communicate ideas and arguments with different types of actor” (Anderson & McLachlan, 2016, p. 306). This approach is not hierarchical, with scientific communication as the most highly valued, but also considers the value and use of the knowledge in creating “a more just and sustainable world” (p. 306).

Collaborative KM development. We have learned through our work with community partners that our typical ways of translating and disseminating important research findings are not always reflective of diverse communities. For example, in our recent engagement with YouthNet/RéseauAdo, a local health promotion organization, they requested recruitment and sharing of findings via Instagram posts and Tiktok videos. This organization in particular has a requirement of ‘nothing about us without us.’ For all of our stakeholder consultations on knowledge mobilization, we have allocated funds through our project budget to compensate our partners for their time in working alongside us to determine knowledge mobilization content and modalities.

Through our experiences in partnership research to date, we have learned that many of our clinical and education partners prefer infographics and short animated videos, which we have created in the past (e.g. CCMHC-uOttawa page). For the current project, we will engage a range of stakeholders with whom we have existing partnerships and for whom our project findings are relevant (e.g. youth, parents, educators, clinicians, agency managers, social workers, researchers) in guiding the development and dissemination of our knowledge mobilization products. This will take place using a range of approaches to meet the needs and recognize the limited resources of this diverse group, including brief consultations at regional meetings already taking place, e-mailed documents where stakeholders can comment on drafts, and phone/video check-ins with organized groups (e.g. YouthNet/RéseauAdo, Parent’s Lifeline of Eastern Ontario, Youville Centre).

Non-Academic Dissemination and Social Media Strategy. Specifics of our plan for non-academic dissemination will emerge from our discussions with stakeholders. However, we anticipate a range of products and approaches, including a) a brief whiteboard video, b) social media video/visual products (Twitter, Instagram/Facebook), c) a guest appearance by members of our team on a Canadian podcast (voicEd), and c) two 1-page infographics. We will also bring research findings to clinical, practitioner, and community-focused panels and conferences at venues like the Canadian Educators Conference on Mental Health, the Children’s Mental Health Ontario annual conference, and Youth Mental Health Canada.

Academic Dissemination. Dissemination to academic audiences is planned to occur throughout presentations at two conferences as well as open-access publication of two articles in refereed journals. In the past two years, with support from our SSHRC grants, we have co-presented 10 scholarly symposia, papers and posters, published 3 articles and have 3 papers under review. We plan to write two articles for submission to peer-reviewed journals using the findings from the scoping review. We will apply for dissemination funding available through uOttawa to support open-access publication where article processing charges are required. Journal articles will also be submitted to the uoResearch repository within 12 months of publication.

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