

# Understanding Why Students Drop Out of High School, According to Their Own Reports: Are They Pushed or Pulled, or Do They Fall Out? A Comparative Analysis of Seven Nationally Representative Studies

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## Abstract

Research on school dropout extends from early 20th-century pioneers until now, marking trends of causes and prevention. However, specific dropout causes reported by students from several nationally representative studies have never been examined together, which, if done, could lead to a better understanding of the dropout problem. Push, pull, and falling out factors provide a framework for understanding dropouts. Push factors include school-consequence on attendance or discipline. Pull factors include out-of-school enticements like jobs and family. Finally, falling out factors refer to disengagement in students not caused by school or outside pulling factors. Since 1966, most nationally representative studies depicted pull factors as ranking the highest. Also, administrators in one study corroborated pull out factors for younger dropouts, not older ones, while most recent research cites push factors as highest overall. One rationale for this change is a response to rising standards from No Child Left Behind (NCLB), which can be ultimately tested only by future dropout research.

## Keywords

education, social sciences, academics, disparities, educational measurement and assessment, history and sociology of education

## Introduction

The cause of a student dropping out is often termed as the antecedent of dropout because it refers to the pivotal event which leads to dropout. This event, however, is the culmination of a much longer process of leaving school that began long before the date that a student actually discontinues attendance. Historic scholarship on school dropout spans from as early as a 1927 monograph that labeled it “school leaving” and associated those at risk with possible mental inferiority (Fuller, 1927, p. 1). At the same time, previous research has explained dropout causes and even cataloged dropout scholarship from the ensuing decades in terms of content and empirical merit (Dorn, 1993; Rumberger & Lim, 2008; Short & Fitzsimmons, 2007). However, never before have reports of students who dropped out been compared from all the available nationally representative dropout studies and then analyzed. What follows will describe seven nationally representative studies on school dropout and their findings. Also, these studies will be analyzed using the framework of *push*, *pull*, and *falling out* factors, as set forth by Jordan, Lara, and McPartland (1994) and Watt and

Roessingh (1994), to determine which types of factors were most prominent. The discussion section will posit potential reasons for predominant types of factors, and the implications this has on dropout scholarship in the past, present, and future.

## Background

School completion rates have grown continually during much of the past century from single digits at the turn of the 20th century, to 50% just after World War II, to 80% in the late 1970s, and finally leveling off at near 89.9% in the recent times (Baldwin, Moffett, & Lane, 1992; Chapman, Laird, & KewalRamani, 2010; Dorn, 2003; Jones, 1977). This

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