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Minding the Gaps in Absenteeism:

Disparities in Absenteeism by Race/Ethnicity, Poverty and Disability

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Abstract

Children from certain racial and ethnic minority backgrounds, in poverty, and/or with a disability, often face distinct challenges in attending school, leading them to miss more school relative to their non-minority, more socio-economically advantaged and non-disabled peers. This brief describes these disparities in absenteeism in the US, discusses the challenge of explaining these disparities, and considers the implications that disparities have for addressing absenteeism. Finally, it closes with advice on how schools can make headway in reducing disparities in absenteeism. As this brief argues, while schools can readily document absenteeism gaps, diagnosing the root causes of these gaps remains much more elusive. Further, schools seeking to reduce disparities in absenteeism will not only need to intentionally establish explicit targets to reduce such gaps, but they will need to develop individualized strategies to remove barriers to attendance thereby getting children—especially those facing disproportionate challenges—back into the classroom.

Keywords: absenteeism, gaps, disparities, race/ethnicity, poverty, disability

Minding the Gaps in Absenteeism:

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The innovative solutions aimed at improving attendance covered in this issue provide us with an overarching lesson: though challenging, helping our nation's most vulnerable children get back into the classroom and attend school more regularly can be accomplished. While these school-based interventions help move the needle in the right direction—improving attendance, thereby lowering absences—critical questions remain about their potential in reducing systemic disparities in absenteeism. Children from certain racial and ethnic minority backgrounds, in poverty, and/or with a disability, often face distinct challenges in attending school, leading them to miss more school relative to their non-minority, more economically advantaged and non-disabled peers (Gottfried, Stiefel, Schwartz, & Hopkins, 2017; Jacob & Lovett, 2017; Romero & Lee, 2007; U.S. Department of Education, 2016). Importantly, improving attendance for children with diverse backgrounds will require multi-pronged strategies and interventions that tackle their unique needs. How we arrive at those strategies depends critically on an understanding of disparities and drivers of those disparities.

This brief summarizes what we currently know about disparities in absenteeism nationwide. It discusses the challenge of explaining these disparities, and the implications that these disparities have for addressing absenteeism. Finally, it closes with some advice on how we can make headway in reducing disparities in absenteeism.

Absenteeism Patterns Across Subgroups: Nationwide Disparities Are Clear and Unequivocal

Nationwide data on absenteeism paints a clear and unequivocal picture of disparities by race/ethnicity, poverty, and disability status (Jacob & Lovett, 2017). Children of color in our

public elementary, middle and high schools, especially children who identify as Multiracial, Pacific Islander, Native American, African American or Latino are chronically absent (missing at least 15 days during the school year) at higher rates versus their White counterparts (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). And those gaps are most stark in elementary school, a critical period for both their cognitive and socio-emotional development. For instance, data from the US Department of Education for the 2013-4 school year shows that for both Native American and Pacific Islander students, chronic absenteeism rates (19.4% and 20.0%, respectively) were more than twice that of their White counterparts (9.7%). While for African American elementary school students, their chronic absenteeism rate (14.6%) was 5 percentage points higher relative to Whites.

Some of these gaps narrow in high school, while other increase. For instance, more than a quarter (27.6%) of Native American high school students were chronically absent, 10 percentage points above their White counterparts (17.3%). Yet, just over a third of African American (23.4%) high schoolers were chronically absent, 7 percentage points above their White peers. Notably, for Hispanic children, chronic absenteeism rates were comparable relative to Whites in both elementary and middle school, while the gap widened in high school. Figure 1 shows how chronic absenteeism rates differ across racial/ethnic groups, grouped by elementary, middle and high school.

<<Insert Figure 1 here>>

Children in poverty are also more prone to being absent versus more economically advantaged children (Child Trends Data Bank, 2015). For example, nationwide, fourth and eighth graders who were in schools with higher proportions of students receiving free or reduced priced lunch (FRPL) were more likely to miss 3 or more days of schools. While 14% of children

in schools where 10 percent of students in the school qualified for FRPL missed 3 or more days, nearly 22% of students missed 3 or more days in schools where more than a quarter of children qualified for FRPL.

Finally, children with disabilities are absent more than their non-disabled peers (Gottfried et al., 2017; U.S. Department of Education, 2016). Roughly a quarter of students with disabilities in our nation's high schools miss more than 15 days of classes, 6 percentage points higher than their non-disabled peers. This disparity is not only unique to students with disabilities in high schools but, as shown in Figure 2, it holds true for those in elementary and middle schools.

<<Insert Figure 2 here>>

How Do These Disparities Emerge? Finding Answers Is More Difficult

While patterns of disparities are clear, we know much less about the pathways through which these disparities emerge. Further, many of the factors underlying disparities themselves are interlinked, which makes isolating and identifying the root causes of absenteeism gaps extremely challenging.

To illustrate the challenge and complexity of identifying causes of absenteeism disparities, consider the link between asthma and absenteeism. Evidence shows that for children under 18, asthma is more prevalent among African American versus White children at roughly a ratio of 1.8 to 1 (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Office of Minority Health, 2017). Asthma also leads to absenteeism (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2015, 2017). Given this, asthma seems like a likely candidate that helps explain the African American-White absenteeism gap.

Yet, we also know that asthma is also linked to poverty (Halfon & Newacheck, 1993). Thus, how much of the absenteeism disparity between African American and White children can be

attributed to asthma relative to poverty? Further, asthma disparities are also interlinked with disparities in housing conditions (Ganesh, Scally, Skopec, & Zhu, 2017) and insurance coverage (Paradise, 2015), alongside other environmental and social determinates. All told, isolating asthma as a contributing factor to racial/ethnic disparities in absenteeism, requires us to also determine how disparities in poverty, housing and access to insurance simultaneously influence, directly or indirectly, absenteeism gaps as well.

Moving Forward: Foundations for Addressing Absenteeism Gaps

Given the complexity of identifying the underlying causes in absenteeism disparities, how can we make headway on reducing absenteeism gaps?

Explicitly Focus on Narrowing Absenteeism Gaps. Just as we would like to close achievement gaps, we also need to be more intentional about closing absenteeism gaps as well. This will require moving beyond absenteeism benchmarks that numerous states have developed in response to the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). For instance, states such as Arkansas, Connecticut, Nevada and Ohio, seek to keep their schools' chronic absenteeism rates below 5% (Jordan & Miller, 2017). Yet, reducing absenteeism or maintaining it below this threshold, on average, can still leave lingering disparities intact. Thus, it is not only important for schools to think about reducing absenteeism on the whole, but how to narrow systemic gaps between key subgroups.

High Quality Data Matters. Tackling absenteeism gaps requires documentation of these disparities. This will require school systems to collect high quality data that allow us to disaggregate absenteeism by key subgroups. Fortunately, there are good examples of how data is being collected and disaggregated from several states. Recently, California released 2016-7 statistics on chronic absenteeism disaggregated by key subgroups

(<https://www.cde.ca.gov/nr/ne/yr17/yr17rel88.asp>). Similarly, Connecticut, provides data on gaps in chronic absenteeism since the 2011-12 school year (<http://data.ctdata.org>).

This type of data disaggregation not only allows schools, districts and states to describe and document overall gaps, but it can help them uncover potentially unexamined, overlooked gaps, especially between children whose identities intersect across multiple subgroups. For instance, do African American children with disabilities have absenteeism rates that are higher relative to their non-disabled peers? Data that allows schools to drill down on these types of questions can help schools reveal these overlooked disparities.

Once the existence of gaps is documented, we then need to diagnose the factors driving those disparities. As addressed earlier, this is neither an easy nor straightforward task. We do know, however, that the underlying drivers of absenteeism can be conceptualized within an overarching socioecological framework. In this framework, drivers of absences involve attributes of children, and can be shaped by characteristics of their families, the schools they attend and the broader communities in which they live (Gottfried & Gee, 2017). Thus, as a first step, uncovering root causes of absenteeism gaps will require multiple sources of data to be interlinked with each other: from education to health to housing to social services. A system of interlinked data sources will enable schooling systems to contrast factors influencing absenteeism across subgroups of children. This can also serve as a starting point to more deeply examine whether and how these factors drive disparities. If those factors do look different for different subgroups, then we can think more systematically about which ones can be influenced by programs, policies or interventions. Importantly, it will be crucial to consider which factors fall under the purview of schooling systems and which ones can be influenced by the collective work of other sectors, such as the health and social welfare systems.

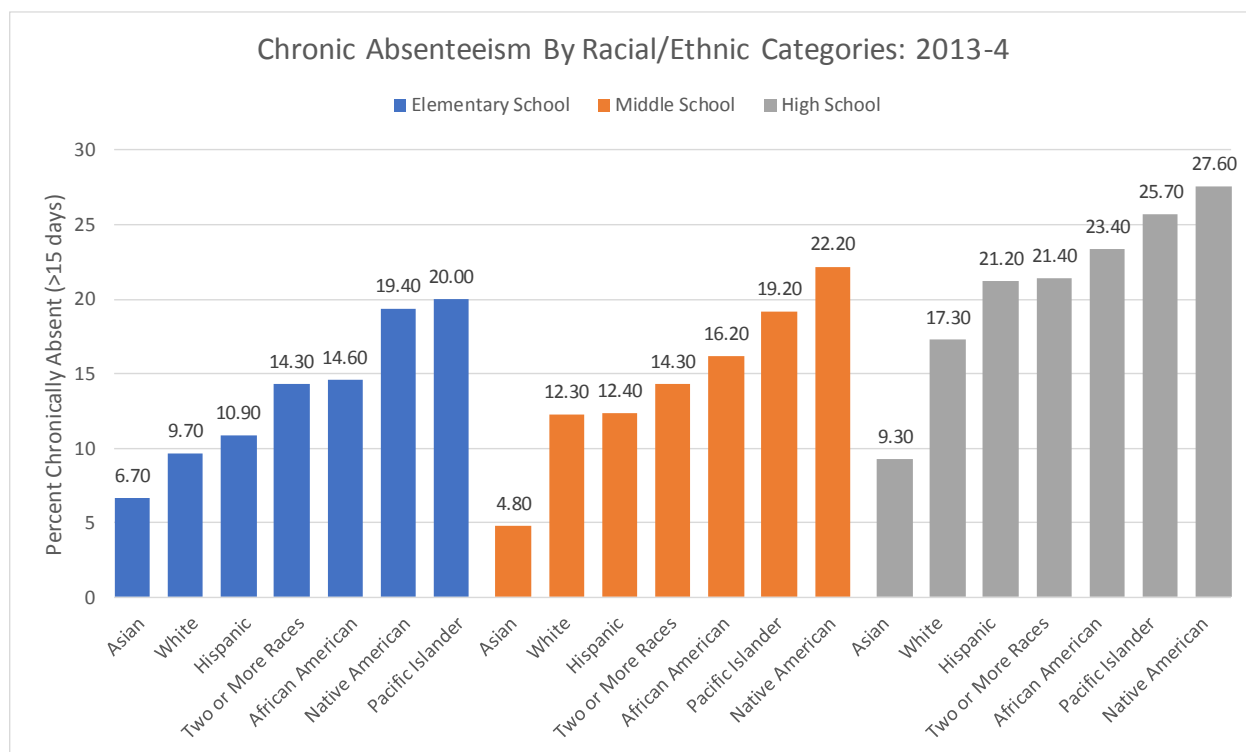
Targeted Interventions. Finally, while interventions to address absenteeism hold considerable promise in increasing attendance, interventions often are designed and implemented to reduce absenteeism, on average. While important, interventions that reduce absenteeism on the whole at the school-level can still mean that gaps remain, particularly if interventions have more favorable outcomes for particular groups of children relative to others.

Thus, to reduce gaps, especially within schools, we need to think about designing individualized approaches, tailored to the specific needs of specific subgroups and to the specific factors driving disparities. Such an approach can be conceptualized within a multi-tiered intervention framework, one that includes personalized outreach and intensive supports alongside whole school interventions (Balfanz & Chang, 2016). There is a key tradeoff to be aware of however: as the intensity and personalization of interventions increase, so does the investment of resources. Striking the right balance between whole school approaches, versus individualized approaches will require school systems to carefully weigh this tradeoff.

Disparities in absenteeism by race/ethnicity, poverty and disability are clear and unequivocal. Reducing those disparities will require intentional and coordinated efforts among key stakeholders, spanning multiple sectors, including those in education, health and social welfare. Not only will it require high quality data to describe and diagnose gaps, but targeted approaches that seek to address underlying disparities driving those gaps. By addressing disparities through targeted approaches, we can get more students—especially those who face disproportionate challenges in attending school—back into the classroom and on track to learn.

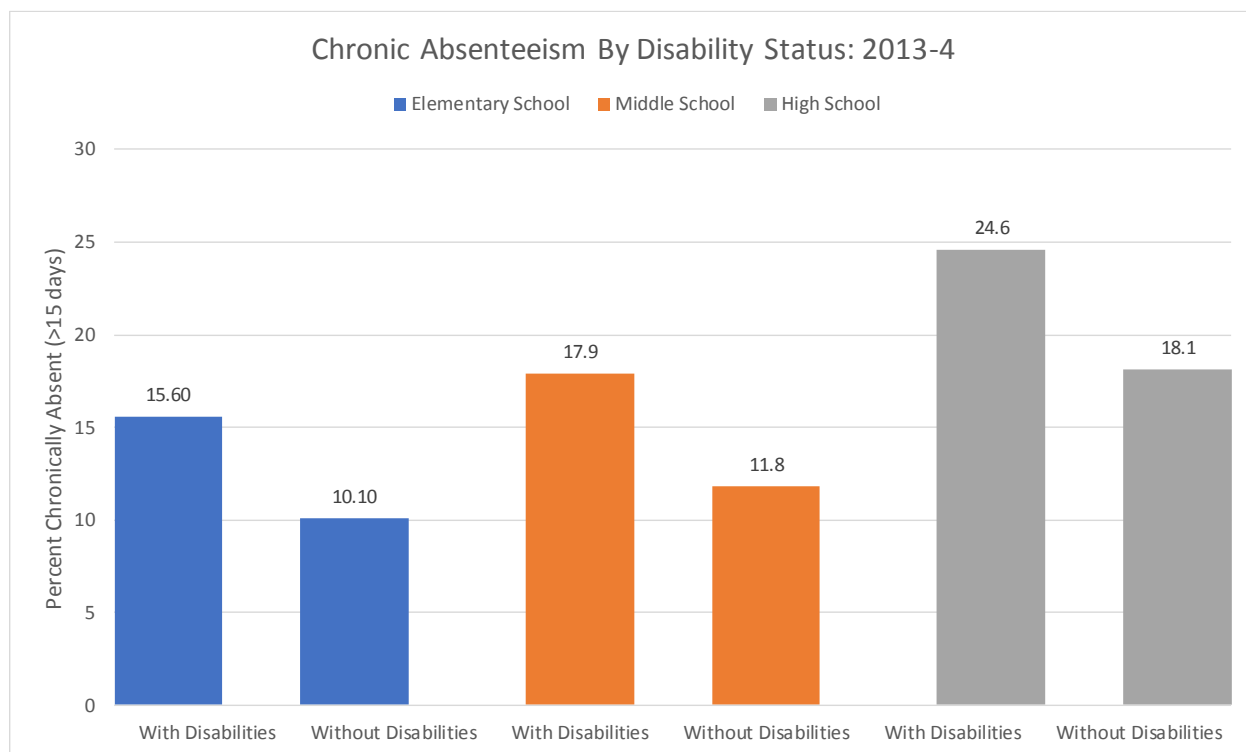
Figures

Figure 1. Chronic Absenteeism By Racial/Ethnic Categories



Source: Data replicated from the US Department of Education's 2016 Office of Civil Rights report *Chronic Absenteeism in the Nation's Schools* (<https://www2.ed.gov/datastory/chronicabsenteeism.html?src=pr>)

Figure 2. Chronic Absenteeism By Disability Status



Source: Data replicated from the US Department of Education's 2016 Office of Civil Rights report *Chronic Absenteeism in the Nation's Schools* (<https://www2.ed.gov/datastory/chronicabsenteeism.html?src=pr>)

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