

City of Chattanooga
Office of Multicultural Affairs

CRIME TASK FORCE REPORT



Dr. Roger Thompson, Committee Chair

This report represents the collective efforts of the 2008 Chattanooga Crime Task Force Committee. It is presented as a conduit to the overall goals of the Office of Multicultural Affairs in addressing significant problems facing the Chattanooga community.

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Executive Summary

This report outlines the recommendations of the 2008 Chattanooga Crime Task Force Committee. Eighteen specific recommendations are detailed across the three broad recommendations of the previous [2005] Committee, which included reducing juvenile delinquency and related risk factors, improving criminal justice and community relations, and enhancing criminal justice accountability. Due to the myriad of problems stemming from juvenile delinquency issues, this report spends a disproportionate amount of time discussing truancy and school-related factors as the relate community crime problems.

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Introduction

We, the people of the United States, in order to form a more perfect Union, establish justice, insure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.¹

These words form the *Preamble* to the United States Constitution and reveal our ideals, aspirations, and values for both public and private life. It is important to begin this report emphasizing the positive moral imperatives emanating from this document and the framework of the government created. Democracy requires active citizen participation in governance with regular, and sometimes strenuous, exercise to be realized and enjoyed. In other words, freedom is not free—there are responsibilities attached! We must talk together, discuss and debate issues, identify choices, deliberate, and eventually arrive at consensus in terms of direction for public policy. In addition, this knowledge base and value system must be passed down to the next generation for similar guidance and direction. Failure to meet inherent civic responsibilities weakens democratic foundations and changes the nature of personal relationships to” Me “instead of” We”, the people. ²

This report is written as an update to the Chattanooga African American Summit (2005) Crime Task Force Report chaired by Camilla Bibbs-Lee. Their recommendations serve as focal points for review, research, and action plans relevant for implementation today. The written format differs somewhat from traditional styles insofar that this report is intended to serve as a stimulus for public conversation upon completion and presentation to various public and private audiences. Very simply, the final chapter surrounding the topics of study has not been written. Instead, individual and collective conversations are invited to think and talk about the contents of this report. Neighbors need to talk together about community values, wrestle with complex issues, clarify choices, and move toward solution(s). We face direct challenge to the values exemplified in the *Preamble* and must begin to do the work that democracy demands of us all!³

Recommendation (2005): Reduce Juvenile Delinquency: Create a Holistic Approach to Address Social Factors (family, drugs, employment)

Juvenile delinquency remains no stranger to American life. Every generation is tested in terms of moral and social boundaries, parenting skills, enforcement mechanisms, tenacity, and intestinal fortitude. There is no single recipe or simple solution to the myriad of behaviors falling under this umbrella; however we find ourselves in shock and dismay at the levels of gun violence and reckless behaviors on display within family units, around school environments, and throughout the community at large. Tempers and tolerances are being tested in courtrooms across the country in defining and addressing juvenile crime with some felony categories now elevated to adult status for prosecution and penalty. The topic is so broad and amorphous that it becomes difficult to define given the number of variables at play. A Summary Report from the Hamilton County Juvenile Court is included in the Appendix. This committee selected one variable--the issue of truancy-- to study and understand how it exercises influence and impact on crime in the community. Herein are contained bits and pieces of information that, at the very least, outline the shadows of truancy. Admittedly, it may not be definitive in every aspect however the data paint a disturbing picture.

Truancy by definition refers to a student's unexcused absence from school. It is a status offense which means it would not be a crime if committed by an adult. The Tennessee Department of Education (TNDOE) defines a truancy incident as five unexcused absences within the same year. Six unexcused absences equal two truancy incidents, etc. The numbers vary across Tennessee jurisdictional boundaries with thousands of youth involved in metropolitan areas. The equation is very simple and direct---truant students are at risk for many negative outcomes:⁴

- *Educational failure
 - *Social isolation
 - *Substance abuse
 - *Low self-esteem
 - *Unwanted pregnancy
 - *Unemployment
 - *Violence
 - *Adult criminality and incarceration
-

The leading question for attention by the Crime Task Force committee surrounds the nature and impact of truancy rates in Hamilton County Schools, and how this behavior interferes with academic success and concomitantly contributes to crime patterns in various forms.

Truancy numbers

Accurate numbers describing truant behavior at the local level escape common definition, collection, and analysis. Very simply, the numbers being reported do not provide comfort in terms of what is happening in our schools on a daily basis. For example, Tennessee Department of Education (TDOE) truancy data for Hamilton County Schools total 19,443 in 2005-2006. In the following year, the number dramatically drops to 637 due to differentiation wanted between excused and unexcused absences. The current year (2007-2008) shows approximately 15,000 attendance- related incidents via local information provided by Hamilton County Department of Education representatives. Caution must be exercised in accepting this number due to the inclusion of tardiness behavior. What becomes clear and obvious is the need for stronger data that can stand the test of time and comparison between local schools and among school systems across the state.

The Tennessee Report Card 2007 contains valuable information about truancy in that it cites attendance rates and graduation rates per high school and school system.⁵ The following chart depicts rates as found on the TNDOE website. It is important to note that the state goal for attendance is 93 % and the state graduation goal is 90%. Reporting data only in this manner yields a masking effect of the actual and total number of students involved in truant behavior.

The data indicate on average we are losing 9% of our student population to attendance problems. At the high school level this number approaches 1,000 students given a total high school population of 10,964. With few exceptions, graduation rates fall far short of the 90% statewide goal. The current number of attendance related incidents precipitating disciplinary action this academic year (@15,000) gives reason for concern and response.

Illustration 1: Attendance and Graduation Percentages, 2005-2007

High School	Attendance 2005	Attendance 2006	Attendance 2007	Graduation 2006	Graduation 2007
21st Century	95.2	94.3	94.2	92.9	95.8
Brainerd	88.8	87.3	85.9	63.9	61.6
Creative Arts	94.1	94.3	94.7	90.8	88.5
Central	89.5	90	92.3	76.7	72.2
CSAS	97	95.9	96.5	99	94.3
CSLA	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
East Lake Acad.	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
East Ridge	88.6	88.7	90.8	79.4	83.1
Hamilton County	84.1	87.8	93.8	N/A	33.8
Hixson	90.5	89.9	88.3	76.7	74.1
Howard	87.2	88.8	88.1	38	47.4
Lookout Valley	92.2	91.7	92.3	67.2	77.8
Ooltewah	93	92.9	92.3	87.7	85.5
Red Bank	92.4	92.4	92.1	81.9	71.7
Sequoyah	N/A	87.4	89.5	66.3	69
Soddy Daisy	92	93.4	93.1	76.7	77.9
Tyner Academy	94.3	91.6	90.9	82.1	84.3

Truancy Laws

Every parent or legal guardian residing within this state having control or charge of any child or children between six (6) years of age and seventeen (17) years of age, both inclusive, shall cause such child or children to attend public or non-public school, and in the event of failure to do so, shall be subject to the penalties hereinafter provided (T.C.A.49-6-3001).

Violation is a Class C misdemeanor which means the judicial system can assess a fine up to \$50 or impose an order of five hours of community service against the parent/guardian.

Current compulsory education laws (T.C.A. 49-6-3007 (e)) requires schools to notify the superintendent of any student who acquires five (5) unexcused absences within a school year. The superintendent must then notify the parent/guardian about the truancy via communication by letter. Therein rests one of the significant problems surrounding truancy--- a significant delay in response. By the time administrative action is taken serious academic damage has already taken place guaranteeing academic failure for the semester or year. If truancy behavior

continues while the prescribed notification process is underway academic failure becomes a certainty. Wanted and needed is an immediate daily notification system thereby preventing the cycle of academic failure, dropout, unemployment, and crime. Recent announcement by the Hamilton County School system of a new electronic service called Connect-ED offers potential promise for use in this arena. Principals can notify parents on cell phones or by e-mail en mass. Notification of student absence at a parent/guardian work environment by phone or e-mail stands a better chance for receipt and response than current dependence on mail to the home address.

Recommendation 1:

Use Connect-Ed to notify parents immediately of any unexcused absence.

Another law worthy of note (T.C.A. 49-6-3006) empowers any local school board or superintendent to employ at least one full-time attendance officer, if warranted. The Hamilton County Department of Education does not employ a person with such title or authority. If truancy is going to be an active agenda item for federal, state, and local attention then argument can be made that at least one person be identified to work within the local educational system to design better data systems and implement effective strategies for truancy intervention and reduction.

Recommendation 2:

Employ at least one full-time person at HCDE central office with responsibility for school attendance related activity.

State law also provides authority to establish a truancy school for children between seven (7) and sixteen (16) years of age who are habitually truant, or while in attendance at school are incorrigible, vicious, immoral, or who habitually wander or loiter about without lawful employment (T.C.A. 49-6-3012). One of the difficult questions often posed by law enforcement officers involves their response to kids on the streets during school hours and school days. There is talk in several circles about truancy centers as drop-off locations, truancy court, daytime curfew, another alternative school, and an effective legal process to slow down negative behaviors at play—parent and student. What becomes evident in this type of

discussion is that all major players need to be at the same table working on common solution(s). Partnerships are going to be needed between the schools and community that go beyond current connections.

Recommendation 3:

Explore the concept of a truancy center.

Teenagers yearn for car keys and driving privileges in their rite of passage to adulthood. Truancy is linked to teenage driving through a form that must be signed by school officials indicating compliance with attendance requirements. This form is then submitted to the Tennessee Department of Public Safety at the time of application for Learner Permit. If an applicant has more than 10 consecutive or 15 cumulative absences in one semester he/she is not eligible for a license or it may be revoked (T.C.A. 49-6-3017). Currently this form is only required at the entry stage of the graduated licensing system in effect which captures the attention of 15 year olds but misses the conduct of 16-18 year-olds. Georgia requires a behavior check and sign-off at all levels of teenage licensure thereby serving notice that school-related behaviors influence responsibilities being granted. Georgia also provides revocation of license at any stage for assaultive behavior directed at a teacher, staff member, or student.

Recommendation 4:

Legislation should be modified to require school conduct forms at all stages of graduated licensing. Provision should also be made enabling revocation of license for assaultive behavior within a school environment.

Judicial jurisdiction to hear truancy cases is vested in the juvenile court or general sessions court (T.C.A. 49-6-3010). Authority is already vested therefore the issue surrounds who wants to open their door for business?

Recommendation 5:

Identify court(s) and judge(s) willing to work with truancy cases.

One observation that may explain some absenteeism involves teenagers being out on the streets until early hours of the morning. Chattanooga has a curfew law for minors that states “it is unlawful for any minor under the age of 16 to be out after 11 p.m. on weekdays or 12:00 midnight on weekends without accompaniment of parent or guardian”.

***Recommendation 6:
Enforce juvenile curfew laws.***

Other Influential Variables

One of the silent and salient variables defining student conduct, performance, and achievement involves daily routine, especially in terms of first bell for start of the day. The early start times of Hamilton County Schools raises question and challenge to the benefits of the 7:15 am time period in operation at many Middle and High Schools:

Illustration 2: Hamilton County Schools 2007-2008 Bell Times

SCHOOL	
21st Century Academy	9:00 - 4:00
Allen Elementary	8:15 - 3:15
Alpine Crest Elementary	8:00 - 3:00
Apison Elementary	8:45 - 3:45
Barger Academy	8:55 - 3:55
Battle Academy	8:00 - 3:00
Big Ridge Elementary	8:30 - 3:30
Birchwood Elementary	8:15 - 3:15
Brainerd High	7:15 - 2:15
Brown Academy	8:00 - 3:00
Brown Middle	7:15 - 2:15
Center for Creative Arts	9:00 - 4:00
Central High	7:20 - 2:20
Chattanooga Middle Museum	9:00 - 4:00
Clifton Hills Elementary	8:00 - 3:00
CSAS	9:00 - 4:00
CSLA	9:00 - 4:00
Daisy Elementary	8:00 - 3:00
Dalewood Middle	7:15 - 2:15

Dawn School	9:00 - 4:00
Donaldson, Calvin Elementary	8:00 - 3:00
Dupont Elementary	8:15 - 3:15
East Brainerd Elementary	8:45 - 3:45
East Lake Academy	9:00 - 4:00
East Lake Elementary	8:00 - 3:00
East Ridge Elementary	8:30 - 3:30
East Ridge High	7:15 - 2:15
East Ridge Middle	7:45 - 2:45
East Side Elementary	8:00 - 3:00
Falling Water Elementary	8:30 - 3:30
Ganns Middle Valley Elementary	8:00 - 3:00
Hamilton County High	8:00 - 3:10
Hardy Elementary	8:00 - 3:00
Harrison Elementary	8:00 - 3:00
Hillcrest Elementary	8:45 - 3:45
Hixson Elementary	8:45 - 3:45
Hixson High	7:15 - 2:15
Hixson Middle	7:25 - 2:25
Howard Middle	7:15 - 2:15
HSAT	7:15 - 2:15
Hunter Middle	7:15 - 2:15
Lakeside Academy	9:00 - 4:00
Loftis Middle	7:15 - 2:15
Lookout Mountain Elementary	8:00 - 3:00
Lookout Valley Elementary	8:15 - 3:15
Lookout Valley High	7:15 - 2:15
Lookout Valley Middle	7:15 - 2:15
McBrien Elementary	8:15 - 3:15
McConnell Elementary	8:15 - 3:15
N. Hamilton County Elementary	8:30 - 3:30
Nolan Elementary	8:45 - 3:45
Normal Park Museum Magnet	8:00 - 3:00
Ooltewah Elementary	8:10 - 3:10
Ooltewah High	7:15 - 2:15
Ooltewah Middle	7:35 - 2:35
Orchard Knob Elementary	8:00 - 3:00
Orchard Knob Middle	7:15 - 2:15
Red Bank Elementary	8:00 - 3:00
Red Bank High	7:15 - 2:15
Red Bank Middle	7:25 - 2:25
Rivermont Elementary	8:45 - 3:45
Sale Creek Middle/High	7:15 - 2:15
Sequoyah High	9:00 - 4:00

Shepherd, Bess T. Elementary	8:15 - 3:15
Signal Mountain Middle	7:25 - 2:25
Smith, Wallace Elementary	8:15 - 3:15
Snow Hill Elementary	8:30 - 3:30
Soddy Elementary	8:30 - 3:30
Soddy-Daisy High	7:15 - 2:15
Soddy-Daisy Middle	7:15 - 2:15
Spring Creek Elementary	9:00 - 4:00
Thrasher Elementary	8:10 - 3:10
Tyner Academy	9:00 - 4:00
Tyner Middle Academy	9:00 - 4:00
Washington Alternative	9:15 - 4:15
Westview Elementary	8:15 - 3:15
Wolftever Creek Elementary	8:20 - 3:20
Woodmore Elementary	8:00 - 3:00

What becomes obvious at the outset is a three-tier system. Select middle and high schools check-in at 7:15 am. Elementary students arrive @ 8:00-8:30 a.m. Magnet schools start their day @ 9 a.m. The question for debate centers on what time period offers the most promise for academic success? Knoxville starts all middle and high schools at 8:30 a.m. with release at 3:30 p.m. They utilize one standard time frame to meet their academic needs.

Economic interests promoting such an early start vary. Admittedly, Tennessee has strong roots in agriculture, and there were initial needs for helping hands related to cattle and crops when facing an agrarian lifestyle. However, times have changed in Hamilton County whereby urbanization is reflected in population, commerce, and service-related employment. If the early start time is predicated upon an agricultural heritage then we have an anachronism at play and need to update and change with the times.

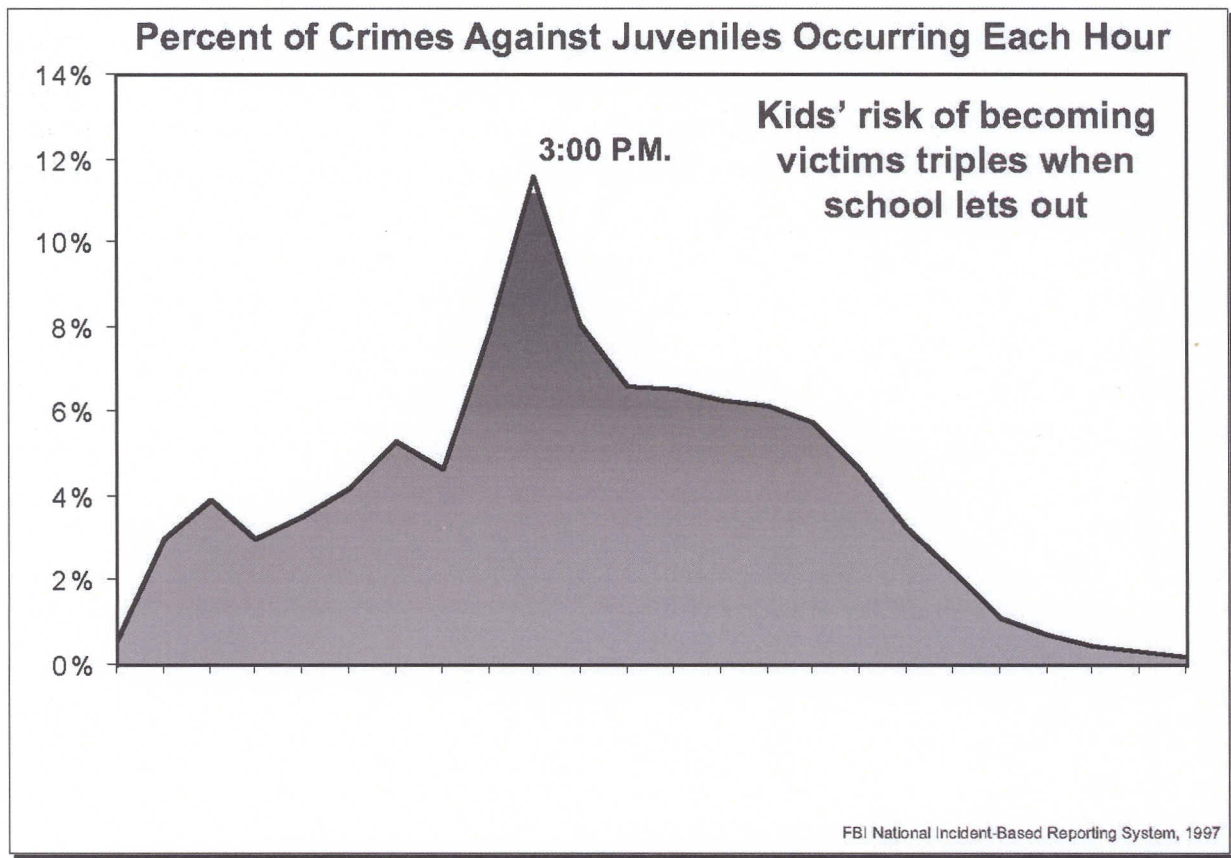
Suggestion is also made that athletic coaches might be responsible for the schedule in place. Academic success must not be compromised in the balance of educational enterprise. Athletic programs can be competitive and successful with a practice start time of 4 pm as attested to by Baylor, McCallie, GPS, Notre Dame, et al.

Another plausible explanation for the early start time surrounds transportation. It is all about school buses, drivers, and expectations related thereto. No doubt there is financial difference in terms of the number of buses needed to operate a 3-tier system versus a 2-tier system which would enable all middle and high schools to

operate on the same daily schedule. Again, academic success should serve as the basis for guidance and decision as opposed to organizational convenience related to transportation costs.

Starting a school day @ 7:15 a.m. translates to a wake-up alarm @ 5 a.m. in order to catch a bus @ 6 a.m. Sleep research tells us that teenagers need more sleep than adults and sleep deprivation simply brings a number of unwelcome behaviors into the educational environment. The first negative involves continued sleepiness followed by a depressed mood, irritability, and low motivation which returns poor performance. One high school--Howard --- is changing their start time this 2008-2009 academic year given a state mandate to address low attendance and performance indicators. Another—Signal Mountain—is a new public school with decision still pending about start time. Seemingly, if start time is performance related then all schools should follow the magnet model and start @ 9 a.m. Ending the school day shortly after 2 pm creates other disturbance factors.⁶

Illustration 3:



Turning teens loose on the streets at such an early release time (2:15 p.m.) with neither constructive activity nor parental supervision presents another set of challenges. For some, there are after-school athletic activities, clubs, and employment to invest time and energy. For others, the last bell signals opportune time for mischief. The prime time for juvenile crime is from 3 p.m.-6 p.m. Neighborhoods turn into playgrounds for testing interpersonal relationships, dealing with conflict, and experimenting with high-risk behaviors involving drugs and sexual encounters. At issue here is the organizational policy and practice of release at a time that offers strong temptations without parental support systems in place given the likelihood that parent(s) are at work. A question must be raised about the continuation of a practice that threatens both emotional and physical boundaries.

Recommendation 7:

Adopt and implement a single start time (8:30-3:30) for all Hamilton County Middle and High Schools.

Truancy will continue to be a topic of study long after issuance of this report insofar that the U.S. Attorney's Office for the Eastern District of Tennessee, the Honorable Russ Detric, has set truancy as a top priority item for U.S. Department of Justice Weed and Seed programs in East Tennessee. Chattanooga has three Weed & Seed sites (Westside, MLK, and Eastside). Collectively they will be working in partnership with local, regional, and national representatives to identify best practices for truancy reduction.

Recommendation 8:

Develop a partnership with U.S. Attorney and local Weed & Seed initiative to promote crime prevention strategies at early stages.

Time did not permit investigation into other behaviors contributing to juvenile delinquency albeit the HCDE Behavior Report for 2007-2008 invites similar review and analysis given the nature of conduct and disciplinary actions taken. Beyond approximately 15,000 attendance related incidents, there are conduct related behaviors ranging from teacher assaults, fighting, weapons, and threats. The level of disciplinary infractions totals over 54,000 incidents for the 2007-2008 academic year. The behavior management system being used by teachers,

principals, and central office administrators merits multidisciplinary review given over 9,000 suspensions. We need a better understanding of what is happening, how, and what can be done to enhance and improve the learning environment.

Recommendation 9:

Create a multidisciplinary task force to review and analyze the behavior management system in use by Hamilton County Schools.

School safety is now a topic of attention and review. A student should be required to carry positive proof of identification when on school property or attending school-related events.

Recommendation 10:

Establish an ID card for middle and high school students.

Students currently have their pictures taken for their annual yearbook. Having a picture ID required as part of the adopted dress code will enhance public safety considerations.

Teen venues and pajama parties merit special attention insofar that they attract young audiences as well as adult youth. Outbreaks of violence are not uncommon. Promoters should be held liable and responsible for a business license, proof of insurance, adequate professional security, etc.

Recommendation 11:

Require concert promoters to register and obtain a business license, show proof of insurance, and show a plan to meet all health and safety standards.