

Why are students dropping out of school?

The Factors that Contribute to the United States High School Dropout rate

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With a very fluctuating economy and an unstable job market, a high school diploma as well as a continued education is becoming extremely important. An increasing amount of businesses will not even consider a job application unless a person has a high school diploma. The Bureau of Labor Statistics contains data showing the increase in opportunities that a person with a high school diploma has in comparison to a person that has dropped out of high school. The data shows that only 55% of high school dropouts were employed from the year 2000 through 2005 as opposed to 71% of high school graduates (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2008 52:26). Although receiving an education is important to success later in life, students who are dropping out of high school and not receiving a high school diploma is a problem that our country is facing (Townsend, Flisher, and King 2007:295). Recent data shows that there is about a 12 percent dropout rate and that the dropout rate of more secluded areas can increase to about 20 or even 40 percent (Hardre and Reeve 2003:347). Why are high school students still dropping out of school? What are the factors that contribute to high school students dropping out of school? Finally, how can this issue be further researched?

The literature review topic that I have chosen deals with the factors that contribute to the United States high school dropout rate. There has been a considerable amount of research concerning the factors that affect high school dropout rates. The factors include changes in family structure and income, relationship with parents due to changes in family structure, teacher support, motivation, and school performance, substance use and abuse, and finally residential location. It is hypothesized that these factors will increase the likelihood of a high school student in the United States to dropout. The topic is sociologically relevant because pursuing an education is a social norm; therefore dropping out is breaking that social norm. The topic is also sociologically relevant because it creates awareness towards the factors that lead to dropping out

of high school in the United States and continued research could potentially prevent future students from dropping out of school.

Factor 1: Changes in Family Structure and Income

The type of family structure that a person lives in does affect the likelihood of that person's chances of dropping out of school. Family structures include two-parent, single-parent, and also stepparent families (Pong and Ju 2000:148). Single-parent families can be further broken down into female-headed households as well as male-headed households. Divorce, separation, and death of a spouse are all variables that define change in family structure from a two-parent family to a single-parent family or stepparent family. "Virtually all previous studies have concluded that children from single-parent or female-headed households are more likely to drop out than are children who reside in two-parent families"(Pong and Ju 2000:149). Children living with stepparents are also more likely to drop out of school than children in a two parent family (Pong and Ju 2000:149). How does a change in a person's family structure significantly affect the dropout rate?

The separation of a parent's marriage is a change in family structure that is detrimental to a child and can increase the child's chances of dropping out of school (Pong and Ju 2000:147). As a result of the separation of a parent's marriage, the income of a child's parents changes. This change in income greatly affects the child. When two people enter into a relationship they most likely have their own separate bank accounts. After becoming married, couples may often share their bank accounts with each other. When a couple divorces, the incomes of both parents once again become separate and this will in turn affect the child due to the loss of a parent's income (Pong and Ju 200:150). This loss of income greatly affects a child in a negative way because it

could potentially put the child in a family of poverty. “Those living in poverty are 2.9 times more likely to be dropouts than are those living above 150 percent of the poverty threshold”(Lichter, Cornwall, and Eggebeen 1993:53). There are many reasons why a person living in poverty would be more likely to drop out of school. One reason that a person living in poverty would be more likely to drop out of school would be because they are preoccupied trying just to survive day by day. A major reason is that they lack the essential resources. They may not have transportation or they might be looking for food so that they will not be hungry. They also might be looking for a job in order to earn money.

The children who are faced with the most economic deprivation are those living in single-mother headed families and they have an increased chance of dropping out of school (Pong and Ju 2000:165). Single-mother headed families generally suffer economically because generally, women do not earn as much money as men (Pong and Ju 2000:150). Women have been portrayed as more nurturing and motherly. They usually do not earn as much money as their male companion because they are busy taking care of children as well as the household. Although taking care of children and the household are both reasons, women with no children also experience a gap in wages in comparison with males.

A child’s relationship with his or her parents can affect their chances of dropping out of high school. Factors that are associated with a child’s relationship that negatively affect their chances of educational attainment are “the physical absence of adults in the household due to divorce, the limited amount of time parents and children spend together due to the rise in two-earner families, and the corresponding parental inattention to children’s activities such as monitoring school performance or instilling educational values”(Lichter et al. 1993:55). A child needs the attention of a parental figure. The less time that a child spends with his or her parents

creates a gap in their relationship that could lead a child's attention towards a person of less nurturing and more deviant characteristics. Children of parents who are separated or divorced may be lacking the attention that is needed especially regarding their education (Lichter et al. 1993:55). Who will make sure that the child is doing his or her homework as well as making sure the child goes to school? Some children need consistent attention regarding school work or their studies may seem less important.

Factor 2: Support, Motivation, and Performance

“According to self-determination theory, students become engaged in school-related activity when instructional activities are interesting, relevant to their lives, and affirm their competences” (Hardre and Reeve 2003:353). If a student is motivated within their course material then they are most likely going to succeed. The other factors that can be attributed to high school dropout rates are negative teacher support, and a student's lack of motivation to succeed because of negative teacher support. The relationship between a teacher and a student is extremely important. The relationship is extremely important because it is much like that of a parent and child relationship. A teacher's job is to nurture and guide a student to succeed similar to what a parental figure might do (Hardre and Reeve 2003:353). When a student is not engaged in class work because they feel like their teacher is not helping them they begin to get aggravated. If a student is upset then they will think negatively about how well they are doing in school and how well they will be able to do in the future. “Hence, much can be gained in both theory and practice by thinking about dropout as not only an achievement issue but also a motivational issue”(Hardre and Reeve 2003:354).

Although teacher support, motivation, and school performance can be a proven factor regarding dropout rates due to research, there is a major limitation to this factor. The limitation involves the school's atmosphere. The way a school is run as well as the way classrooms are run differs everywhere. A school on the east side of a town can be extremely different in the way it is run in comparison to a school on the west side of town.

Factor 3: Substance Use and Abuse

Another factor that strongly contributes to the dropout rate is substance use and substance abuse. The use of tobacco, alcohol, cannabis or marijuana, and other illicit drugs are all substances that when used or abused relate to dropping out of school (Townshend, Flisher, and King 2007:295). People probably relate substance abuse to dropping out of school because of its deviant nature. The entertainment world also portrays substance users as usually being the cool kid that does whatever he or she wants. There are quite a few theories relating to substance use and abuse and these theories explain why people do act the way they do. The theories are social control theory, problem-prone behavior and general deviancy theory, primary socialization theory, social learning theory, peer cluster theory, deviant affiliation theory, the theory of differential association, and finally the strain theory (Townshend et. al 2007:308-309). These theories are all tied to deviance which is contributes to dropping out of high school.

People are socially bonded to each other through social norms. The social control theory states that when social norms are broken people cannot be socially controlled because of behavior that goes against what is social (Townshend et al 2007:308). An example of this would be smoking weed. The social control on smoking weed is not very strong. Because of this people

will break away from the norm of not smoking weed to smoking weed. Smoking weed is considered a deviant characteristic that is related to dropping out of school.

Another theory is the problem-prone behavior and general delinquency theory. This theory says that mixing behaviors that are problematic with behaviors that children are more likely to do such as smoking, drugs, and alcohol is why children drop out of school (Townsend et al. 2007:308). Children who smoke, do drugs, and drink alcohol are not conforming to the social norms of what adolescents do. If a child smokes cigarettes then he is likely to drink alcohol and if he drinks alcohol then he is more likely to do drugs.

Both primary socialization theory and social learning deal with peer influence. Primary socialization theory states that people that use substances drop out of school to be with their friends and social learning theory is when people learn deviant acts through their peer influences (Townsend et al. 2007:308). The peer cluster theory, deviant affiliation theory as well as the theory of differential association all deal with peer influences and are related to children dropping out of school. “Those experiencing problems at school are thought to have a way of seeking each other and together they form peer groups”(Townsend et al. 2007:308). Deviant affiliation is directly connected to this because the more a child corresponds with deviant children the more likely that child is to be deviant.

The last theory is the strain theory. This theory is related to dropping out of school and substance abuse because when children get kicked out of school they feel alone and because of this they are more likely to do deviant behaviors (Townshend et al. 2007:308).

Children’s chances of dropping out of school because of tobacco use, alcohol use, marijuana use, and drug use can be seen through the theories provided. The theories show us

how and why children begin using substances. Substance uses are deviant acts that go against social norms and education is a social norm.

Factor 4: Residential location

A data table from a study on educational outcomes by current location and location at age 16 shows that the percent of high school dropouts from urban and rural areas were 18.9% for urban and 28.6% for rural (Sander 2006:312). The residential location where a person lives can greatly affect the educational performance. Why does residential location have an effect on the dropout rate? The most important reason is resources. School resources, family resources, and economic resources are all contributors to the dropout rate based upon location.

The school resources in most rural areas are lacking in comparison to urban areas. A reason for this is largely due to economic resources. Many rural schools do not receive the funding that urban schools do. "Inner-city schools tend to provide, on average, higher expenditure per pupil"(Roscigno, Devey, and Crowley 2006:2131). Because of this, rural schools are not able to provide the necessary educational resources that children need to succeed. These educational resources include things such as computers, books, qualified teachers, and updated facilities.

Although residential location can be a proven factor regarding dropout rates due to research, there is a major limitation to this factor. Research is limited in explaining how educational processes and outcomes vary spatially(Roscigno, Devey, and Crowley 2001:269). There was incredibly more information on rural areas as opposed to urban areas.

Conclusion:

After all the research that has been accomplished, the problem of children dropping out of school still exists. It still exists today because of the many factors that contribute to school dropouts. Factors such as family structure, income, substance use, residential location, and motivation are all factors that contribute to the dropout rate. Within these factors are many different variables such as resources, peers, teachers, and divorce. The hypotheses that were developed prior to the research can be both supported as well as refuted. Each hypothesis was supported with evidence however there were limitations. How is it that they can be both supported and refuted? The reason is because the factors are very circumstantial. Until we begin to resolve the problematic issues, the dropout rate will persist on and in a state of economic disparity that this country is in, educational attainment with a high school diploma is extremely important. An area of future research that could help improve knowledge about this topic so that someday it will be of little importance is residential location. At first, I wanted to compare the factors contributing to drop out rates in rural versus urban areas; however, after compiling extensive research the information did not lead me in that direction. I only received enough information to make location a factor for dropping out. The reason why this is the case is because many of the studies focused mainly on rural areas and did not explain how educational processes and outcomes vary spatially(Roscigno, Devey, and Crowley 2001:269). This would be great future research.

Summary of revisions to paper:

After completing my first paper, it was apparent that I still needed to make changes regarding my paper. A major revision that occurred in my final draft was the fact that my paper's focus was no longer on rural areas versus urban areas. There just was not enough information for that to be possible. Since there was not enough information about this I decided to add in a limitation section under the residential location section of the paper. That took place on page 8 of

my paper. I also added a limitation section under the teacher support, motivation, and school performance section. The limitation was that school environments differ everywhere. This took place on page 6 of my paper. Another major revision of my paper took place in the introduction. My introduction was lacking so I added in a quote from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics to enforce the fact that receiving a high school diploma helps in getting a job. I also added research questions, hypotheses, as well as sociological relevance to the introduction. This all took place on page 2 and 3. On page 4, I addressed the fact that the wage gap persists even for women with no kids. On page 5, I built up the introduction paragraph to substance abuse and I also explained that the theories relate to deviance which relates to dropping out. I also made my conclusion distinguished by giving it a header on page 8. In the conclusion, I added a lot of content. I added in that the hypotheses could be both supported and refuted as well as addressing future research. This was on page 9 of the paper. All other changes were grammatical changes or small changes to the paper. I did not visit the writing center but I did use the lady at the library many times with help finding relevant sources. The process of this paper was scary at first; however the way that the class was run made it very smooth. Although I hated the fact that I had to present in front of class because that is also scary, I was glad that it was a part of the process. I have gained much knowledge about my topic and about the process of research in general.

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