

Truancy in secondary education: prevalence and profiles of students including characteristics of family environment and links with school

El absentismo en educación secundaria: prevalencia y perfiles del alumnado incluyendo características del contexto familiar y de la vinculación con el centro

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ABSTRACT

Truancy is a widespread phenomenon in the world with serious consequences. This study aims to: 1) assess the prevalence of truancy among the population of schoolchildren between 12 and 16 years of age in a Spanish city (Huelva); 2) describe its sociodemographic variability; and 3) establish a typology of student profiles in relation to this problem, considering the level of truancy, the characteristics of the family environment and links with the school. A random, representative sample of schoolchildren in mandatory secondary education in the city (n= 1036; 49.7% female, average age 14.2 years) completed an anonymous questionnaire in class or online. The data were analysed by means of bivariate analysis and using an exploratory multivariate technique (Multiple Correspondence Analysis). A total of 32% of the sample revealed that they had practised truancy to some degree in the previous 30 days, and 24.1% reported having missed at least one full day of school without a good excuse in those previous 30 days. The prevalence of truancy is higher among pupils whose parents have a low level of education and immigrant-origin children, as well as those with relatively high amounts of pocket money. The study concludes with a typological classification of the children into five different profiles. The results suggest that truancy is a complex phenomenon, with subtle and probably unstable differences between truants and non-truants, so the key to preventing it would not lie in focusing on those cases of pronounced truancy, but rather in taking intersectoral action to tackle the range of factors that contribute to truancy.

Keywords: truancy, secondary education, prevalence, correlates, profiles

RESUMEN

El absentismo escolar es un fenómeno extendido en el mundo y de graves consecuencias. Este estudio pretende: 1) estimar la prevalencia del absentismo en la población escolarizada de 12 a 16 años de edad en una ciudad española (Huelva); 2) describir su variabilidad sociodemográfica; y 3) establecer una tipología de perfiles del alumnado en relación con este problema teniendo en cuenta el nivel de absentismo practicado, las características del entorno familiar y la vinculación con el centro docente. Una muestra aleatoria y representativa del alumnado de Educación Secundaria Obligatoria de la ciudad (n= 1036; 49.7% mujeres, de 14.2 años de edad media) cumplimentó un cuestionario anónimo en las aulas o vía online. Los datos han sido analizados mediante análisis bivariado y con una técnica multivariable exploratoria (Análisis de Correspondencias Múltiples). El 32% de la muestra practicó algún grado de absentismo escolar en los 30 días anteriores. El 24.1% manifestó haber faltado a clase al menos un día completo en los 30 días previos sin razón justificada. La prevalencia del absentismo escolar es más alta entre el alumnado con progenitores con un bajo nivel de estudios y entre el de origen inmigrante, así como entre quienes manejan cantidades relativamente altas de dinero de bolsillo. Se concluye el trabajo con una clasificación tipológica del alumnado en cinco perfiles diferenciados. Los resultados sugieren que el absentismo es un fenómeno complejo, con diferencias sutiles y probablemente inestables

entre estudiantes absentistas y no absentistas, por lo que su prevención no estribaría en actuar focalizadamente con los casos que presentan un absentismo acusado, sino más bien en abordar intersectorialmente el abanico de factores que lo favorecen.

Palabras clave: absentismo escolar, educación secundaria, prevalencia, correlatos, perfiles

INTRODUCTION

Truancy is a globally widespread phenomenon. According to the 2022 PISA assessment, carried out in 81 countries, 19.8% of fifteen-year-old students in OECD countries had skipped at least a full school day without a valid reason in the fifteen-day period prior to the PISA test. The percentage for those reporting to have skipped one or several classes in the same two-week period was slightly higher (22.5%) (OECD, 2023).

The prevalence of truancy varies greatly across countries. In some, the rate of students having skipped at least a full school day was below 5% in 2022 (this was the case in Korea, Japan, China Taipei, Viet Nam, the Chinese regions of Hong Kong and Macau and Portugal). Some European countries, in addition to Portugal, had rates below 10% (the Netherlands, Hungary, Iceland, the Slovak Republic, Belgium, Croatia, Sweden and Switzerland). By contrast, in some other countries such as Italy, Turkey, the Dominican Republic, Kosovo and Paraguay, the rate of students that had missed at least one full day of school in the previous two weeks was over 50%. Whereas in Spain, the rate for this level of truancy stood at 28.3%, which was above the average rate for OECD countries (OECD, 2023).

The individual and collective consequences derived from truancy are serious. Severe truancy hinders learning and diminishes academic performance (Aucejo & Romano, 2016; Gershenson et al., 2017), but it also might foreshadow early drop-outs and low professional skills in adult life together with correlating low wages, poorer health and shorter life expectancy (Allen et al., 2018; García & Razeto, 2019). It is also linked to an increased risk of mortality from injury (unintentional, homicide or suicide) (Bailey et al., 2015).

In addition, several longitudinal studies point to truancy as a relevant factor favouring the use of alcohol, tobacco or cannabis and the escalation of drug use (Henry & Huizinga, 2007; Henry & Thornberry, 2010). It may also promote delinquency (Dembo et al., 2014; Kearney et al., 2020) and violent behaviour (Herrenkohl et al., 2012). School absenteeism at an early age (in primary school) tends to be a steady feature throughout the school years of the individual and predicts absenteeism at age 15, which results in worse school grades and is linked with social-behavioural difficulties (Ansari & Pianta, 2019).

Additionally, cross-sectional studies show that truancy has other correlates such as a markedly lower performance in mathematics (OECD, 2023), higher probability for risky behaviour regarding sexually transmitted diseases (Houck et al., 2012), teenage pregnancy (Houck et al., 2012; Zhou et al., 2015), fights (Maynard et al., 2017) and other externalising behaviours (Vaughn et al., 2013). However, as these studies have a cross-sectional design, it is not easy to determine whether some correlates are derived from truancy, or rather favour it, or whether truancy and its correlates may be increased by third variables, such as, for example, the shortcomings of the educational system in welcoming and motivating students who come from disadvantaged social backgrounds or are of immigrant origin (Martin et al., 2020a; 2020b), or the absence of an effective system to support students changing schools in their transition from primary to secondary education (García & Razeto, 2019).

In any case, given that truancy is widespread in many countries and the seriousness of its potential consequences (both individual and collective), it seems clear that greater research and prevention efforts are needed (Cruz, 2020; Henry & Huizinga, 2007).

However, effective prevention always requires an adequate etiological analysis. It is beyond doubt that longitudinal designs have greater potential than cross-sectional ones when it comes to identifying factors contributing to a given problem -truancy in our case. However, cross-sectional studies can be fruitful in the search for etiological hypotheses if samples are relatively large and representative of a given school population, and importantly, if suitable multivariate statistical techniques are used in the analysis of the data so that the interrelation of the variables at play can be captured as a whole. In this sense, when data are collected by means of a questionnaire that basically contains categorical variables, using Multiple Correspondence Analysis may be particularly convenient. This exploratory multivariate technique, created by Lebart et al. (1982), allows both the synthesis of the interrelation of the variables and the subsequent classification of the subjects according to the similarity of their answers. The above may help to better understand the heterogeneous realities of students vis-à-vis truancy and serve as a starting point for preventive intervention strategies that are partially differentiated to suit students with different profiles.

Specifically, this study aims to: 1) Estimate the prevalence of truancy among the population of mandatory secondary education students (typically aged 12 to 16 years) in a city in the south of Europe (Huelva); 2) Analyse its variability according to sociodemographic variables; and 3) Establish a typology of student profiles in terms of the variables considered in the study (school, family, sociodemographic variables) which allows to apprehend the students' heterogeneous realities, in relation to this problem, in a synthetic way.

The study is based on three hypotheses: 1) The prevalence of truancy is higher among pupils whose parents have a lower level of education; 2) Truancy is more prevalent among pupils with characteristics that denote school maladjustment; 3) The characteristics of the family environment, in addition to those related to school life, play a relevant role in the configuration of differentiated profiles of pupils in relation to truancy.

METHOD

General design of the study

This is a descriptive cross-sectional study. A representative sample of mandatory secondary education students in the city of Huelva were surveyed by means of an anonymous self-administered questionnaire which they completed in paper or online.

Participants and sampling system

To obtain a representative sample of local secondary school students (typically aged 12-16 years), a probabilistic stratified random multi-stage sampling was used. Firstly, the schools were divided into strata considering location (city districts) and type of school (state schools or private-publicly subsidised schools). It was intended to survey one class in each of the four years of mandatory secondary education in a total of 14 schools. For this purpose, in each stratum a number of schools was randomly selected. That number was proportional to the school population in that stratum. School management teams were invited to take part and informed about the characteristics of the study and its procedure in case of acceptance. When a school declined to participate in the study, the proposal was made to another school in the same sampling stratum. Subsequently, in every participating school, one classroom was randomly selected in each of the four years of mandatory secondary education so that, after parental acceptance and that of the students themselves, the data could be collected on a day agreed with the management team. The schools decided on how to administer the anonymous questionnaire: on paper (in the classroom) or online (in the classroom or from home).

The final sample consisted of 1036 students in 14 schools (7 state schools and 7 private-publicly subsidised schools).

Instrument and variables

The anonymous self-administered questionnaire was specifically designed for this study and contained the following groups of variables.

Socio-demographic variables: gender; age; academic year; parents' level of education (ten-choice item, later categorised into five values: no education, basic education, secondary education, university education, does not know); parents' employment situation (eight-choice item: has a permanent job; has their own business; does occasional jobs; is unemployed; is retired, early retired, pensioner or on permanent leave; does housework; does not know; has no father/mother); country of birth (for the student and their parents, categorised into two values: Spain, another country); family composition, that is, with whom they live at home (nine dichotomous variables; mother, father, siblings, step-siblings, grandmother, grandfather, other relatives, other); considering themselves a believer in any religion (not specified), with four response categories (believer and practising, non-practising believer, no, does not know); for girls whether or not they had already had their first period and age of first menstruation. These socio-demographic items were taken from the questionnaires in the WHO study "Health Behaviour among School-aged Children" (HBSC) (Mendoza et al., 1994) and in the EVAE study (Mendoza, 2004; Mendoza et al., 2005).

Pocket money. Participants were surveyed on the amount of available pocket money they usually had for personal expenses (in euros). This item had previously been used in the HBSC study questionnaire (Mendoza et al., 1994). The variable was broken down into three values according to age and the curve distribution for pocket money at each age (small, medium and large amounts).

Truancy. The question, adapted from the EVAE study (Mendoza et al., 2014) was worded as follows: How many days have you skipped classes in the last 30 days without being sick or having some other valid reason? Five choices were provided (none; a few hours, but not a whole day; one day; two or three days; four or more days).

Indicators for school adjustment: having repeated a grade and self-perceived academic performance, items from the HBSC questionnaire (Mendoza et al., 1994); perceived value of school learnings for the future, item adapted from the Pennsylvania Youth Survey (2021); wish to change school and sense of pride in their school, items adapted from the Sense of Belonging to School Scale (Akar-Vural et al., 2013); satisfaction with personal performance in class work, item from the Positive Youth Development Scale-short form (Geldhof et al., 2014; Gómez-Baya et al., 2019); difficulty in paying attention in class (variable newly created for this questionnaire); certainty that they would still attend school even if it was not compulsory (newly created variable).

Indicators for quality or tension in school relationships: feeling that classmates generally get on well; feeling confident to discuss personal issues with peers (newly created variables); perceived peers' concern when they are absent, item taken from the Simple School Belonging Scale (Whiting et al., 2017); frequency of being excluded by peers; frequency of being bullied at school; frequency of bullying others at school, items from the 1994 HBSC questionnaire (Wold et al., 1994).

Indicators for perceived support from teachers: perceived support at school; feeling that teachers encourage them to do their best, items from the Positive Youth Development Scale-short form (Geldhof et al., 2014; Gómez-Baya et al., 2019); being able to reach teachers for help when they have a problem; perceived fair treatment of students by teachers (newly created items).

Indicators for participation in school life: hours spent in a typical week giving advice to classmates or friends; hours spent in a typical week participating in school committees, assemblies or school boards, items from the Spanish adaptation of the Social Contribution Scale (Gómez-Baya et al., 2019).

Family dynamics: satisfaction with their relationship with their mother; satisfaction with the relationship with their father, items from the 2019 ESPAD study questionnaire (ESPAD Group, 2020); satisfaction with conversations with parents; feeling they are an useful and important member of their family, items from the Positive Youth Development Scale-short form (Geldhof et al., 2014; Gómez-Baya et al., 2019); frequency of helping with the household chores; frequency of joint family activities at the weekend; frequency of discussing their day at home, items from the EVAE study (Mendoza et al., 2006; Mendoza-Berjano, 2003).

Type of school. In addition to the questionnaire, information concerning the type of school (state or subsidised) and size (up to 400 students, between 401 and 800; more than 800) was also collected.

The questionnaire was pilot tested with a sample of students from all grades of compulsory secondary education (n=95) in order to verify the adequacy of the newly created items and the feasibility of the instrument as a whole.

Data collection

The fieldwork was carried out in Autumn 2020. Almost all respondents completed the anonymous questionnaire individually in their classrooms, either on paper (65.7%) or online (30.5%). The rest (3.8%) completed the online questionnaire from home. In 81% of cases, a member of the research team was present in the classroom regardless of the questionnaire version (paper or online). In 15.2% of cases, the subjects individually completed the online questionnaire from the classroom without the presence of any member of the research team but accompanied by a teacher who had been given prior guidance by said team.

A total of 12.6% of the students in the surveyed classrooms did not attend class on the day the questionnaire was administered. Of those present, 2.2% did not complete the questionnaire, either because they refused to do so (in approximately half of these cases) or for other reasons, such as not understanding the Spanish language or having a broken electronic device (personal computer or similar). The average time to complete the questionnaire was 39 minutes. The number of missing values in the responses was generally very low (around 1% for those items related to truancy or school life).

Data analysis

A descriptive analysis for the frequency of each variable was carried out. This was followed by chi-square test bivariate analyses for the categorical variables and variance analysis (ANOVA) to investigate the association between continuous dependent variables and categorical independent variables. Subsequently, the Multiple Correspondence Analysis (MCA) technique was applied. This allows an overall synthetic vision in terms of variable interdependence in the case of questionnaires with categorical variables (Batista-Foguet & Sureda, 1998; Greenacre, 1993; Lebart et al., 1995). For this purpose, the variables with categorical content (32 variables) were considered to be active variables (those for which the response categories could potentially form the axes or factors derived from the MCA). Socio-demographic and continuous variables were considered as illustrative. Finally, the subjects in the study were classified based on similarity in questionnaire responses through the use of cluster analysis and SPAD software.

Ethical considerations

The study protocol was approved by the Andalusian Biomedical Research Ethics Committee. Parents and legal guardians were adequately informed and their consent was requested prior to the data collection process. Students participated on a voluntary basis. The questionnaire was anonymous. The principles established by the Helsinki Declaration were respected.

RESULT

Sociodemographic profile of the sample

The sample consists of 1036 students (49.7% female, with an average age of 14.2). Table 1 shows the parents' level of education and their employment situation (according to the answers given by the respondents) and some other sociodemographic variables. A total of 95.3% of the students surveyed reported to have been born in Spain and 87.5% said that all their family members were Spanish nationals.

Table 1

Characteristics of the sample according to socio-demographic variables

Variables	Categories	No	%
Gender	Boy	518	50.3
	Girl	512	49.7
Age (average 14.17 years of age)	12 years of age	220	22.0
	13 years of age	241	24.1
	14 years of age	242	24.2
	15 years of age	229	22.9
	16 or more years of age	69	6.9
Has parents	Has a father and a mother	980	94.6
	Does not have a father	48	4.6
	Does not have a mother	5	0.5
	Is an orphan	3	0.3
Father's level of education	No education	103	10.3
	Basic education	226	22.6
	Secondary education	130	13.0
	University education	237	23.7
	Does not know	303	30.3
Mother's level of education	No education	91	8.9
	Basic education	240	23.6
	Secondary education	160	15.7
	University education	289	28.4
	Does not know	237	23.3

Variables	Categories	No	%
Father's employment situation	Has steady employment	769	77.1
	Has unstable employment	114	11.4
	Is retired or on permanent leave	36	3.6
	Housework	9	0.9
	Does not know	69	6.9
Mother's employment situation	Has steady employment	614	60.1
	Has unstable employment	181	17.7
	Is retired or on permanent leave	13	1.3
	Housework	159	15.6
	Does not know	54	5.3
Country of birth	Spain	977	95.3
	Another country	48	4.7
Country of family origin	All family members are from Spain	881	87.5
	Mother is a foreigner	33	3.3
	Father is a foreigner	30	3.0
	Both parents are foreigners	24	2.4
	All family members are foreigners	39	3.9
		Mean	Sd
Pocket money (weekly amount)	All	14.00	21.88
	Boys	14.49	21.92
	Girls	13.50	22.65
Total number of individuals in the sample		1.036	

The sample was evenly distributed across the four grades of compulsory secondary education. A total of 38.7% of students were enrolled in state schools, the rest in subsidised schools (religious and non-religious) (Table 2).

Table 2

Characteristics of the sample according to school-related variables

Variables	Categories	No	%
School grade	First grade of secondary education	264	25.5
	Second grade of secondary education	268	25.9
	Third grade of secondary education	272	26.3
	Fourth grade of secondary education	232	22.4
Type of school	State school	401	38.7
	Private school with public funding	635	61.3
School size	Up to 400 students	377	36.4
	401 to 800 students	328	31.7
	Over 800 students	331	31.9

Prevalence of truancy

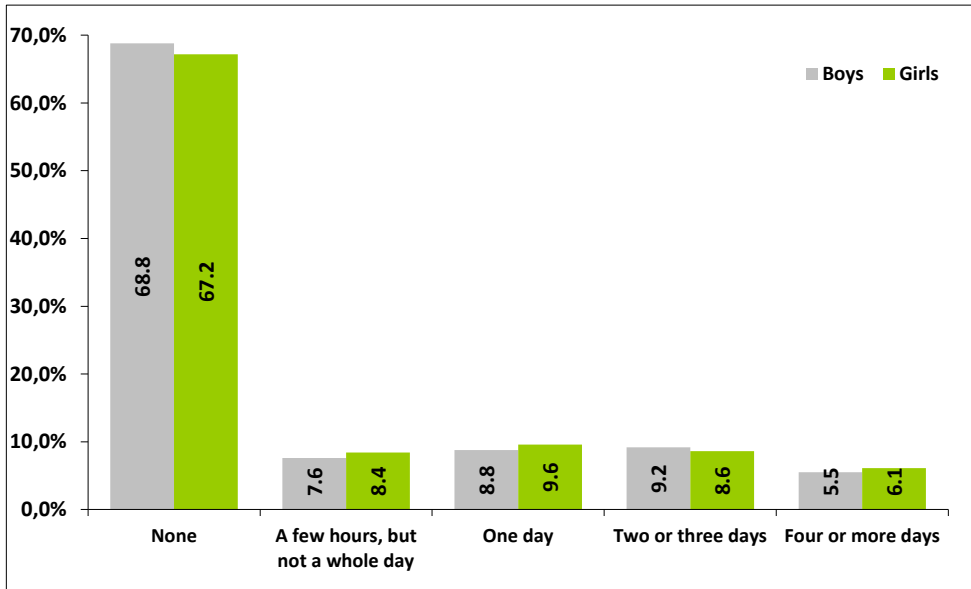
Slightly more than two thirds of the students surveyed (68%) said that in the 30 days prior to the survey they had not skipped classes without being sick or having some other justified reason. The rest reported to have skipped only a few hours (8%), a full day (9.3%), two or three days (9%) or four days or more (5.8%). A total of 24.1% reported having skipped at least one full day without a valid reason in the last 30 days.

Socio-demographic variability of truancy

No relevant gender differences were observed in this respect (Figure 1). Nor were there significant differences according to the grade or educational cycle, or the type of school (state or subsidised). However, there were differences according to age, in the sense that a lower prevalence of truancy was found at 12 years of age and a higher prevalence at 16 years of age or older, compared to the 13-15 age groups ($p < .01$). In addition, differences according to school size were also observed, with the overall prevalence of truancy (including only a few hours of unexcused absence) being higher in medium-sized schools (38.3%) than in those with more students (25.8%) ($p < .001$).

Figure 1

Days of unexcused absence from class in the last 30 days among students enrolled in Compulsory Secondary Education in Huelva (Spain), according to gender (in percentages)



The parental level of education introduced marked differences in this phenomenon, with a much higher prevalence of some type of truancy among students whose father had no school education or went to school for only a few years (54.9%) than among those whose father had a university education (21.5%) ($p < .00001$; $V = 0.195$; moderate effect size). The same is true for the mother's educational level (57.3% and 20.2%, respectively) ($p < .00001$; $V = 0.216$; moderate effect size). In turn, among pupils whose father or mother had no school education or only attended school for a few years, the prevalence of skipping more than a full day of classes was significantly higher (more than twice as high) than among the rest of the pupils. On the other hand, when the father worked occasionally, the overall rate of truancy was particularly high (46.3%) ($p < .05$; $V = 0.091$; small effect size), as well as when the mother worked occasionally (43.1%) ($p < .05$; $V = 0.090$; small effect size). In addition, the prevalence of truancy was higher when the student was not born in Spain ($p < .001$; $V = 0.133$; small effect size).

Typological classification of students

After carrying out the MCA following the procedure described above, by means of cluster analysis, groups of subjects that were homogeneous in their answers to the items on the questionnaire were identified, if they were located in neighbouring areas when projected onto the poly-dimensional space formed by all the factors or axes resulting from the MCA. Analysing the resulting dendrogram or classification tree, a classification into 7 differentiated profiles was selected. Two of them contained a very small percentage of subjects (3.6% adding the two classes together) and were basically characterised by omissions in certain questions, which is why their description is not included here. Table 3 consecutively presents the 15 responses that most characterised the members of each of the five remaining classes.

Class 1. Students with difficulties at school, isolated in the family, sporadically bullied and not practising truancy (12.5% of the sample)

This class was defined by responses showing a feeling of not being supported at school and a lack of pride in belonging to it, as well as mistrust of classmates and a frequent feeling of being excluded by them. Also, some other answers showing dissatisfaction about the communication with their parents and not feeling at all like a useful member of the family were particularly frequent in this class. There were some other defining characteristics (though less markedly) in this class: being occasionally bullied at school, a family that hardly ever engages in joint activities at the weekend, always having difficulties to pay attention in class and perceiving that their own school performance is below average. Similarly, some other answers appeared in descending order of importance: not having skipped any classes in the last 30 days and having no more than €5 per week of pocket money.

Class 2. Students with intense truancy, aged 16 or over, handling high amounts of pocket money, with parents of low educational level and having repeated several years (11.2%)

The responses that characterised this group the most were frequent truancy, having repeated two or more grades, being 16 or older, handling more than 40 euros a week of pocket money (or between 20 and 40) and that the mother or father has no school education or had only attended school for a few years. Indifference to how they are doing in class and whether they are satisfied with the dialogues with their parents also appeared. Two other particularly frequent responses in this class

were that the family is of foreign origin and that the grandmother lives at home. Also included were responses indicative of having difficulty paying attention in class on a regular basis.

Class 3. Students with slight truancy, with lack of trust in classmates, who would choose another school, and without good communication at home (13.6%)

This group was mainly characterised by a low level of truancy (no more than one day of unexcused absences in the last 30 days) and a lack of trust in peers to discuss personal issues. They were also characterised by sometimes having difficulties in paying attention in class and agreeing that they would choose another school if they could, as well as rating their school performance as average. Other characteristic answers were: “rarely bothering other classmates willingly” and “feeling left out by other students very frequently”. Some other defining answers were those that show indifference towards feeling supported by the school, feeling satisfied about their relationship with their father or feeling like a useful member of the family. Answers showing disagreement with having good conversations with their parents were also found in this class.

Class 4. Students with no truancy, moderately satisfied with their communication with their parents, with some connection to the school, a moderately good school career and parents with university studies (34.9 %)

This group was mainly characterised by having no truancy. Also, for reporting being “in agreement” (and not “in full agreement”) with being able to have good conversations with their parents, being a useful member of the family, teachers treating students fairly and taking pride in their school. Another defining feature was showing agreement with receiving support and encouragement from teachers and with the fact that their classmates would worry if they were absent from class. Never having repeated a grade, considering their own school performance as good and spending two hours a week helping at home were also (albeit to a lesser extent) characteristic responses in this class. The same applied to a parent having a university education and handling medium amounts of pocket money.

Class 5. Students who perceive clear support from teachers, with a strong connection to the school, highly satisfied with the relationship with their parents, with very good school performance and no truancy (24.3%)

In contrast to the previous class, this one was mainly characterised by “strong agreement” with responses that denote optimal teacher support, a good communication climate with parents, feeling like a useful member of the family and enjoying a good classroom climate with peers. It was also defined by rating one’s own school performance as very good and never having difficulty in paying attention in class. It also included spending six or more hours a week helping the family and practising no truancy. In a less prominent place, answers stating that the family always carries out joint activities at the weekend, as well as having dinner every day with the father, mother or another adult in the family were also characteristic of this class. Likewise, never feeling excluded by peers and never bullying peers were answer categories common among students of this class.

Table 3

Typological classification of Compulsory Secondary Education students into five different profiles

	Response category	Test value	p value	Percentage	
				GRP/CAT	CAT/GRP
	Not feeling supported at school	12.04	.000	77.97	35.66
	Not being able to tell personal things to classmates	11.30	.000	43.83	55.04
	Not being able to turn to teachers for help	10.78	.000	47.66	47.29
	Classmates do not worry if they miss classes	10.19	.000	47.46	43.41
CLASS 1 (12.5%)	Not having good conversations with their parents	9.48	.000	75.61	24.03
	Quite often other students do not want to be with them and they end up alone	9.41	.000	70.21	25.58
	Not being proud of the school	9.37	.000	59.09	30.23
	Not feeling like a useful and important member of the family	9.22	.000	72.09	24.03
	Feeling little support at school	8.34	.000	46.59	31.78

	Response category	Test value	P value	Percentage	
				GRP/CAT	CAT/GRP
CLASS 1 (12.5%)	What they learn at school will be of no use to them in the future	8.14	.000	46.99	30.23
	Believing that teachers do not treat them fairly at all	7.92	.000	52.38	25.58
	Choosing to go to another school	7.84	.000	38.66	35.66
	Feeling like an unimportant member of the family	7.78	.000	55.56	23.26
	Not taking time to help their family	7.39	.000	56.25	20.93
	Never discussing at home what happened during the day	7.36	.000	50.85	23.26
CLASS 2 (11.2%)	More than one day of truancy in the last month	21.99	.000	73.51	95.69
	Having skipped 2 or 3 days of school in the last month without being sick or having another justified reason	15.66	.000	75.00	59.48
	Having skipped 4 or more days of school in the last month without being sick or having another justified reason	11.33	.000	71.19	36.21
	Having repeated a grade 2 or more times	6.07	.000	43.40	19.83
	Being 16 years of age or older	5.01	.000	33.33	19.83
	Having more than 40 euros a week	4.82	.000	35.09	17.24
	Having a mother who went to school for some years	4.71	.000	28.57	22.41
	Having a mother with no school education	4.71	.000	28.57	22.41
	Having a high amount of pocket money available	4.27	.000	18.99	42.24
	Having a father who went to school for some years	3.88	.000	24.27	21.55
	Having a father with no school education	3.88	.000	24.27	21.55
	Having repeated a grade once	3.75	.000	20.75	28.45
	Being born in a country other than Spain	3.35	.000	29.17	12.07

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	Response category	Test value	P value	Percentage	
				GRP/CAT	CAT/GRP
CLASS 3 (13.6%)	Up to one day of truancy in the last month	24.30	.000	77.97	97.87
	Having missed a few hours of school in the last month without being sick or having another justified reason	15.43	.000	84.15	48.94
	Having missed 1 day of school in the last month without being sick or having another justified reason	14.18	.000	72.63	48.94
	Being able to tell personal things to classmates occasionally	3.18	.001	18.99	42.55
	Classmates get on well	3.16	.001	16.73	67.38
	Finding it sometimes difficult to pay attention to teachers' explanations	3.11	.001	18.02	50.35
	Hesitating to choose to go to another school	2.89	.002	21.71	23.40
	Rarely teasing or bullying others in the school environment	2.83	.002	18.75	38.30
	Thinking that their academic performance is average compared to their peers	2.77	.003	18.62	38.30
	Feeling indifferent toward school support	2.73	.003	19.18	33.33
	Feeling indifferent about their relationship with their father	2.66	.004	22.73	17.73
	Feeling indifference to valuing oneself as a useful and important family member	2.58	.005	20.11	25.53
	Having few good conversations with their parents	2.49	.006	24.05	13.48
	Rarely being teased or bullied at school	2.46	.007	17.48	43.26
	Spending 1 hour per week participating in committees, assemblies or boards of their school	2.44	.007	21.05	19.86

	Response category	Test value	P value	Percentage	
				GRP/CAT	CAT/GRP
CLASS 4 (34.9%)	No truancy in the last month	18.33	.000	51.44	99.17
	Not having missed school in the last month without being sick or having another justified reason	18.33	.000	51.44	99.17
	Having some good conversations with their parents	8.65	.000	53.16	51.25
	Saying that teachers sometimes treat them fairly	8.64	.000	47.59	68.42
	Being proud of the school	8.49	.000	48.07	65.65
	Feeling supported at school	8.07	.000	49.88	56.23
	Feeling like a useful and important member of the family	7.58	.000	49.74	52.63
	Being able to turn to teachers for help	7.29	.000	47.32	58.73
	Classmates get on well	7.09	.000	44.37	69.81
	Feeling that they are doing well in class work	6.35	.000	48.16	47.09
	School teachers regularly encourage students to do their best	6.13	.000	47.28	48.20
	Classmates are somewhat concerned if they are absent from class	6.12	.000	44.49	60.39
	Never having repeated a grade	5.87	.000	39.26	88.64
	Agreeing to go to school, even if it is not compulsory	5.78	.000	44.03	59.28
	CLASS 5 (24.5%)	Spending time with the family during the weekend from time to time	5.40	.000	50.44
Believing that teachers treat them fairly		15.05	.000	62.81	60.32
Having many good conversations with their parents		14.98	.000	52.38	74.21
Feeling a lot of support at school		14.34	.000	63.23	55.95
Always being able to turn to teachers for help		14.25	.000	61.44	57.54
Teachers at the school encourage students to do their best		14.18	.000	53.61	67.86
	Feeling like a very useful and important member of the family	14.15	.000	50.55	72.62

	Response category	Test value	P value	Percentage	
				GRP/CAT	CAT/GRP
CLASS 5 (24.5%)	Feeling that they are doing very well in class work	14.04	.000	66.84	50.40
	Being very proud of their school	13.87	.000	55.36	63.49
	Going to school, even if it is not compulsory, because what they learn is important	13.61	.000	60.43	55.16
	What they learn at school will serve them in the future	12.48	.000	53.26	58.33
	Classmates get on very well	11.93	.000	49.52	61.11
	Thinking that their academic performance is very good compared to their peers	11.38	.000	54.87	49.21
	Feeling very satisfied with their relationship with their father	10.52	.000	37.64	79.76
	Discussing frequently at home what happened during the day	10.46	.000	39.45	74.21
Classmates are concerned if they are absent from class	10.10	.000	60.14	35.32	

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The primary objective of this study was to estimate the prevalence of truancy among the population of (compulsory secondary education) students in Huelva (Spain). The estimated prevalence of some truancy in the previous 30 days is approximately one third of the sample (32%), ranging in duration from only a few hours (8%) to four or more days of unexcused absences (5.8%). In turn, the prevalence of truancy of at least one full day is 24%, a rate that matches the one reported in the 2018 PISA study for all 15-year-old students in Spain and is somewhat lower than the estimated prevalence in the 2022 PISA study (28.3%) (OECD, 2019; 2023). However, some differences should be noted. The PISA study enquires about unexcused absences in the previous 15 days, whereas the item in this study refers to the previous 30 days. Moreover, it should not be forgotten that 12.6% of the students in the randomly selected classrooms were absent on the day when the questionnaire was completed. No data were collected regarding the nature of these absences, but it seems likely that many of them were unexcused. In this sense, the

actual prevalence of truancy may be higher than estimated in this study (or, for that matter, in any study collecting data from surveys conducted in classrooms).

The second aim of the study was to analyse the socio-demographic variability of truancy. In the sample studied, the prevalence of truancy was very similar among female and male students. Across the OECD as a whole, there are also no significant gender differences in the prevalence of truancy of at least one full day of absence in the previous two weeks (20.2% for girls and 19.4% for boys) (OECD, 2023). However, in the 2022 PISA results for Spain, there are notable gender differences in this respect, with a higher prevalence among girls (30.4%) than among boys (26.1%) (OECD, 2023).

As truancy shows large international variability (OECD, 2023), it can be said that it is basically caused by the synergy of social factors that have a stronger impact in some countries. However, the similar prevalence across both genders in the OECD (or in the city of Huelva) suggests that the bulk of these factors affect broad sections of both male and female students in a similar way.

Moreover, in the sample of students from Huelva, truancy is more prevalent when parents have no school education or only attended school for a few years than when they were able to undertake university studies. This is in line with the findings of the 2022 PISA study, both for Spain (33.8% prevalence of at least one full day of missing classes among socially disadvantaged students, compared to 22.2% among advantaged students) and for the OECD as a whole (a difference of 6.3 percentage points in the prevalence of such truancy between the two groups of students) (OECD, 2023).

The Huelva study found that the prevalence of truancy is higher among pupils of immigrant origin than among other pupils. In this respect, the results of the study highlight the need to consider an intercultural perspective in the planning, development and evaluation of public policies in the field of education, given that the presence of pupils of immigrant origin is a reality in our context, and in particular the results of this study seem to suggest that the education system is not providing a suitable response to these pupils, among which intense truancy is more prevalent.

However, it is striking that in our sample, approximately one fifth of the students whose parents have a university education were absent from school in the previous 30 days. This might suggest that the phenomenon is widespread and that it is being fuelled by social factors which are now also affecting, at least to some extent, students whose parents are university-educated. This, in turn, could lead to the interpretation that nowadays, having highly educated parents does not protect students against the risk of truancy.

The third objective of the study was to establish a typology of student profiles including, in addition to the different levels of truancy, family, school and socio-demographic variables. The typological classification following the MCA carried out,

identified differentiated groups of subjects who tend to give similar answers to a wide range of questions in the questionnaire.

In class 2, the link between high truancy, handling large amounts of pocket money, a low educational level of the parents and having repeated grades can be found. A new finding from this research is the connection between handling high amounts of pocket money and high truancy. Neither the descriptive, cross-sectional design nor the multivariable analysis technique (MCA) used in the study allows to establish causal relationships between variables, but this connection would deserve a longitudinal analysis. If handling high amounts of pocket money in preadolescence or adolescent would be found to be a predictor for truancy, the preventive implications could be clear.

In class 3, mild truancy is linked to a lack of trust in classmates, a desire to change school and a lack of good communication at home. Class 1, in turn, includes students that have difficulties at school, feel isolated in the family, are bullied occasionally, but do not skip classes. Handling small amounts of pocket money is another frequent response in this group, which might suggest that, in practice, this could have some protective effect, even if certain risk factors for truancy are present. This could also be the subject of further studies.

No truancy appears as a defining feature in both classes 4 and 5, but much more markedly so in class 4. In class 4, no truancy is found in association with moderate satisfaction with family and school as well as parents with university education. The main feature for students in class 5 is that they feel a clear support from teachers and have an excellent engagement with school and family. Nevertheless, showing no truancy is also a defining feature in this group.

The results obtained do not lend themselves to a single interpretation. These findings may suggest that truancy is a complex and dynamic phenomenon in terms of causes and evolution. There might be subtle, and probably unstable, differences between students who skip school and those without truancy. Truancy (pronounced truancy) could be the small visible part of a much more widespread problem: feeling to a greater or lesser extent disconnected from school (either from teachers, students or both), as well as from the educational pathway planned within the educational system in general. There may also be contributing factors which impact on this relatively widespread disconnection from school and trigger truancy. These include handling large amounts of pocket money and feeling isolated in the family. If this were the case, the prevention of truancy would not be a matter of targeting students with high levels of truancy –it is well known how useless it is to try to reduce the tip of an iceberg–, but rather of preventing and reducing disconnection from schools and isolation within the families. Some prevention could probably be brought about by providing, with the support of public authorities, a wide range of health and educational extracurricular activities that are attractive and accessible to

all social sectors, including the most disadvantaged. In this context, physical activity could play a particularly important role. There is strong evidence that it can enhance cognitive development, personal well-being and social integration throughout the life cycle (Mendoza-Berjano et al., 2023).

In sum, truancy is a widespread phenomenon among secondary education students, and does not affect only a specific sector of them. The results of the study suggest that truancy is associated both with disengagement from school life and with feelings of isolation within the family. In turn, it is more prevalent among pupils whose parents have a low level of education or are of immigrant origin. In Spain as a whole (although not in the city of Huelva) it is affecting girls more than boys. This poses a complex challenge for the education system in terms of preventing this problem and dealing with existing cases. Social problems caused by the synergy of different factors always require intersectoral measures for their solution. The education system, in addition to promoting research into this problem and disseminating effective preventive initiatives, could lead joint action with other social sectors with a view to significantly reducing it.

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