

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

**PSYCHO-BEHAVIOURAL FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO
TRUANCY AMONG MALAY SECONDARY SCHOOL
STUDENTS IN MALAYSIA**

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Abstract

Objective: Truancy is a disciplinary problem, which frequently occurs among school students and it has many contributory as well as inter-related factors. It is a growing problem in this country and it often becomes a prelude to other delinquent behaviours. The study objective is to determine the prevalence of truancy as well as factors related to it including psycho-behavioural factors. **Methods:** A cross-sectional study involving 556 Malay student's selected using multi-stage sampling was conducted. **Results:** The overall prevalence of truancy is 30.2%. The predictors to truancy are age, students who frequenting entertainment centre, students who have not completed Quran recital, coping strategies using problems solving methods and time spent watching television/video. There is a significant association between truancy and psycho-behaviour such as watching video/internet pornography, frequenting entertainment centre, smoking, motorcycle racing and dating a special friend. **Conclusion:** Truancy is a social issue, which must be given serious attention by all concerned components of the society. *ASEAN Journal of Psychiatry, Vol. 13 (2): July – December 2012: XX XX.*

Keywords: Truancy, Malay Students, Coping Strategies, Delinquent Behaviours

Introduction

Playing truant is one of the disciplinary problems with highest rate among school students. Truancy, as defined by the Federal Territory Education Department of Kuala Lumpur is not attending school on official school days without reason or without written reasons from parents or guardians or medical doctors [1]. According to a report the rate of truancy in year 2003 was 0.86%; with criminal behaviour (0.24%), obscene behaviour (0.03%), destructive behaviour (0.04%) and dishonest behaviour (0.02%) [1]. Those who manifested delinquent/ high level of aggressive behavior

were more than twice at risk than other children to develop drug use disorder [2]. In year 2003, 43,421 students played truant from school and this number has increased 25% compared with the number of truanancies in year 2000, which was 34,613. This trend is worrying and if steps are not taken to put a stop to it, this problem will evolve into a future menace to society.

Several studies conducted in Malaysia showed the truancy rate among students is at a critical stage, between 20 and 40%. According to a study of high risk Form 1 teenagers in Federal

Land Development Authority (FELDA) settlements in Perak, Johor and Pahang, the prevalence of students who have played truant from school is 41.4% [3]. Another study conducted among students from high risk schools in Kuala Lumpur showed the prevalence of playing truant is 21.2% [4]. In the United States of America and Britain, the prevalence of playing truant in the past 20 years is between 3 and 19% [5]. A study in Cologne, Germany which classifies truancy as students being absent without reason for more than five times in the previous year, showed a truancy prevalence rate of 7.9% [6].

Truancy is also a precursor to other negative behaviour such as delinquency or criminal activities. The Los Angeles Education Department reported that chronic truancy problem is a strong indicator that may lead towards delinquent behaviour. Students who play truant are also at high risk to be involved with drug abuse, alcohol dependency or violence [7].

A multi-dimensional array of inter-related factors contributes towards truancy in school. Many previous studies show that truancy increases in parallel with students' age [8]. Truancy increased exponentially among students in the range of 12 to 16 years in Christchurch, New Zealand where truancy rate among 16-year-old students was 10 times that of 12-year-olds [9]. The prevalence of truancy is also higher among male students [10]. Where socioeconomic status is concerned, previous studies show there is a strong association between truancy and low socioeconomic status [11, 12].

Families also play a contributory role towards truancy. Lack of parental attention and supervision, parents who are disciplinarians and unpredictable, no involvement in children's activities, anti-social parents and also large families are among the important contributing factors towards students' truancy [13]. Truancy cases are also related to single parent families, deceased or absent parents and parents' low educational level [14].

Where the individual is concerned, truancy is related to low academic performance in school [14, 15]. Smoking is also a strong predictor towards truant behaviour in school. In addition, drug abuse is also related to truancy [7, 16]. A high score for teenage psychological problems also has connections with school truancy [14]. Truant students are found to have higher mean scores for internalizing and externalizing symptom [17].

Coping strategies are defined as cognitive and behavioural efforts by a person to deal with extreme internal and external desires [18]. Teenagers in the high-risk group have a lower mean score for coping via problem solving. This means teenagers in this group use less problem solving strategies but prefer to use coping strategies, which are non-productive [19].

School factor plays a major role in influencing truancy behaviour. There is an association between truancy and students' attitude of disliking school, having a low academic achievement target and being unsure about the importance of school [20]. There is an association between truancy and low score of students' opinion about school, the academic staff and students' social abilities in class [15]. The influence of media towards children and teenagers is strong due to their immaturity in understanding what they watch on television. Delinquent students are more easily influenced by what they watch and more easily imitate what they see on television [21].

The objective of this research is to determine the prevalence and factors, which contribute to truancy among Malay secondary school students in Malaysia.

Methods

This cross-sectional research was carried out in Kajang, Selangor, Malaysia from the June 2007 until October 2007 and involved 556 Malay students of Form Two and Four in two non-residential secondary schools. Using multi-stage random sampling, Kajang was chosen from five zones in the district of Hulu Langat. Two schools from six non-residential secondary

schools were selected. In these two schools, nine Form Two classes and 9 Form Four classes were chosen at random. From these classes, total of 556 Malay students were selected according to the inclusion and exclusion criteria as research samples.

Data collection was done via questionnaires and pilot testing was conducted before the actual administration of the questionnaires. The questionnaire consists of five sections namely respondent's biodata, family background, individual factor, school and environmental factors. The 18 items Adolescent Coping Scale (ACS) [22] was used to determine coping strategies and Hatta Islamic Religiosity Scale (HIRS) [23] to measure the religious status. In this study, truancy was defined as not attending school on official school days without valid reason or written or verbal reasons from the parents, guardians or medical doctors. The non-attendance must be of three consecutive days or more or ten days or more if not consecutively within a period of six months from the January until June 2007.

Data were analyzed using the SPSS version 13.0 software. The Chi Square Test was used for dependent categorical variable while the Mann Whitney U Test was used to compare medians for quantitative data, which is not distributed normally. Multivariable analysis was used to determine the adjusted odd ratio for truancy with the independent variable.

Results

From the descriptive analysis, 51.3% of the respondents were female students, 50.2% Form Four students and 49.8% Form Two students. The overall prevalence of truancy is 30.2% where the prevalence of truancy among male respondents is higher, that is 35.4% compared with female respondents, which is only 25.3%. The prevalence of truancy among Form Four respondents is higher, that is 41.9% compared with Form Two respondents, which is only 18.4% (Table 1). There is no significant association between gender and truancy, however students aged 16 years (Form Four) are four times more likely to play truant (AOR = 3.56; 95% CI = 2.25-5.65).

Table 1. Socio demographic characteristics of the respondents.

	Truant		Prevalence OR (95%CI) <i>p</i> value	Adjusted OR (95%CI)
	Yes	No		
Sex #				
Male	96 (35.4%)	175 (64.6%)	1.62	0.89
Female	72 (25.3%)	213 (74.7%)	(1.13- 2.34)	(0.54-1.47)
Age (Class)#				
16 years (Form 4)	117(41.9%)	162 (58.1%)	3.25	3.56
14 years (Form 2)	51 (18.4%)	226 (81.6%)	(2.18-4.71)	(2.25-5.65)
Total Family income Median (IQR)	(n=161) 2000 (1150-4000)	(n=379) 3000 (1500-5500)	* <i>p</i> <0.001	
Mother's education	(n=132)	(n=330)	** <i>p</i> = 0.003	
Not schooling / Primary School	10 (38.5%)	16 (61.5%)		
Secondary School	88 (32.7%)	181 (67.3%)		
College/ university	34 (20.4%)	133 (79.6%)		

Father's education				
Not schooling / Primary School	9 (60%)	6 (40%)	**p= 0.004	
Secondary School	67 (31.8%)	144 (68.2%)		
College/ university	55 (24%)	174 (76%)		
Marital status#				
Single	24 (42.1%)	33 (57.9%)	1.79	1.66
Married	144 (28.9%)	355 (71.1%)	(1.02-3.14)	(0.87-3.19)
No of bedrooms #				
Less than 3	36 (42.6%)	49 (57.6%)	1.89	1.44
More or equal to 3	132 (28%)	33 (72%)	(1.17-3.03)	(0.82-2.52)

Truant, n=168; Non truant, n=388; unless stated in table

* Mann-Whitney U test

** p, level of significant for trend

In socioeconomic status, it was found that the median of family income of truant students is lower at RM2000 (IQR=1150-4000) compared with those of non-truant students at RM3000 (IQR=1500-5500) ($p < 0.001$). Parents' educational level has a significant association with truancy. There is a pattern which shows the lower the parents' educational level is, the truancy percentage is higher with a value of $p=0.003$ (mother) and $p=0.004$ (father) (Table 1). There is also a significant association between marital status and truancy. The respondents with single parents are twice more at risk to be involved with truancy (POR 1.79; 95% CI 1.02- 3.14). There is also an association between the numbers of bedrooms with truancy

rate. The percentage of truancy is higher (42.6%) among respondents who live in homes which have less than three bedrooms, compared with those who live in homes (28%) with three or more bedrooms (POR 1.89; 95%CI 1.17-3.03).

The median score of interaction for the truants' mothers is 25 (IQR = 21 - 29), significantly lower than the mothers of non truants; 26 (IQR = 23 - 29). However no significant difference was found between the fathers (Table 2). For academic performance, the truants' academic achievement is lower than the non-truant (AOR 1.54; 95%CI 1.07-2.22).

Table 2. Comparison of the parental interactions, academic performance, coping strategies and religiosity between the truant and non truant respondents.

	Truant		Prevalence odds ratio (95% CI), p-value	Adjusted OR (95%CI)
	Yes (n=165)	No (n=387)		
Interactions score (mother)				
Median (IQR)	25 (21-29)	26 (23-29)	* $p=0.015$	
Interactions score (father)				
Median(IQR)	23(20-27)	24(20-27)	* $p=0.413$	
Academic performance				
Poor	86 (35.4%)	157 (64.6%)	1.54 (1.07-2.22)	1.34 (1.02-2.08)
Good	82 (26.2%)	231 (73.8%)		

Coping strategies#				
Problem solving				
Seldom used	156 (31.9%)	333 (68.1%)	2.15 (1.12-4.12)	2.11 (1.00-4.42)
Always used	12 (17.9%)	55 (82.1%)		
Referring to others				
Seldom used	112 (29.4%)	269 (70.6%)	2.68 (1.87-3.83)	2.21 (0.85-4.52)
Always used	56 (32%)	119 (68%)		
Non productive coping				
Seldom used	156 (30.2%)	360 (69.8%)	1.01 (0.50-2.04)	0.73 (0.33-1.87)
Always used	12 (30%)	28 (70%)		
Quran recital				
Incomplete	96 (38.4%)	154 (61.1%)	2.03 (1.40-2.92)	1.83 (1.20-2.80)
Complete	72 (23.5%)	234 (76.5%)		
Islamic Religiosity Index (IRI)				
Median (IQR)	30.6 (27.9-33.6)	31.4 (29.2-34.0)	* <i>p</i> =0.005	

Truant, n=168; Non-truant, n=388; unless stated in table

* Mann-Whitney U test

There is no significant association between emotional disturbances such as stress, depression and anxiety with truancy. For coping strategy, problem solving strategy shows significant association with truancy. Those who seldom utilized problem solving method, the truancy percentage is higher compared with those who frequently used problem solving method (AOR = 2.11, 95% CI = 1.00-4.42). Coping strategies which involved consulting other people and nonproductive ways did not show any significant association with truancy in the multivariable analysis (Table 2). Religious status was measured using the Islamic Religiosity Index (IRI) score. This score was obtained from questions on knowledge about Islam, Islamic practices, the practice of Quran recital as well as actions to do good and curb bad deeds. IRI median score of truants was lower compared with non truants (*p*= 0.005) (Table 2). Those who did not complete their

Quran recital are more likely to play truant than those who completed (AOR 1.83; 95%CI 1.20-2.80).

There is a significant association between truancy and involvement with high risk behaviour such as watching videos/internet porn (POR = 2.22; 95% CI =1.42-3.46), frequenting entertainment centres (AOR = 2.40, 95% CI = 1.40 - 4.10), dating a special friend (POR = 1.52; 95% CI = 1.03-2.23), fighting / bullying (POR = 1.56; 95% CI = 1.01-2.41), motorcycle racing (POR = 2.78; 95%CI = 1.43-5.40), smoking (POR = 2.54; 95% CI = 1.73-3.74) and hours watching TV/ video more than 15 hours per week (AOR = 2.24; 95% CI = 1.46-3.45) . On the other hand, there is no significant association between truancy and drug abuse, glue-sniffing, alcohol consumption, vandalism and stealing (Table 3).

Table 3. Comparison of various anti-social activities between truant and non truant respondents.

Anti-social Activities	Truant		Prevalence OR (95% CI)	Adjusted OR (95%CI)
	Yes	No		
Pornography				
Yes	45 (45%)	55 (55%)	2.22(1.42-3.46)	1.26 (0.72-2.21)
No	123 (27%)	333 (73%)		

Drug abuse				
Yes	2 (50%)	2 (50%)	2.33 (0.33-16.65)	-
No	166 (30.1%)	386 (69.9%)		
Glue sniffing				
Yes	0 (0%)	3 (100%)	NA	-
No	168 (30.1%)	385 (69.6%)		
Consuming alcohol				
Yes	0 (0%)	1 (100%)	NA	-
No	168 (30.3%)	387 (69.7%)		
Frequenting entertainment centre				
Yes	82 (48.8 %)	86 (51.2%)	3.35 (2.28-4.93)	2.40 (1.40-4.10)
No	86 (22.2%)	302 (77.8%)		
Dating special friend				
Yes	61 (36.5%)	106 (63.5%)	1.52 (1.03 - 2.23)	0.79 (0.49-1.30)
No	107 (27.5%)	282 (72.5%)		
Vandalism				
Yes	10 (32.3%)	21 (67.7%)	1.11 (0.51-2.40)	-
No	158 (30.1%)	367 (69.9%)		
Fighting / bullying				
Yes	43 (38.1%)	70 (61.9%)	1.56 (1.01-2.41)	1.08 (0.63-1.85)
No	125 (28.2%)	318 (71.8%)		
Gangsterism				
Yes	10 (38.5%)	16 (61.5%)	1.47 (0.65-3.31)	-
No	158 (29.8%)	372(70.2%)		
Stealing				
Yes	21 (37.5%)	35 (62.5%)	1.44 (0.81-2.56)	-
No	147 (29.4%)	353 (70.6%)		
Motorcycle racings				
Yes	20 (52.6%)	18 (47.4%)	2.78 (1.43-5.40)	1.61 (0.71-3.68)
No	148 (28.6%)	370 (71.4%)		
Smoking				
Yes	73 (44.8%)	90 (55.2%)	2.54 (1.73-3.74)	1.09 (0.63-1.91)
No	95 (24.2%)	298(75.8%)		
Hours watching TV/video				
More than 15 hours per week	114 (38.0%)	186 (62.0%)	2.29 (1.16-3.35)	2.24 (1.46-3.45)
Less than 15 hours	54 (21.1%)	202 (78.9%)		

* Mann-Whitney U test

NA- Not available

Discussion

This study found that the prevalence of truancy among Malay students in Malaysia is 30.2%. A study conducted by Noor Hidayah et al. (2004)

on Form One students in a high risk FELDA area in the states of Perak, Johore and Pahang showed that the prevalence of truancy among the students is higher at 41.4%. Another study conducted by Nik Ruzyanei in 2006 on truancy

in three high risk schools in Kuala Lumpur recorded a lower prevalence of truancy at 21.6%. The differences in prevalence could be due to the different population background and geographical area. Comparing with studies conducted overseas, they show higher prevalence of truancy. The truancy rate in the United States and Britain in the past 20 years is between 3% and 19% [5]. In Swaziland, prevalence of truancy is 21.6% with male students show higher prevalence at 27.4% compared to 17.9% among female students [10].

Truancy also more frequently occurs among Form Four respondents as compared with Form Two respondents. This shows in secondary schools the prevalence of truancy increases with age. This study is similar to the one conducted among 12 to 16 year old cohorts in Christchurch, New Zealand which showed the truancy rate among students increased exponentially among students aged 12 to 16 years old. Truancy percentage of 16 year old students is 30.2%, ten times that of 12 year old students, which is only 3% [9].

In terms of gender, the results showed significant difference. Male are twice more prone to truancy compared to female though it is not significant in the multivariable analysis. This is similar with the study conducted in Africa and Germany which showed a strong association between gender and truancy [5, 24].

Where family socioeconomic status is concerned, truants show a lower median than non truants. This is similar to other studies that showed that truant students usually originate from low socio economic families [11, 12, 25]. Parents' educational level also showed significant association with truancy. The lower the parents' education level, the higher the percentage of students who were involved in truancy. This association has been proven by Miller & Plant in 1999 that truancy was correlated to parents' low education level. Perhaps when the education level of the parents is low, their children do not see the importance or not given enough emphasis on school education.

Parents' marital status also plays a role in truancy. The respondents whose parents are single are almost twice more at risk to be involved in truancy. This is similar to the study carried out on 15 and 16 year old students in the United Kingdom which revealed significant association between truancy and students with single parents or students who did not have parents any more [14]. A study of delinquent students in Malaysia also showed a significant association between delinquent behaviour and divorced parents [21]. Interaction with the mother seemed to be an important factor as it is lower among truants as compared with those of non-truants. Studies in Ontario, Canada showed that truant students have an experience of family conflicts and do not have close relationships with their families [15].

Similar findings found for academic achievement and truancy. Many other studies show that students who are low achievers prefer to play truant from school. They lag behind in their studies and therefore achieve poor results. Studies done in Ontario, Canada and Johore, Malaysia have shown a significant association between truancy and low academic achievement [15, 25]. A study in Edinburgh, United Kingdom found that truancy is a strong predictor of low academic achievement [14].

Religious status as examined in the context of Islamic religious knowledge, religious practices, Quran recital, staying away from forbidden things and doing good deeds show significant association that truants have a lower median Islamic Religiosity Index (IRI) score. This result almost resembles a study conducted on teenagers between the ages of 11 to 18 in Pennsylvania, United States which showed the perception that religion is important in life and students' involvement in religious activities has associations with six high risk behaviours namely smoking, consuming alcohol, playing truant, indulging in sexual activity, drug abuse and depression [27].

There is a significant association between truancy and psycho-behaviour such as watching video or internet pornography, frequenting entertainment centre, smoking, motorcycle

racing and dating a special friend. The results corroborate with Garry in 1996 that truancy is a precursor to other delinquent or criminal activities. Miller & Plant in 1999 also show that students who lead a delinquent lifestyle, use drugs and smoke are predictors towards truancy. Mohammad et al in 2009 studied among early adulthood also show those who manifested delinquent/ high level of aggressive behavior were more than twice at risk than other children to develop drug use disorder.

Coping strategies used when encountering problems show that respondents who use problem solving methods once in a while are significantly more involved in truancy compared with respondents who always utilize this strategy. This is similar to a study carried out in FELDA settlements in Perak, Pahang and Johor using the Adolescent Coping Scale (ACS) which shows that high-risk teenagers have a lower mean score for problem solving methods compared with non-risk students [19].

Truancy cases should be dealt urgently as it has a major effect on the students, their families and the nation. Dropping out of school and getting involved in various delinquent activities are the after-effects of uncontrolled truancy. The problem will be aggravated unless all relevant authorities like school authorities and parents take immediate action. The Ministry of Education has also taken proactive measures by having a committee to combat truancy represented by various departments like the police force, health authorities, youth organizations, welfare department, local government and other relevant parties.

Our study has several limitations. The truancy definition differs from one study to another making it difficult to compare. We also did not classify truancy into pure truancy, school refusal or school phobia like many other studies before this. Our study population is only among Malay students so that generalisation is limited. Information bias might occur but we have taken precautions by giving training and proper instruction during the survey. Future research in this area should include all ethnic groups in Malaysia and use a standard definition similar

with other studies if possible. Combining qualitative aspect also might give more insight to the truant problem in the future.

Conclusion

This study concluded that truancy is one of the most frequent delinquent behaviour among secondary school students. Most of the psycho-behavioural factors identified needs to be addressed and intervened. Proper strategic plan and involvement of all parties concerned must be implemented to prevent further detrimental effects of truancy.

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