The Problem with Dropping Out and Why Students Leave School Before Graduating

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ABSTRACT

There is currently a major cultural problem taking place across American society in regard to students dropping out of school. Millions of Americans drop out of high school and college each and every year. Millions never earn a high school diploma or college degree. This study looked at the reasons why students dropped out of school (N = 367). Some of the major reasons found were the need for money, disinterest in classes, family issues, poor grades, lack of support, pregnancy, and so forth. The study analyzed differences across various groups (e.g., gender, ethnicity, age, and social class) in relation to dropping out, returning to school after dropping out, highest level of schooling achieved, and regretting dropping out. The study results demonstrated numerous connections between a number of key variables (e.g., social class and its association to dropping out), gender (e.g., women were more likely to regret dropping out and were more likely to return to school), and disinterest in classes (e.g., poor grades, absenteeism, suspensions, etc.). It was also found that most of the respondents dropped out of school for more than one reason and that the highest percentage of students dropped out at the community college level. The study brings forth additional data that can help educators and school administrators to better understand this larger cultural problem and what can potentially be done to help reduce these overall dropout rates that are currently afflicting the nation.

Keywords:
dropping out, disinterest in classes, absenteeism, social class, poor grades, need for money, community college.

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Introduction

Dropping out in American schools has become a major problem. People that do not earn a high school diploma are far more likely to be unemployed than those that have graduated. Those that have a college degree are even less likely to be unemployed than those that have dropped out of high school or college. There is a clear positive correlation between level of education and employment rates. Those that have a college degree are also much more likely to have higher annual incomes and to have higher overall satisfaction rates in regard to their careers. There is a clear connection between level of education and many life outcomes, such as mental health, physical health, and longevity.

At any given point in time there are well over 6 million Americans between the ages of 16 to 24 that have dropped out of school (Bloom, 2015). The United States has a high school event dropout rate of 3.3%, which amounts to around one-half million high school students each and every year (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2016). Why does this matter? For one reason, this dropout rate matters because the approximate 6.7 million unemployed 16 to 24-year-olds that have dropped out of school costs the American taxpayers over $100 billion dollars each and every year (Johns Hopkins University, 2016). Those that drop out are also more likely to be involved with dangerous behaviors (e.g., drugs and alcohol), to be homeless, to be involved in criminal behaviors, to be incarcerated, and so forth.

Dropping out rates in American high schools and colleges is a major social and cultural problem. If there is ever going to be a major improvement with this educational problem the reasons why people are dropping out need to be much better understood. It is also critical to understand which types of individuals are dropping out and whether or not anything can be done to reduce the chances of them leaving school prematurely. This study has as its goal the intent to bring forth current data that helps to shed further light on this pressing social problem.

Background

There are many reasons why a person may make the decision to drop out of high school. Some of the core reasons put forth in the literature include certain behavioral problems such alcohol and drug use, delinquency, risky sexual behaviors, criminal conduct, fighting, bullying, and family problems (Jensen & Hawkins, 2018; Tanner & Wilson, 2014; Wood, 2011). Dropout rates at the community college level is posing a major problem that is costing taxpayers billions of dollars each year. Some community colleges only graduate around 30 percent of the total number of students that enroll, and other estimates calculate that over 70 percent of all community college students are unprepared for college level studies when entering as freshmen (American Association of Community Colleges, 2018; Burnett, 2016; National Student Clearinghouse, 2014).

The majority of community college students that drop out never return to complete their respective programs. There are many different reasons as to why a college student may make the decision to leave school before graduating, such as increasing tuition costs, lack of support, need for employment, and problems at home (Burnett, 2016; Saenz et al., 2015; Tanner & Wilson, 2014). Other core reasons why people drop out of school involve suspensions (Freeman et al., 2015), absenteeism (Kearney & Graczyk, 2014), failing grades (Bloom, 2015), and being involved in a physical altercation or being bullied (Chung, Monday, & Perry, 2017).

There are also various sociodemographic variables that play a role in whether or not a student drops of out college. Coming from a low-income family is a correlated variable that

is connected to dropping out of school (Chung, Monday, & Perry, 2017). Males are more likely to drop out than females (Bloom, 2015; Chung, Monday, & Perry, 2017). Native Americans have the overall lowest graduation rates, followed by male Hispanic students (Bureau of Indian Education, 2018; National Center for Education Statistics, 2018). Students with disabilities also

have among the lowest 4-year graduation rates of any group, standing at around 61% (Johns Hopkins University, 2016).

When trying to make sense as to why people drop out of school it is important to pay attention to individual behaviors (e.g., drug use, alcohol use, criminal behaviors, etc.), familial factors that contribute to the problem (e.g., domestic violence, lack of parenting, single family homes, etc.), and wider social and cultural factors (e.g., lack of funding, poverty, economic conditions, etc.). Lack of motivation, lack of academic confidence, monetary problems, and certain self-imposed psychological barriers appear to be major factors in determining which students are at the greatest risk of dropping out (Carlson, 2016; Wood, 2011). Other core factors that place students "at-risk" of dropping out revolve around chronic absenteeism and low grades. These two factors working together, in combination with coming from a low-income background, place an individual among one of the highest risks for dropping out (Tanner & Wilson, 2017; Wood, 2011).

Why does all of this matter? Ballantine and Hammack (2017) pointed out that the unemployment rate for those without a high school diploma floats around 10 percent, whereas it is only around 2.5 percent for those with a college degree. They went on to point out that people with less than a high school diploma make less than $30,000 annually, whereas those with a college degree make around $67,000 a year, and those with professional degrees make around $100,000 a

year (Ballantine & Hammack, 2017).

Level of education achieved has effects across the entire life span. For instance, men and women that do not complete high school or college have shorter life expectancies, live in higher rates of poverty, live in environments that are more dangerous and violent, and suffer from higher rates of various chronic and debilitating illnesses (Moody & Sasser, 2018; Segal, Quals, & Smyer, 2011; Quadagno, 2018). Those that have lower levels of education and that are living

in poverty are also more likely to suffer from certain mental illnesses, to live in abusive environments, to have inadequate health insurance, to be involved in unhealthy behaviors, and to be victimized in certain ways (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012; Carlson, 2016; Lee & Fan, 2014; Segal, Quals, & Smyer, 2011).

Keeping students in school will help to not only improve their lives over the long run, but it will also help to improve larger social and economic problems across the nation. Individuals that obtain higher level of education will realize better life outcomes across multiple domains (e.g., mental and physical health, living conditions, life satisfaction, longevity, etc.). These improved individual level conditions will also help to improve wider social, cultural, and economic conditions (e.g., poverty rates, and crime). Educated populations tend to thrive and be more prosperous across various social and economic levels. Many scholars argue that having strong educational systems and highly educated populations, along with healthy families, is the base for any successful society (Berns, 2015; Jensen & Hawkins, 2018; Kearney & Graczyk, 2014; Tanner & Wilson, 2014).

The current study intends to support the claims made by earlier researchers concerned about the problem with millions of students dropping out of high schools and colleges each and every year. This study will highlight some of

central reasons that people have dropped out of school, what levels they dropped out at (e.g., high school community college, 4-year college), if they regret dropping out, and what their major sociodemographic characteristics are (e.g., age, gender, ethnicity, etc.). The study has the goal of highlighting real-world causes that can be better addressed at the high school and college levels that can help to lower dropout rates and concurrently serve to increase students overall academic success and graduation rates. Doing these things should also help to simultaneously improve larger social, cultural, and economic conditions.

Methods

Data for this study were collected via a quantitative questionnaire designed for the specific purposes of this investigation. The data were collected primarily from residents of California in a nonprobabilistic manner. Availability and snowball sampling were the two main methods used to collect the data. To be eligible for the study the respondents must have dropped out of high school or college at some point in the past. If respondents had returned to school some period of time after dropping out, they were still included in the study as they could still contribute to the primary goals of the study (e.g., why people drop out, whether they return to school after dropping out, etc.). The survey took approximately 3 minutes to complete and there was no compensation given for participation. There was no deception employed in the study. The purpose of the study was explained to each respondent prior to filling out the instrument. Consent was provided by the respondent's willingness to fill out the survey. Any questions that the respondents had about the study or about any of the questionnaire items were answered in good faith and with clarity.

The survey had a standard quantitative design and asked about key demographic variables relevant to the purposes of the study (e.g., gender, social class, and ethnicity) that will allow certain group differences and inferences to be made. The survey also asked for information regarding the levels that respondents dropped out (e.g., high school, community college, etc.), the reasons that they dropped out (e.g., suspensions, drug use, poor grades, etc.), whether they returned to school after dropping out, whether they regret dropping out, and so forth. Data for this study were collected primarily at the nominal and ordinal levels. Only one scale level measure was employed in the study (i.e., age at the time of dropping out). The instrument did not collect qualitative information and the researchers did not ask for further elaboration on the given responses.

The sample size for this study was N = 367. The were 170 women (46.3%), 193 men (52.6%), 2 "Other" responses (0.5%), and 2 nonresponses (0.5%) in regard to gender. The largest ethnic group in the study was comprised of Hispanic respondents (n = 205, 55.9%), followed by White (n = 99, 27%), Black (n = 22, 6%), Asian (n = 17, 4.6%), Middle Eastern (n = 12, 4.3%), Multiracial (n = 9, 2.5%), and Native American (n = 1, 0.3%). Two respondents did not answer this particular question (0.5%). In regard to social class, the majority of the respondents identified with being form the working-class (n = 203, 55.3%). In descending order, the rest of the sample consisted of those from the middle-class (n = 106, 28.9%), the lower-class (n = 41, 11.2%), and the upper-class (n = 6, 1.6%). Eleven respondents (3.0%) did not answer this particular question.

A series of statistical analyses were performed on the data. Both descriptive and inferential analyses were conducted with the statistical software program SPSS 24. The discrete level variables were coded into SPSS for proper data analysis. The scale item data were placed directly into the database for subsequent analysis. A number of relevant descriptive, correlational, and inferential analyses were run across the categorical variables (e.g., Runs test, Chi-square, Somers' d, gamma, Phi, Cramer's V). Binomial tests were run to check for any expected or notable differences across certain nominal level variables (e.g., whether or not respondents returned to school after dropping out). Ordinal level tests were run to check for differences across the levels that respondents dropped out of school, their highest levels of education achieved at the time of filling out the questionnaire, and current social class standing (e.g., Median test, Kruskal-Wallis test, etc.). Other inferential tests were employed to check for any significance differences between groups via the one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) and the independent samples t-test.

Statistical significance was set at the standard .05 level for all analyses performed. All inferential analyses were conducted in a non-directional (i.e., two-tailed) manner. Any result

that had a higher than chance occurrence (i.e., anything with a greater probability of .05) was regarded as statistically insignificant and was analyzed accordingly.

A total of 369 surveys were filled out for this study. Two of the surveys were discarded for responses that were unclear and for leaving too many items unanswered. This left the final sample standing at 367. The remaining 367 surveys were deemed to be valid and useful for the purposes of this study. Respondents seemed to have a clear understanding of what the study was about and what the survey items were asking them. It is believed that the final sample data and subsequent analyses have provided valuable and practical information.

Presentation of Results

All of the study participants have dropped out of school at some point. Some never returned to school (n = 247, 67.3%), whereas others did return after taking some time off (n = 120, 32.7%). The largest percentage of respondents dropped out at the community college level (n = 161, 43.9%), followed by high school (n = 124, 33.8%), 4-year university (n = 73, 19.95), and graduate school (n = 3, 0.8%). Six of the respondents were unclear on exactly which level they dropped out at (1.6%).

The average age at which the respondents dropped out of school was 19.3 years. The women's average age was 19.7, whereas the men's average age was 19. An independent samples t-test did not produce significant differences between women and men in regard to the ages at which they dropped out of school, $t(251) = 1.72$, p = .088. The most frequent age in which respondents dropped out of school was 18. A one-way ANOVA was run to look for any significant differences between ethnicity and ages at which respondents dropped. The results did not produce any significant differences, F(7, 336) = 1.57, p = .142. Kruskal-Wallis tests revealed that there were differences between ethnicity and level dropped (sig. = .006) and ethnicity and social class (sig. = .000). For example, Hispanic respondents were more likely to come from working-class backgrounds and to drop out of school at lower levels than Asian respondents, which tended to come from higher social class backgrounds. Middle Eastern respondents were more likely to come from higher class backgrounds than Black respondents. The Middle Eastern respondents were also more likely to drop out of school at a higher level than Black respondents.

An ANOVA test did reveal significant findings in regard to social class and the ages at which respondents dropped out, F(3, 330) = 3.82, p = .010. From the data it appears that those from the higher social classes (e.g., middle and upper) dropped out at later ages and college levels than those from the lower classes (e.g., lower and working). Multiple post hoc findings demonstrated significant differences between upper-class and lower-class dropout ages (LSD = 3.11), middle-class and lower-class (Tukey's = 2.04, Bonferroni = 2.04), and working-class and lower-class (LSD = 1.51). Association measures demonstrated that there is a significant correlation between social class and dropout ages (d = .14, p = .000; g = .24, p =.000). Again, the produced findings show that respondents from higher social classes tended to drop out at later ages. Those from the lower and working classes tended to drop out at relatively younger ages.

Respondents were also asked if they could go back in time whether or not they would choose to remain in school (as opposed to dropping out). Chi-square analyses found that there were differences between ethnic groups, X^2 (7, N = 367) = 15.15, p = .034. Nominal level measures of correlation produced significant results in relation to ethnicity and wishing that one had remained in school (V = .203, p = .034; C = .199, p = .034). Further analysis of the data revealed that those that identified as "multiracial" were the most likely to wish they could turn back time and remain in school (88.9%). This sentiment is followed by Asian respondents (82.4%), Black respondents (81.8%), and Hispanic respondents (81.0%). White (66.7%). Middle Eastern (58.3%)

respondents were the least likely to wish they could go back in time and remain in school. Differences were also detected between women and men and their desires to turn back time and remain in school, X^2(3, N = 376) = 13.15, p = .004. There was also a significant association between gender and the desire to have remained in school, X^2(3, N = 376) =13.15, p = .004; V = .189, p = .004. It would appear that women were more likely to express the desire to have remained in school than men (84.7% and 69.4%, respectively). A one-sample binomial test also demonstrated that the respondents in the study were significantly more likely to express a desire to have remained in school than to not express this desire (B = 281, sig. = .000).

There were many different reasons as to why the respondents dropped out of school. The majority of the research participants stated that they dropped out of school for multiple reasons (n = 213, 58%). In descending order, the ten most common reasons why the respondents dropped out of school were: the need for money (n = 181, 49.3%), disinterest in classes (n = 119, 32.4%), family issues (n = 88, 24.0%), poor grades (n = 85, 23.2%), pregnancy (n = 63, 17.2%), lack of support (n = 55, 15.0%), parenting (n = 47, 12.8%), drugs (n = 33, 9.0%), absenteeism (n = 30, 8.2%), and alcohol use (n = 27, 7.4%). Other stated reasons for dropping out included mental health issues, fighting, suspensions, criminal behavior, gang involvement, physical health problems, incarceration, and bullying.

There were a number of clear connections between certain variables of interest in the study. For example, absenteeism and being disinterested in classes demonstrated a strong correlation (V = .711, p = .000), as did absenteeism and needing to make money (V = .721, p = .000). Having poor grades was also strongly associated with being disinterested in classes (V = .743, p = .000), needing to make money (V = .729, p = .000), and pregnancy (V = .707, p = .000). There was also a strong connection between respondents having family

problems and feeling that they were lacking in support for schooling (V = .707, p = .000). There were also strong correlations found between criminal behavior and suspensions (V = .744, p = .000), criminal behavior and absenteeism (V = .715, p = .000), and fighting and suspensions (V = .829, p = .000). Other correlations that are worthy of mention include fighting, alcohol, and drug use, which were all connection to absenteeism, suspensions, and poor grades. The data revealed multiple clear connections between certain behaviors and issues taking place in the lives of students and them thus being more likely to fall behind in school and to eventually drop out. The data collected for this study show that there are many different interacting factors involved when making the decision to leave school before graduating.

Discussion

The current study has brought forth some practical information that can be used by educators to help better understand why students are leaving their classes and respective programs. There are many different reasons why students drop out of their classes. Teachers, staff, and school administrators need to do a better job addressing these various reasons so they reduce these large dropout rates that we are currently seeing across the nation. Millions of high school and college students drop out of American schools each and every year (Johns Hopkins University, 2016; National Center for Education Statistics, 2016). This is having a profound effect on the nation's economy in regard to unemployment rates, social welfare services, housing, and other government programs (Burnett, 2016; Johns Hopkins University, 2016; Tanner & Wilson, 2014). We are also now facing a severe college tuition debt problem that has reached $1.5 trillion dollars (Friedman, 2018). Much of this debt comes from students that enroll in classes, take out loans, and then eventually drop out. This is a national problem that must be better addressed in the coming years.

Dropping out of school is considered to be a serious national problem, if not a national epidemic (Bloom, 2015; Carlson, 2016; Johns Hopkins University, 2016; National Student Clearinghouse, 2014). To put this into perspective, it is estimated that around 50% of all males that enroll in community college will drop out within 3 years (Wood, 2011), with the highest dropout rates occurring among Native American males and Black males (Bureau of Indian Education, 2018; National Center for Education Statistics, 2018). Understanding exactly why people drop out of school is not always an easy thing. As was found in the current study, it is often the case that students drop out for multiple reasons. In the current study, 58% of the respondents stated that they dropped out because of two or more reasons. the most common reasons being needing to find a job or make more money, disinterest in classes, family issues, poor grades, and lack of support. Pregnancy was also a top reason given by the female respondents. There were some clear connections across the reasons that students dropped. For instance, poor grades, absenteeism, and disinterest in classes were all highly correlated. This makes sense as it is understandable how these different problems would all be linked in certain ways. Absenteeism, family problems, and the need to make money (e.g., work) were also strongly correlated. Drug use, alcohol use, absenteeism, and suspensions were also interconnected in various ways. To be able to better make sense of all of this researchers and educators need to pay attention to the lives of the students and what they are going through that can ultimately have a negative impact on their motivation and overall school performance.

The highest rates of dropping out occur at the community college level and these massive dropping out rates are contributing to larger social problems across the nation (National Student Clearinghouse, 2014; Wood, 2011). Almost 45% of the respondents in this study dropped out at the community college level. This was easily the largest single proportion of the entire sample, with the second highest level being high school dropouts (34%). Females were more likely to return to school after taking some time off. This could be, in part, due to leaving school due to pregnancy. Females were more likely to leave school because of interpersonal issues (e.g., family) and health problems. Males were slightly more likely to leave school because of disinterest in classes, substance use, legal and criminal problems, gang involvement, incarceration, and suspensions. The women in the study were more likely than the men to express that they regret dropping out of school. Female respondents were also more likely than their male counterparts to have earned a college degree.

Most of the study participants did not return to school after dropping out (n = 247, 67.3%), but many did (n = 120, 32.7%). This demonstrates that many of the people that leave school are willing to return at some point. This is good reason for schools to stay in touch with those that have dropped out and to continue to encourage them to return once they are able to do so. If schools could do a better job at helping students to realize that it is often in their long-term interests to remain in school then these overall dropout rates could be reduced. This could also help to improve return rates over the long run. For instance, if dropouts could be better educated on the long-term financial benefits of acquiring a higher- level education, then that alone may be enough to keep millions of students in their classes. Overall, those that earn college degrees tend to make twice as much as those that drop out of high school (Ballantine & Hammack, 2017). Those with college degrees also tend to live longer, have increased life opportunities, live healthier lives, and have higher levels of life satisfaction (Chung, Monday, & Perry, 2017; Kearney & Graczyk, 2014; Tanner & Wilson, 2014).

This study did not explore the qualitative nature of why people drop out of school. Further

research could look further into the attitudinal reasons people drop out. Future research could also further explore personality characteristics, values, background variables, issues relating to social class, etc. This study did find a connection between social class and dropping out in regard to the levels at which people leave school. Those from the lower and working classes were more likely to drop out of high school. Much of this appears to have to do with the need to get a job, pregnancy, family problems, not seeing the value school, and other reasons. Those from the middle and upper classes were more likely to drop out at the college level. Ethnic differences were also found in regard to dropping out, highest level of education achieved, reasons for dropping out, and whether or not they returned to school after dropping out. As discussed earlier, Asian and White respondents were more likely to have higher levels of education and to return to school after dropping out than Hispanic and Black respondents. Further research could also help to better make sense of these ethnic differences.

More research is needed in regard to what could help to keep students enrolled in school and working toward their respective degrees. Early intervention programs should be further explored in regard to effectiveness. The majority of students entering community colleges today are ill-prepared and are not performing at minimum expected levels (Johns Hopkins University, 2016; Saenz et al., 2015; Wood, 2011). It is also important to further examine the role of mentoring relationships. Mentoring programs have been shown to improve overall academic performance, to increase student morale, to improve student's "soft skills," and to increase overall graduation and transfer rates (Hall, 2006; Karcher et al., 2008; Saenz et al., 2015). Students that are connected to upper-level classmates or to instructors themselves are more likely to feel connected to the school, to put in more time in their studies, and to have higher grades overall. They are also less likely to drop out. More schools and colleges need to put in the time and effort to develop effective and comprehensive mentoring programs for their at-risk students.

Conclusion

There is a serious problem with dropping out across the nation. Schools need to do a much better job keeping their students in classes and helping to keep them motivated to obtain higher levels of education. There are various reasons as to why students drop out of school. Schools and educators need to take the time to better understand what these reasons are and how to better address them. If the nation's overall dropout rates could be significantly reduced it would have the effect of improving many other problematic areas that we are currently seeing across American society (e.g., unemployment, student loan debt and default, social welfare, crime, etc.). An educated society is a flourishing society. It is in the nation's best interest to see to it that each and every member gets and adequate and quality education that best serves their individual goals and interests in life.

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