

PERF RESEARCH BRIEF

“The Coproduction of Truancy Control: Results from a Randomized Trial of a Police-Schools Partnership Program”

PERF Research Advisory Board member Dr. Lorraine Mazerolle (University of Queensland) and her team recently evaluated the deterrent effects of a police-school partnership known as the Ability School Engagement Program (ASEP), as implemented in Brisbane, Queensland.

ASEP brought together police and school representatives to work with parents and their truant children to increase their understanding of truancy laws and the consequences for noncompliance. The goals of ASEP were to increase parents’ and children’s perceptions of the legitimacy of the truancy laws, get the truant students to willingly improve their school attendance, and to decrease anti-social behavior by the students.

Researchers believed that improving perceptions of the truancy law’s legitimacy would improve family engagement with the school and reduce the incidence of truancy and delinquency. Results show that ASEP increased parental awareness of the possibility of prosecution and subsequently increased student willingness to attend school. This study provides a strong example of how carefully planned police partnerships with schools, rooted in building perceptions of legitimacy among parents and students, can yield reductions in juvenile delinquency.

Reference:

Mazerolle, Lorraine, Sarah Bennett, Emma Antrobus, and Elizabeth Eggins. “The Coproduction of Truancy Control: Results from a Randomized Trial of a Police-Schools Partnership Program.” *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency*, (2017): 1-33.

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Summary

Reduced truancy and greater safety in schools are goals shared by schools and police agencies. The police role in targeting school-based crime and delinquency has taken many forms, such as uniformed patrols, responding to calls for service, and performing investigations of criminal offenses within schools. Some schools have added school-based police officers, also known as School Resource Officers (SROs). Additionally, researchers suggest that developing partnerships between police, schools, and parents can potentially reduce school-based crime and delinquency. Such partnerships are anchored in the concept of “coproduction,” or the process of police motivating citizens, non-state actors, and other third parties (such as schools) to help prevent or control crime problems.

Coproduction is a key feature of common law enforcement techniques, such as community policing and building informal social control (i.e. controlling behavior through social bonds to

non-state actors, parents, neighbors, or local institutions). Both operate under the premise that positive, legitimate police engagement with the community increases the capacity of citizens to be proactive in addressing crime problems. Empowered citizens can have an indirect impact on crime reduction, beyond what police can directly influence through enforcement. In this way, partnerships in policing may be effective for reducing crime because they create greater capacity than what the police might be able to accomplish alone.

This research highlights an evaluation of a partnership program intended to reduce truancy in Brisbane, Australia. The Ability School Engagement Program (ASEP) was designed to ensure that parents and students understood truancy laws and the consequences for noncompliance, with the goal of encouraging parents and students to believe in the legitimacy of the truancy laws. This police-school partnership exemplifies key characteristics of successful coproduction efforts, such as: 1) common-ground goals, 2) increased understanding of legal responsibilities and consequences, and 3) a focus on motivating citizens to reduce or prevent crime (i.e., improving school attendance).

Researchers used a randomized trial design to evaluate the deterrent effects of ASEP, and found that the partnership program (1) increased parents' awareness of the likelihood of prosecution and (2) increased students' willingness to attend school.

The ASEP police-school partnership was implemented across 11 schools in Queensland, Australia. The targeted school district was a highly disadvantaged metropolitan area of Queensland's capital city, Brisbane. Nearly 50 percent of families in the district had no employed parent, and approximately 40 percent of the families received welfare benefits. Both these figures were higher than the Australian average. The attendance rate for the target schools was below the Queensland average, and a high number of students were involved with the criminal justice system. A total of 102 truant students and their guardians were randomly allocated to either a control (not in the program) or experimental condition (enrolled in the program). There was a high level of equivalence between the two groups, with no observed significant differences on preexisting levels of truancy and key demographic variables, indicating that the randomization was successful.

The control condition used two business-as-usual conditions: standard business-as-usual and the business-as-usual with SRO exposure. In both business-as-usual conditions, the schools implemented their truancy laws in their standard way, which involved the school principal making ad hoc decisions to initiate formal meetings with the truant's parent, official warning letters via mail, and, in rare cases, letters of impending prosecution to the parents. The warning letters and engagement with the families included no emphasis on procedural justice, which includes treating people with dignity and respect, conveying trustworthy motives, giving voice to the participants, and being neutral in decision-making. For the business-as-usual with SRO exposure, conditions also included a dedicated SRO whose role was to deliver classroom seminars and attend to police-related matters within the school community.

The experimental condition used the ASEP to address truancy. Within the ASEP condition, a partnership was formed between the police and the 11 schools in the trial. As third-party partners

with police, the schools formed the basis for increasing, in a procedurally-just way, parents' and children's understanding of their legal responsibility to attend school.

In Queensland, truancy laws are structured as regulatory laws that involve a system of graduated sanctions. The regulatory legal provisions available to the schools were communicated in a procedurally fair way to foster greater willingness of the students to attend school. ASEP sought to reduce and deter truancy through a collaborative "family group conference" (FGC). The FGC brought together a school representative, a uniformed police officer assigned to the ASEP program, a responsible parent (or guardian), the truant, and a trained FGC facilitator. The facilitators were drawn from an existing pool of conference facilitators working within the Department of Communities' Youth Justice Conferencing Unit. They were specially trained to lead a conference that used restorative and procedurally just dialogue to describe the legal consequences of truancy.

The conferences included discussions of the context of the truant behavior, which were intended to convey a sense of procedural justice – for example, by giving participants opportunities to share their point of view and voice their concerns. Topics of these discussions included 1) factors that may have led to the student's truancy, 2) the effects and legal consequences of the behavior, and 3) the development of a child-focused action plan. Guided by the FGC facilitators, school representatives and the ASEP police officers explained the laws pertaining to truancy, emphasizing the legal consequences and punitive actions that could be taken if truancy continued. Immediately following the conference, the ASEP officer was assigned responsibility for monitoring compliance with the action plan by the school, the parents, and the students for a period of six months. After the six-month period, the ASEP officer conducted short exit meetings for families who participated in ASEP.

Findings revealed that the experimental intervention, as compared to the control condition, made the parents significantly more aware of their legal responsibility to ensure their children attended school and the consequences of noncompliance (i.e. the likelihood of prosecution). In addition, students' efforts to go to school increased when the parents believed that prosecution for nonattendance was likely. Specifically, students' self-reported willingness to attend school increased post-intervention, as measured through surveys.

The research supports the idea of collaborative partnerships as an effective approach to policing in schools. Considering the increased pressure on police to handle a wide variety of issues, this study provides evidence that a collaborative partnership can be a relatively simple, sustainable, and effective option to get young people more engaged with their education and to reduce juvenile crime in a comprehensive, procedurally just way.