



Full Length Article

Associations of adverse childhood experiences with depression and alcohol abuse among Korean college students



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ABSTRACT

This study investigated adverse childhood experiences of Korean college students and the impact such experiences have on students' depression and alcohol abuse. Using an online questionnaire, 939 college students were surveyed regarding their adverse childhood experiences, depressive symptoms and alcohol use habits. About half of the participants claimed to have experienced at least one adversity in their childhood. Eight percent of participants reported experiencing four or more categories of adversity. The correlations between adverse childhood experiences and depressive symptoms, alcohol abusive behaviors, and the comorbid condition of the two outcomes were significant when students' gender, geographical regions, maternal and paternal education, and family incomes were adjusted. Graded associations of cumulated adverse childhood experiences with the outcome variables were evident. These findings strengthen the link between child maltreatment and adult public health issues carrying socioeconomic burdens, two matters that have not been extensively studied in Korean contexts.

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1. Introduction

In the nearly two decades since the original adverse childhood experiences (ACE) study by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and Kaiser Permanente in the United States of America (Felitti et al., 1998), there have been consistent efforts to examine the associations between adverse and traumatic childhood experiences and health-related outcomes in later life. Now, researchers have arrived at the consensus that ACEs such as abuse, neglect, and family dysfunctions can lead to lifelong unwanted consequences. Poor outcomes associated with ACEs have appeared across diverse developmental and health domains such as substance abuse (Mersky, Topitzes, & Reynolds, 2013), mood or anxiety problems (Sareen et al., 2013), poor physical health-related indices (Bellis et al., 2014), and socially-unacceptable behaviors (Bellis et al., 2014; Fox, Perez, Cass, Baglivio, & Epps, 2015). Also, a dose-response relationship is now widely accepted: experiencing accumulating levels of adversity during childhood increases the possibility of undesirable outcomes in later life (Bellis et al., 2014; Fox et al., 2015; Mersky et al., 2013).

Initially, most ACE studies were conducted in developed Western countries with low tolerance levels for child maltreatment and high interests in public health. In 2009, the World Health Organization (WHO) and CDC played a leading role in building a global research network to prevent abuse, neglect, and violence toward children in low- and middle-income countries. Countries such as China, Saudi Arabia, and Vietnam participated in this project in effort not only to understand

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the long-term risks and associated consequences of ACEs in their own cultural contexts but also to prevent these adversities from affecting future generations (World Health Organization, 2009). As the first step in undertaking global surveillance of ACEs, the WHO developed the Adverse Childhood International Questionnaire (ACE-IQ), a measurement that enables international researchers to make cross-cultural comparisons of the prevalence of ACEs and their associations with public health matters (World Health Organization, 2011). The ACE-IQ includes comprehensive categories of childhood adversities. Its validity as a tool has been demonstrated by testing its psychometric properties in several countries (Bellis et al., 2014).

Recently, ACEs have become a global academic topic. Researchers in diverse countries have explored the prevalence of ACEs in their own domestic contexts and studied associations with various outcomes in adulthood. For example, Ramiro, Madrid, and Brown (2010) found that, of 1068 people residing in urban communities in Philippines, 75% reported at least one incident of ACE. They found strong graded relationships between number of ACEs, health-risk behaviors and poor health among Philippine people. In Saudi Arabia, Almuneef, Qayad, Aleissa, and Albuhairan (2014) investigated the links between ACEs and health-related issues in adulthood. Among 931 subjects, about 82% reported at least one incident of ACE. Almuneef et al. (2014) suggested that being exposed to four or more ACEs increased the risk of having chronic diseases and risky health behaviors. In Japan, Isumi and Fujiwara (2016) explored inter-generational transmission of ACEs by studying associations between caregivers' own ACEs and their shaking and smothering behaviors toward their infants. The researchers found a link between a specific type of ACE (witness of intimate partner violence) and infant shaking behaviors. However, no graded relationship of ACEs with abusive caregiver behaviors (shaking and smothering) was found.

South Korea did not participate in the global surveillance of ACEs. However, child abuse and neglect are known to be common in this context. Several Korean domestic studies have explored the associations between traumatic experiences in childhood and outcomes in later life. The viewpoints and methods of existing Korean domestic childhood trauma studies are, to some extent, different from those of international ACE studies in three key respects. First, few Korean studies deal with a comprehensive scope of childhood traumas at the same time. Most Korean domestic childhood trauma studies address a particular type of childhood trauma such as emotional neglect (Cho & Lee, 2014) or sexual abuse (Choi, 2009). Second, the graded associations of cumulative ACEs with outcomes in the general population have not been properly explored in a Korean context. Many studies have undertaken two-group comparisons (i.e., outcomes from people with childhood trauma versus outcomes from people without trauma) (Kim, Kim, & Park, 2006; Kim, Chung, & Lee, 2009) or correlational approaches (Kim & Han, 2015; You & Heo, 2012). Third, there is a lack of evidence regarding health-related outcomes as consequences of ACEs among the general Korean population. Most outcomes addressed in childhood adversity studies are socio-emotional, such as interpersonal problems (Bae & Cho, 2014), impaired empathetic ability (Kim & Han, 2015), and subnormal life satisfaction (You & Heo, 2012). Aside from this, childhood trauma among outpatients of mental clinics has been often studied (Sohn, Lee, Song, Sakong, & Lee, 2001). The differences between the international ACE studies and Korean domestic studies are mainly due to Korean researchers' lack of instruments, which has restricted them from measuring diverse types of childhood adversities and calculating the cumulative ACEs in valid manners.

In order to address these research gaps, the present study explores the prevalence of ACEs among Korean college students using a valid instrument enabling international comparisons. This study tests the links of ACEs to depression, alcohol abuse, and the co-occurrence of depression and alcohol abuse among Korean college students. Depression and alcohol abuse are two of the most prevalent mental health problems among the Korean population. The socioeconomic costs of depression and alcoholism are a serious issue in Korea (Kim et al., 2007; Kim, Lee, Kang, & Choi, 2013).

The present study focuses on college students for several reasons. Previous studies have shown that depression and substance problems often emerge in early adulthood (Kessler et al., 2007), and that the co-occurrence of these two problems in early adulthood is notably high (Brière, Rohde, Seeley, Klein, & Lewinsohn, 2014). Several studies conducted in Western contexts found that the destructive impacts of ACEs are obvious on young adults' mental health through disorders such as depression (Bellis et al., 2014; Mersky et al., 2013), and health-risk behaviors such as alcohol abuse (Bellis et al., 2014; Mersky et al., 2013), teen pregnancy (Hillis et al., 2004), and drug use (Bellis et al., 2014; Dube et al., 2003; Mersky et al., 2013). Emerging in early adulthood as consequences of ACEs, these issues may extend or augment the influences of ACEs throughout individuals' lifetimes if no proper understanding is reached and interventions made at the issues' onset (Mersky et al., 2013; Nurius, Green, Logan-Greene, & Borja, 2015). To date, no academic attempt has been made to understand mental health issues of young Korean adults as consequences of their childhood adverse experiences. By investigating the link of ACEs with depression and alcohol abuse in college students, the present study intends to provide meaningful information and implications for public health in Korean contexts.

This is the first Korean study employing the scopes and methods of global ACE surveillance. The current investigation has three objectives: to investigate the prevalence of ACEs among Korean college students using a valid instrument corresponding to international ACE surveillance; to explore the links of ACEs to depression, alcohol abuse, and the comorbid condition of depression and alcohol abuse; and to examine the graded associations of cumulative ACEs with depression, alcohol abuse, and the comorbid condition of depression and alcohol abuse.

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