



Social causation and neighborhood selection underlie associations of neighborhood factors with illicit drug-using social networks and illicit drug use among adults relocated from public housing

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ABSTRACT

Theories of social causation and social influence, which posit that neighborhood and social network characteristics are distal causes of substance use, are frequently used to interpret associations among neighborhood characteristics, social network characteristics and substance use. These associations are also hypothesized to result from selection processes, in which substance use determines where people live and who they interact with. The potential for these competing selection mechanisms to co-occur has been underexplored among adults.

This study utilizes path analysis to determine the paths that relate census tract characteristics (e.g., economic deprivation), social network characteristics (i.e., having ≥ 1 illicit drug-using network member) and illicit drug use, among 172 African American adults relocated from public housing in Atlanta, Georgia and followed from 2009 to 2014 (7 waves). Individual and network-level characteristics were captured using surveys. Census tract characteristics were created using administrative data. Waves 1 (pre-relocation), 2 (1st wave post-relocation), and 7 were analyzed.

When controlling for individual-level sociodemographic factors, residing in census tracts with prior economic disadvantage was significantly associated with illicit drug use at wave 1; illicit drug use at wave 1 was significantly associated with living in economically-disadvantaged census tracts at wave 2; and violent crime at wave 2 was associated with illicit drug-using social network members at wave 7.

Findings from this study support theories that describe social causation and neighborhood selection processes as explaining relationships of neighborhood characteristics with illicit drug use and illicit drug-using social networks. Policies that improve local economic and social conditions of neighborhoods may discourage substance use. Future studies should further identify the barriers that prevent substance users from obtaining housing in less disadvantaged neighborhoods.

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1. Introduction

Most studies of the social epidemiology of illicit drug use describe neighborhood and social network characteristics as distal causes of illicit drug use (Cooper et al., 2013; de la Haye et al., 2013; Furr-Holden et al., 2015; Genberg et al., 2011a; Carl A. Latkin et al.,

2007; Carl A. Latkin et al., 1999; Carl A. Latkin et al., 1995; Linas et al., 2015; Linton et al., 2014; Matto et al., 2007; Mennis and Mason, 2010; Olumide et al., 2014; Sterk et al., 2014; Williams and Latkin, 2007). Substance users, however, may “select” the type of neighborhoods where they live and choose the type of people with whom they interact. When the order of temporality cannot be determined from cross-sectional research, or selection processes are unaccounted for, these oversights limit knowledge about the mechanisms linking neighborhoods, social networks, and substance use. Only a few studies on the epidemiology of substance use among adults have investigated the extent to which selection

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mechanisms operate (Bohnert et al., 2009; C. Latkin et al., 2013). The current study extends knowledge about the directionality of the associations among neighborhood characteristics, social network characteristics, and illicit drug use using data from a cohort of African American adults relocated from public housing in Atlanta, Georgia.

1.1. Social causation and social influence

Neighborhood characteristics, such as economic disadvantage and violent crime (Cooper et al., 2013; Genberg et al., 2011a; Carl A. Latkin et al., 2007; Sterk et al., 2014; Williams and Latkin, 2007), and social network characteristics, such as large numbers of substance-using social network members (Bohnert et al., 2009; de la Haye et al., 2013; Carl A. Latkin et al., 1999; Carl A. Latkin et al., 1995; Linas et al., 2015; Matto et al., 2007; Mennis and Mason, 2010; Olumide et al., 2014; Williams and Latkin, 2007), are the most widely documented contextual correlates of illicit drug use. Theories of social causation and social influence, which suggest that neighborhood and social network characteristics are distal causes of illicit drug use, have been used to provide explanations of the mechanisms behind these relationships.

The theory of social causation originates in sociological and psychological literature and specifically posits that neighborhood-level economic disadvantage and lower social status are fundamental stimuli that induce psychological distress and behaviors such as substance use (Dohrenwend et al., 1992; Marmot; Rose, 2001; William J. Wilson, 1997; W.J. Wilson, 2012). Living in economically disadvantaged communities that are also plagued by disinvestment, abandonment, substandard housing and crime may confer feelings of disempowerment and boredom that ultimately cause psychological distress (Dohrenwend et al., 1992; C. A. Latkin and Curry, 2003; Marmot; Rose, 2001; William J. Wilson, 1997; W.J. Wilson, 2012) and encourage substance use and other risky behaviors (German and Latkin, 2012; Carl A. Latkin et al., 2007). Abandoned and substandard housing, in particular, may also provide venues for illicit drug use and other illicit behaviors that are hidden from public view and provide sanctuaries for unstably housed people (Bourgeois, 1998; Furr-Holden et al., 2015; Carl A. Latkin et al., 2007; Linas et al., 2015; Linton et al., 2013, 2014).

According to social causation theory, social network processes may also lie in the causal pathway linking neighborhood characteristics to illicit drug use. Neighborhoods act as social units where social connections are formed and access to social capital can be facilitated (Carpiano, 2006; Chaskin, 1997). Social cohesion and collective efficacy may be lower in neighborhoods where abandonment is prevalent and these circumstances may limit access to employment opportunities and enable the growth of visible drug market activity and other crimes (Sampson et al., 1997) that facilitate access to illicit drugs, and support individual illicit drug use (Crum et al., 1996; S. G. Sherman et al., 2004; Susan G. Sherman and Latkin, 2002; Wertz and Sayette, 2001).

Social influence theory also posits that social network members influence individual actions by direct influence and conveying descriptive and inductive norms (Cialdini et al., 1990, 1991; Lapinski and Rimal, 2005), and these norms can be disseminated through social networks rooted in a specific neighborhood (Davey-Rothwell et al., 2015; K. E. Tobin et al., 2011). In the context of substance use behavior, descriptive norms are defined as direct observation of social network members' use of substances, while inductive norms are characterized as the belief that substance use is acceptable among social network members. Descriptive and injunctive norms have been associated with substance use and risky sexual behaviors in prior research (C. Latkin et al., 2013; Linas et al., 2015; Matto et al., 2007; K. Tobin et al., 2014; Tucker et al., 2015).

1.2. Neighborhood selection and social selection

Although several longitudinal studies have strengthened arguments for causal effects of neighborhoods and social network characteristics on illicit drug use, the extent to which selection processes may also occur is often underexplored and unaccounted for in these studies. Arguably, relationships between neighborhood characteristics and illicit drug use and between social network characteristics and illicit drug use may be partly explained by neighborhood selection and social selection processes (Arcaya et al., 2014, 2016; Bohnert et al., 2009; Dohrenwend et al., 1992; James et al., 2015; C. Latkin et al., 2013; Smith et al., 2015).

To date, empirical investigations of neighborhood selection according to illicit drug use status have been lacking, but research on other health outcomes, including obesity, suggest people with poor health conditions are more likely to relocate to neighborhoods that are economically deprived (Arcaya et al., 2014, 2016; James et al., 2015). Thus it is plausible that substance users may exhibit similar patterns of mobility. Chronic unemployment is high among people who use substances (Alexander, 2010; Buchmueller and Zuvekas, 1998; Burgess and Propper, 1998; McCoy et al., 2007; Wall et al., 2000) and because people who use illicit drugs—especially those who are low-income and/or are racial/ethnic minorities—face higher rates of incarceration, they may encounter structural barriers to employment and acquiring affordable housing in less-disadvantaged neighborhoods (Alexander, 2010; Desmond, 2016; Richardson et al., 2016). People who attempt to cease their use of illicit drugs may also move to neighborhoods that they perceive to be less disadvantaged and have less visible drug activity (Corney et al., 2008) to reduce exposure to potential cues of illicit drug use.

The process of social selection in observational studies has been described as both *assortative* and *situational*. In assortative processes, individuals seek out others who can increase access to information, emotional support, and other resources. In situational processes, people select into specific social settings where they believe shared norms and goals are upheld (Cheadle et al., 2013; Rivera et al., 2010). Social selection has also been described as *relational* because network members may be connected by mutual friends (Cheadle et al., 2013; Rivera et al., 2010). Social selection can be understood as “birds of a feather flocking together” (McPherson et al., 2001). In other words, people who use illicit drugs may intentionally select friends and sexual partners who also use illicit drugs. A number of observational studies among adolescents and young adults have documented temporal associations between self-reported substance use and subsequent self-reported interaction with substance-using social network members (Bohnert et al., 2009; Cheadle et al., 2013, 2015; Eisenberg et al., 2014; M.-H. Go et al., 2010; M. H. Go et al., 2012; C. Latkin et al., 2013; Reifman et al., 2006). However, to our knowledge, only two studies have investigated social selection and demonstrated similar findings among samples of adult substance users (Bohnert et al., 2009; C. Latkin et al., 2013). Advancing this line of research to also explore neighborhood selection processes will better identify the mechanisms that should be targeted by social policies, social network interventions, and substance use prevention and treatment strategies.

1.3. Study objective

This study investigates whether processes of social causation, social influence, social selection and neighborhood selection influence the relationships among neighborhood characteristics, social network characteristics, and illicit drug use among a predominantly African American cohort of adults relocated from

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