



# Youth Justice Issue Brief

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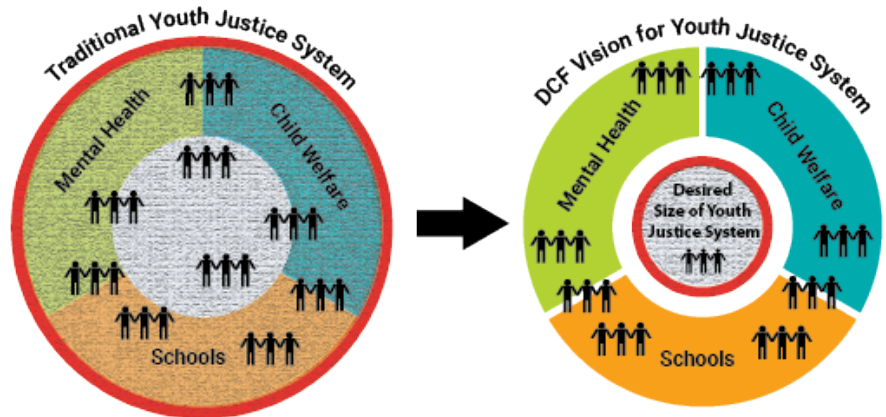
## Truancy

Regularly missing school has a significant impact on student achievement and positive youth development. A range of community, school, family, and student characteristics have been found to contribute to the problem of truancy – underscoring the need for collaborative, developmentally appropriate interventions that are matched to a youth’s primary needs.

## Youth Justice Vision & Strategic Plan

Through the Department of Children and Families (DCF) [2016 input gathering process](#), a vision emerged related to cross system collaboration with schools in regards to truancy to ensure youth are not unnecessarily brought in to the Youth Justice (YJ) system:

- Schools, human services, and law enforcement have clearly defined roles and regular collaboration
- There is a clear and consistent statewide approach to truancy that diverts youth from the YJ system and addresses any underlying school and family system needs contributing to truancy.



The youth justice system encompasses youth with a variety of primary needs other than delinquent behavior.

Youth are served in the appropriate system, and are not brought into the youth justice system in order to address other primary needs.

## Background

### What is Truancy?

If a student is **absent without an acceptable excuse for all or part of one or more days** during which school is held, they are considered **truant** under Wis. Stat. sec. 118.16(1)(a) and (c)) [1]. It is important to note per Wis. Stat. sec. 118.15(4), home schooling that meets specific criteria may be substituted for attendance at a public or private school. Additionally, “part of day” is defined by school districts and may vary across the state.

If a student is **absent without an acceptable excuse for all or part of five or more days during a school semester**, they meet the definition of **habitually truant**. Schools may refer habitually truant students to juvenile court intake or municipal court only after satisfying the steps detailed in Wis. Stat. sec. 118.16(5) [1].

Truancy is considered a “status offense,” or an offense that if committed by an adult, would not be considered a criminal offense. Research suggests the underlying needs of youth who commit status offenses are best met outside of the formal youth justice system [2].

# Background

## The Impact of Absence From School

Research has demonstrated chronic absence – missing ten percent or more of a school year for any reason, excused or unexcused – has a significant impact on student achievement. Students who regularly miss school are:

- More likely to miss early learning milestones
- Less likely to graduate on time
- More likely to drop out of school
- More likely to experience poor outcomes in adulthood [3, 4]





Unexcused absences also impact communities, as high rates of truancy have been found to be associated with higher rates of daytime criminal activity [5].

The impact of frequently missing school on both students and communities emphasizes the need for targeted and effective truancy interventions. However, **interventions should bear in mind the impact of any absence on student performance and aim to not contribute (whether intentionally or unintentionally) to the larger issue of chronic absence.**

## Evidence-Informed Decision-Making

### Importance of Matching Services to Needs

A range of community, school, family, and student characteristics have been identified that contribute to the problem of truancy:

Community	School	Family	Student
 <small>Created by Made by Made from Noun Project</small>	 <small>Created by Iuliana from Noun Project</small>	 <small>Created by Oksana Latysheva from Noun Project</small>	 <small>Created by sulgyeon Jung from Noun Project</small>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Unsafe path to/from school</li><li>• Poor transportation</li><li>• Negative peer influences</li><li>• Financial, social, medical, or other barriers that pressure students to stay home to help with family</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Bullying</li><li>• Undiagnosed disability</li><li>• Pressure for academic success</li><li>• Lack of culturally relevant or engaging instruction</li><li>• Unwelcoming/unsafe school climate</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Housing and food insecurity</li><li>• Conflicting family responsibilities/obligations</li><li>• Attitudes of parents related to their own school experience</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Unmet mental health needs</li><li>• Frequent school changes</li><li>• A need to work</li><li>• Poor academic performance</li><li>• Substance abuse</li></ul>

# Evidence-Informed Decision-Making

Research suggests youth may be chronically absent for multiple reasons spanning several different categories [4, 6, 7]. As the correlates for chronic absence are broad, **the most effective approaches to truancy include families, schools, and communities, working together to set and consistently enforce rules for attendance** [5, 8].

Additionally, for youth involved in the justice system, accurately matching services to a limited set of identified needs is more important in facilitating long-term behavior change than provision of more services [9, 10]. It is important to note that while school problems have been identified as one of the “central eight” predictors of recidivism, when considered independently, truancy is a much stronger predictor of youth needs than of future delinquent behavior [11]. For this population, in-home and/or community-based responses have been found to be more cost-effective and developmentally appropriate [2, 12, 13]. **Several examinations of truancy interventions have found harsh sanctions – like out-of-home placement, denial of family welfare benefits, or sending police to the homes of students – are more likely to increase the incidence of truancy** [5, 12, 14].

## Validated Screeners to Assess Needs

Immediacy and consistency are key elements in effective truancy interventions [5]. A structured needs assessment can help triage youth justice referrals – facilitating diversion where appropriate, identifying youth and family primary needs, and tailoring intervention services in a steady, developmentally-appropriate manner.

While there are many examples of assessments available online, only a few have been validated. When a tool is “validated,” it has been tested repeatedly to ensure results are accurate, reliable, and replicable [15].

Examples of Validated Needs Assessments:

### School Refusal Assessment Scale-Revised (SRAS-R)

Designed to evaluate “symptoms” of school refusal and identify the functional conditions contributing to a youth’s non-attendance. The 24 question surveys should be completed by both parent and child and are freely available online.

[Link to SRAS-R](#)

### JIFF Interviewer

Self-administered, strengths-based tool that screens a youth and their caregiver across 10 different life domains. Following the short screener, a case plan outline is software generated.

[Link to JIFF Interviewer](#)

## A Note on YASI and Truancy: Focus on Needs

The Youth Assessment and Screening Instrument (YASI) is a risk/needs assessment tool available to county human service agencies that is designed to assess for risk of re-offense and assist in case planning. The YASI Prescreen provides a useful snapshot of a youth’s level of risk and criminogenic needs, which can be used to divert low-risk youth from the YJ system and make a referral (if necessary) to more appropriate community-based services. **While the YASI has been validated for use in delinquency cases, it has not been validated for use with truancy.**

As truancy is a status offense and is not a strong predictor of future delinquency, it is **recommended counties use a validated needs assessment tool for truancy referrals.**

**Although, not required, if a JIPS referral results in an adjudication, a worker may administer the Full Assessment, as that information may be useful for case planning.** However, particular attention should be given to the youth’s identified needs, rather than their risk level.

# Evidence-Informed Decision-Making

## YJ Referrals as a Last Resort

Tools and strategies most available to the Youth Justice system – court mandates, supervision appointments, compliance checks, and out-of-home placement – are unlikely to yield long-term behavior change for youth who are chronically absent and may even negatively impact education outcomes for youth [5, 14, 16]. Available literature consistently recommends that the most effective truancy strategies are multi-tiered, with early interventions provided by schools and community agencies and the justice system acting as a “last resort” for a much smaller number of youth and families requiring more intensive support [14, 17, 18].

Communities must balance the immediate risk youth who are not regularly attending school may pose to public safety with the “social cost” of formal justice system involvement on long-term outcomes for both youth and their communities [5, 9, 12, 14]. It is strongly recommended counties consider Wisconsin law, current best practice, and available resources in determining a best path forward for local truancy interventions. Establishing a collaborative group to consider the following may be a good place to start:

### **Navigate Wisconsin Statutes**

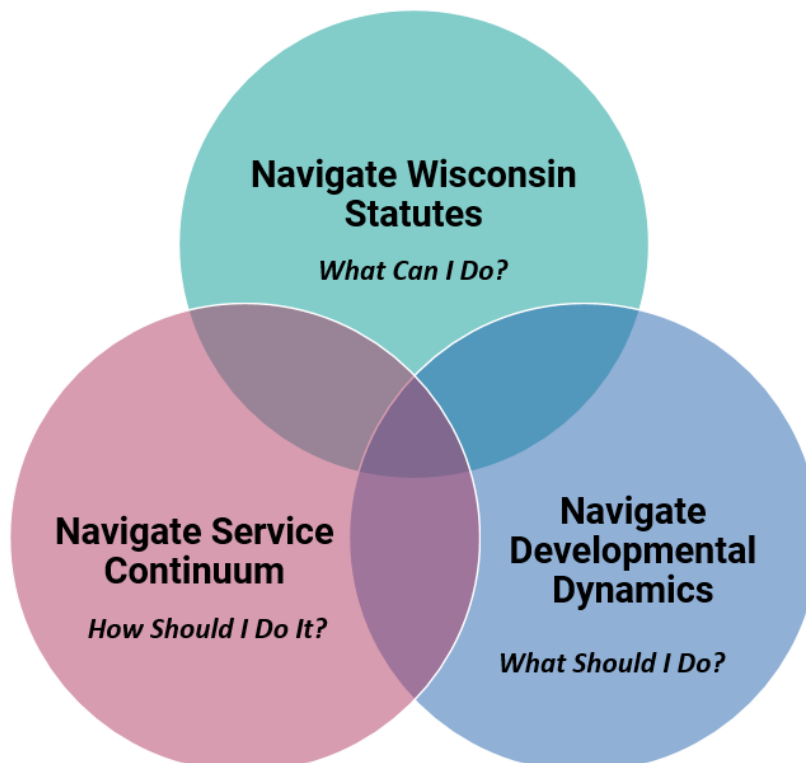
- *What does Wisconsin statute say we **can** do to address truancy?*

### **Navigate Developmental Dynamics**

- *What does current best practice research tell us we **should** do to address truancy?*

### **Navigate Service Continuum**

- ***How** can we use the resources currently available to our community to address truancy?*

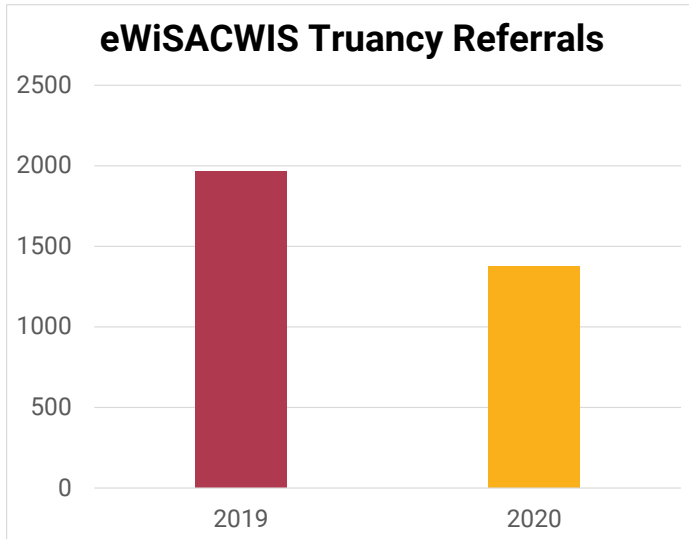


# Research You Can Use

Effective Truancy Interventions	Resources
<p><b>Intentionally Collaborate Across Agencies</b></p>	<p><b>NCJFCJ School-Justice Partnership National Resource Center</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <a href="#">School Pathways to the Juvenile Justice System Project: A Practice Guide</a></li> <li>• <a href="#">Developing a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) for School Justice Partnerships: Technical Assistance Tools</a></li> <li>• <a href="#">Collecting Data and Sharing Information to Improve School-Justice Partnerships</a></li> </ul> <p><b>U.S. Departments of Justice, Health and Human Services, Housing and Urban Development and Education</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <a href="#">Every Student Every Day: A Community Toolkit to Address and Eliminate Chronic Absenteeism</a></li> </ul> <p><b>AttendanceWorks</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <a href="#">10 Steps Communities Can Take to Reduce Chronic Absence</a></li> </ul>
<p><b>Include Family As Collaborators</b></p>	<p><b>AttendanceWorks</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <a href="#">Bringing Attendance Home: Engaging Parents in Preventing Chronic Absence</a></li> </ul> <p><b>Wisconsin Department of Children and Families</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <a href="#">Youth Justice Issue Brief #2: Family Engagement</a></li> </ul>
<p><b>Appropriately Match Services to Needs &amp; Focus on Incentives</b></p>	<p><b>AttendanceWorks</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <a href="#">What Makes an Attendance Incentive Program Successful?</a></li> </ul> <p><b>FutureEd</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <a href="#">Attendance Playbook: Smart Strategies for Reducing Chronic Absenteeism in the COVID Era</a></li> </ul> <p><b>Models for Change</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <a href="#">Innovative Brief: Using Community Truancy Boards to Tackle Truancy</a></li> </ul>
<p><b>Implement Evidence-Informed Programs</b></p>	<p><b>What Works, Wisconsin – Research to Practice Series</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <a href="#">Finding Effective Solutions to Truancy</a></li> </ul> <p><b>Connecticut State Department of Education</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <a href="#">Catalog of Truancy Intervention Models</a></li> </ul> <p><b>Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <a href="#">Model Programs Guide</a></li> </ul> <p><b>U.S. Department of Health and Human Services</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <a href="#">Title IV-E Prevention Services Clearinghouse</a></li> </ul> <p><b>Institute of Education Sciences What Works Clearinghouse</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <a href="https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/FWW#">https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/FWW#</a></li> </ul>



## THE NUMBERS



Truancy referrals vary across the state. In 2019, 5 counties documented over 100 referrals each in eWiSACWIS\* and 12 counties did not enter any referrals for truancy.

\*eWiSACWIS is Wisconsin's statewide centralized case management system. CY2019 is the first full year of available referral and intake data. eWiSACWIS does not capture all instances of truancy ordinance violations or tickets issued by municipal courts.

Approximate percentage of youth referred for Truancy in 2019 with a prior CPS history

# 80%



## THE VOICES

What Wisconsin youth have [shared about truancy](#):

### Importance of matching services to needs

- "With truancy cases, ask: What kind of home life is making someone not go to school?"
- "Don't use detention for truancy. Kids should not be put in jail unless they do a crime - not for status offenses."

### Validated screeners to assess needs

- "Just like schools have IEPs for special needs students – need assessments in more situations to figure out what kids need – they are lacking in these areas, but they are good at this – more balanced."

### YJ referrals as a last result

- "There should be alternatives to suspending or expelling kids because of truancy. Should work more on getting kids the services they need."
- "The question should be: 'What conditions set you up for success?'"

### Collaboration

- "Involve parents and don't take parent responsibility away."
- "I missed one day of school and then I got sanctioned. I wish there could be a meeting with someone where the kid and parent sit down before going into court to talk about what is really going on. Before jumping to conclusions, learn more about my situation."

### Incentives

- "It helps to be complimented on the good stuff you're doing, instead of just focusing on the bad things."

# Program Spotlight

## La Crosse County | Diversion from YJ with a System of Care



La Crosse County's approach to truancy is part of its larger System of Care (SOC) program. The SOC is a family-focused, holistic, flexible, and intensive program, designed identify and target the root cause of behaviors. Formed via MOU in 2016, SOC is a collaborative effort between county human services, the School District of La Crosse, the circuit court, district attorney's office, and law enforcement as a "new door" used to divert youth away from the criminal justice system. Truancy is one of several focus acts – behaviors the SOC task force determined would be best supported with intervention rather than formal court involvement. Youth referred to the SOC for truancy are given the Child and Adolescent Functional Assessment Scale (CAFAS) to assess needs at initial intake – information that is then used to identify appropriate therapeutic interventions and supports and develop a case plan. Youth graduate from the program upon completion of the conditions included in the plan.

Contact Person: [Bridget Todd Robbins](#)

## Barron County | Consistent & Intentional Interagency Communication



Barron County received a Youth Justice Innovation Grant in 2019 and set out to enhance the partnership between schools, families, and the youth justice system in order to decrease youth justice referrals and improve the ability of students to self-regulate, thrive, and feel supported in school settings. A key feature of their approach has been creating dedicated space for interagency collaboration to strengthen the relationships between youth-serving agencies, as well as between collaborating partners and youth and their families. A strategy Barron has used to increase positive school engagement is including a social worker in joint meetings between the family, school personnel, and School Resource Officer to discuss wraparound interventions for a student identified as having underlying mental health needs. The primary focus of these meetings is developing a shared understanding of the student and their family's strengths and needs to offer needs-based recommendations.

Human services and school districts discuss referrals during rotating, regularly scheduled meetings. This consistent schedule has allowed Barron County to connect with each district in their county at least six times per year, creating a designated space for both agencies to share responsibility in supporting students and families referred to the program.

Contact Person: [Karla Broten](#)



## Kewaunee County | Using Vital Conditions to Connect Youth to School



Kewaunee County also received a Youth Justice Innovation Grant in 2019. A Youth & Family Advocacy Task Force – including representatives from law enforcement, the district attorney’s office, human services and the Algoma School District – was convened and continues to meet monthly to discuss community issues and provide input and guidance to the Community Youth Advocate, a school-based position that serves as a bridge between youth, their families, and school personnel. Recognizing a “language barrier” between systems, the task force opted to ground their work in the Vital Conditions, a public health framework that describes the community properties that all people need to “participate, prosper, and reach their full potential.” Use of the Vital Conditions has centered the group around a unified vision of where youth in their community are suffering, struggling, and thriving. Access to this framework is kept in the forefront of goals, decision-making, and removal of barriers.

In addition to promoting and enhancing youth connections to school, Kewaunee has worked to identify and address macro-level barriers in their community. After identifying that reliable transportation was one of the biggest barriers for students with attendance concerns, the Community Youth Advocate helped to set up reliable van transportation provided by the school in areas where busing is not available.

Contact Person: [Corinne Konkol](#)

### Wisconsin-Specific Truancy Resources for Schools

A corresponding eBrief about Truancy and the Youth Justice System for School Attendance Officers can be found on DPI’s School Attendance Page

<https://dpi.wi.gov/sspw/safe-schools/school-attendance>

DPI Guidance on Attendance in Online and Blended Learning Environments

<https://dpi.wi.gov/online-blended-learning/attendance>

Answers to Frequently Asked Compulsory School Attendance Questions

<https://dpi.wi.gov/sites/default/files/imce/sspw/pdf/schlattendqa.pdf>

What Works Wisconsin Truancy Fact Sheet

[https://fyi.extension.wisc.edu/whatworkswisconsin/files/2014/04/t\\_5truancy.pdf](https://fyi.extension.wisc.edu/whatworkswisconsin/files/2014/04/t_5truancy.pdf)



# Action Steps



Created by Gregor Cresnar  
from Noun Project

## Focus Strategies on Chronic Absence

Research has demonstrated chronic absence – missing ten percent or more of a school year for *any* reason excused or unexcused – has a significant impact on student achievement. Interventions should bear in mind the impact of *any* absence on student performance and aim to not contribute to the larger issue of chronic absence.



Created by Vectors Market  
from Noun Project

## Make Collaboration a Priority

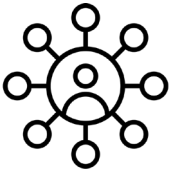
The most effective approaches to truancy include families, schools, and communities, working together to set and consistently enforce rules for attendance.



Created by unblinn  
from Noun Project

## Use a Screening Tool to Assess Youth Needs

A structured needs assessment can help triage youth justice referrals – facilitating diversion where appropriate, identifying youth and family primary needs, and tailoring intervention services in a steady, developmentally-appropriate manner.



Created by Intel Phoenix  
from Noun Project

## Match Services to Identified Needs

For youth involved in the justice system, accurately matching services to a limited set of identified needs is *more* important in facilitating long-term behavior change than provision of more services. Several examinations of truancy interventions have found harsh sanctions – like out-of-home placement, denial of family welfare benefits, or sending police to the homes of students – are more likely to *increase* the incidence of truancy.



Created by Hsin Poh Lin  
from Noun Project

## Use YJ Referrals as a Last Resort

Communities must balance the immediate risk youth who are not regularly attending school may pose to public safety with the “social cost” of formal justice-system involvement on long-term outcomes for both youth and their communities. The most effective truancy strategies are multi-tiered, with early interventions provided by schools and community agencies and the justice system acting as a “last resort” for a much smaller number of youth and families

# Resources

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# Resources

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