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The association of unemployment from age 21 to 33 with substance use disorder symptoms at age 39: The role of childhood neighborhood characteristics



Jungeun Olivia Lee^{a,*}, Tiffany M. Jones^b, Rick Kosterman^b, Isaac C. Rhew^c,
Gina S. Lovasi^d, Karl G. Hill^b, Richard F. Catalano^b, J. David Hawkins^b

^a Suzanne Dworak-Peck School of Social Work, University of Southern California, 669 W. 34th Street, Los Angeles, CA 90089-0411, USA

^b Social Development Research Group, School of Social Work, University of Washington, 9725 3rd Ave NE, Suite 401, Seattle, WA 98115, USA

^c Center for the Study of Health and Risk Behaviors, Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences, University of Washington, 1100 NE 45th St., No. 300, Box 354944, Seattle, WA 98195, USA

^d Dornsife School of Public Health, Drexel University, 3600 Market Street, Room 751, Philadelphia, PA 19104, USA

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ABSTRACT

Background: This study examined whether duration of unemployment from ages 21 to 33 was associated with symptoms of alcohol use disorder, nicotine dependence disorder, and cannabis use disorder at age 39, after accounting for childhood and early adult involvement in substance use and other indicators of psychopathology. Analyses also investigated whether dimensions of perceived neighborhood characteristics during childhood and adolescence contributed to the link between unemployment and substance use disorder symptoms during adulthood. Potential gender differences were examined.

Method: Using life-course calendar data from a prospective longitudinal study ($N=677$), participants' unemployment history was measured from ages 21 to 33. General childhood and substance use-specific neighborhood characteristics were assessed at ages 10–18.

Results: Findings from negative binomial regression models showed that duration of unemployment was associated with higher levels of alcohol use disorder and nicotine dependence symptoms, after adjusting for earlier involvement in substance use. Substance use-specific neighborhood factors during childhood were associated with symptoms of nicotine dependence and cannabis use disorder. Findings also suggest that the detrimental impact of unemployment on nicotine dependence symptoms was possibly stronger for women.

Conclusions: Findings suggest that unemployment may be an important risk factor for alcohol use disorder and nicotine dependence symptoms, indicating that public health efforts providing strategies to cope with unemployment, particularly for women who experience chronic unemployment, may be promising. Additionally, substance use-specific neighborhood characteristics during childhood should be considered as part of a prevention strategy to ameliorate adult nicotine and cannabis use problems.

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1. Introduction

During the economic crisis of 2007 and the subsequent recession, the United States experienced an increased unemployment rate. In 2010, the rate was 9.8% (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics,

2014), more than twice the rate in 2009 (4.7%; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2014). For young adults, the unemployment rate was substantially higher than the national average in 2010 (17.2%; U.S. Congress Joint Economic Committee, 2010). Since 1971, young adults in the United States have been relatively more vulnerable to unemployment (Edwards and Hertel-Fernandez, 2010; Taylor et al., 2012). Thus advancing knowledge about the potential impact of unemployment on young adults is an important contemporary public health goal.

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: lee363@usc.edu (J.O. Lee), tjones03@uw.edu (T.M. Jones), rickk@uw.edu (R. Kosterman), rhew@uw.edu (I.C. Rhew), gs145@drexel.edu (G.S. Lovasi), khill@uw.edu (K.G. Hill), catalano@uw.edu (R.F. Catalano), jdh@uw.edu (J.D. Hawkins).

1.1. Unemployment and substance use problems

It has been consistently suggested that unemployment may be linked to substance use (Catalano et al., 2011; Henkel, 2011). However, the nature of this association has been widely debated and two lines of argument have emerged: social causation and social selection (Catalano et al., 2011; Henkel, 2011; Sareen et al., 2011). Social causation suggests that unemployment might increase substance use, because an unemployed person might use substances to manage stress associated with unemployment (Boden et al., 2014; Catalano et al., 2011; Henkel, 2011; Mossakowski, 2008) or lose latent benefits accompanying employment, such as time structure, that likely mitigate substance use (Jahoda, 1981, 1982). In contrast, social selection proposes that preexisting substance use problems preclude individuals from retaining their employment (Boden et al., 2014; Sareen et al., 2011), although the extent of such reverse causality might differ depending on the type of substances; for example, nicotine versus alcohol. Considering the debate, it is critical to investigate whether unemployment is associated with substance use, beyond preexisting substance use, as suggested by the social selection hypothesis.

These hypotheses have been invoked in empirical studies, and existing evidence is mixed (Catalano et al., 2011; Mossakowski, 2008). Unemployment has been associated with an increase in alcohol abuse (Redonnet et al., 2012), a decrease in substance use (Ettner, 1997; Khan et al., 2002) and no change in cannabis abuse (Melchior et al., 2015). Such mixed findings warrant further inquiry. In particular, considering that most studies have focused on alcohol (Boden et al., 2014; Ettner, 1997; Khan et al., 2002; Mulia et al., 2014) with very few exceptions (e.g., Melchior et al., 2015; Redonnet et al., 2012), elevated risk of widely used other substances, such as nicotine and cannabis (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2014), should be investigated. It is feasible that unemployment may have differential associations with different substances, given variation in their legal status under laws governing drug use. Considering the positive association among legal restrictions on a drug, its availability, and substance use (Hawkins et al., 1992), alcohol and tobacco might be more easily accessible options for unemployed people, compared to cannabis. By extension, unemployment might be strongly associated with alcohol and tobacco. Because studies examining substances other than alcohol have been limited, this hypothesis remains a conceptual speculation.

1.2. Child and adolescence neighborhood characteristics and adult substance use problems

The life course perspective suggests that each developmental period should be understood in tandem with the circumstances of earlier developmental periods (Elder, 1994; McLeod and Almazan, 2003). Specifically, studies have consistently documented that childhood experiences might cast long-lasting effects on adult developmental outcomes (e.g., Duncan and Magnuson, 2011). Socioecological theories (Bronfenbrenner, 2005; et al., 1998; Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 1998; Zucker, 2006) underscore the potential salience of childhood neighborhood context.

Life course theory (Braveman and Barclay, 2009; Hertzman and Power, 2003) and developmental psychopathology (Cicchetti and Toth, 2009; Sroufe, 2007) offer three hypotheses conceptualizing how an earlier risk factor, such as child neighborhood context, can influence the link between a more proximal risk factor (i.e., unemployment) and developmental outcome. First, the common determinant hypothesis (Cicchetti and Toth, 2009; Schunck and Rogge, 2012; Sroufe, 2007) suggests childhood neighborhood context might be a common source that shapes both adult employment status and substance use. Second, the additive effect (Braveman and

Barclay, 2009; Hertzman and Power, 2003) suggests that earlier neighborhood characteristics would exert an independent impact on substance use outcomes beyond unemployment, a proximal risk factor. Finally, the interactive effect (Braveman and Barclay, 2009; Hertzman and Power, 2003) posits that an additional early risk factor would amplify the impact of a proximal risk factor on substance use. For example, the resource substitution hypothesis (Ross and Mirowsky, 2011) specifically posits that downward movement in adult socioeconomic status, such as unemployment, might disproportionately affect individuals with a more disadvantaged childhood background, because their attained socioeconomic status and its accompanying resources are the primary source of support for maintaining behavioral health.

Empirical studies have provided suggestive evidence supporting the contention that child neighborhood context might function as a common determinant, additive, or interactive risk factor in the context of unemployment and substance use. Neighborhood factors during childhood, such as neighborhood-level poverty, have been negatively associated with labor force participation (Galster et al., 2016). Similarly, emerging evidence has suggested the salience of neighborhood context in substance use, although these studies either relied on data from cross-sectional designs (Galea et al., 2007; Karriker-Jaffe, 2013; Winstanley et al., 2008) or examined adolescent substance use (Breslin and Adlaf, 2005; Furr-Holden et al., 2015; Tucker et al., 2013). In contrast to studies related to adolescent substance use (Breslin and Adlaf, 2005; Furr-Holden et al., 2015; Tucker et al., 2013), studies of the influence of childhood neighborhood context on adult substance use, particularly beyond the normative peak age, appear to be lacking. This represents an important gap in the knowledge base for developing and tailoring preventive strategies to curb substance use problems that persist beyond the normative peak age.

Further, studies have reported evidence suggesting that neighborhood context might moderate the relationship between a more proximal risk factor or stressor and adolescent substance use (i.e., interactive effect; Fagan et al., 2014; Snedker et al., 2009; Zimmerman and Vasquez, 2011). A recent study, for example, reported that the impact of violent victimization on any use of alcohol, tobacco, or cannabis was exacerbated among adolescents in neighborhoods with lower levels of perceived neighborhood collective efficacy (Fagan et al., 2014). Extrapolating from the aforementioned conceptual speculation and relevant empirical evidence regarding adolescent substance use, it is plausible that earlier neighborhood contexts might moderate the impact of unemployment, a more proximal risk factor or stressor, on adult substance use disorders. To our knowledge, no longitudinal study has examined this hypothesis and thus it is unknown whether earlier neighborhood contexts might function as an interactive risk factor a decade later in the life course.

Importantly, relevant literature has underscored the importance of considering multiple dimensions of neighborhood context (Schüle and Bolte, 2015)—including economic disadvantage, safety, violence, and social norms—on substance use (Jackson et al., 2014). Emerging literature has provided a basis for conceptualizing these multiple dimensions of neighborhood context as general versus outcome-specific risk factors (Capaldi et al., 2009; Duncan et al., 2006; Furr-Holden et al., 2015; Lee et al., 2012; Moffitt, 1993). Moffitt (1993) posited that general (e.g., neighborhood safety) and outcome-specific (e.g., social norms for substance use) environmental risk factors may lose or gain salience for substance use persisting beyond its normative peak age. Childhood exposure to substance use-specific neighborhood characteristics, for example, might lead to an individual to develop a more tolerant attitude toward substance use, which can lead to greater reliance on substance use as a coping strategy during periods of stress, such as unemployment. To our knowledge, the predictive capacity of

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