



Review

How economic recessions and unemployment affect illegal drug use: A systematic realist literature review



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ABSTRACT

Background: Economic recessions may influence illegal drug use via different mechanisms, for example increased use due to more psychological distress or decreased use due to lower incomes and purchasing power. This paper reviews the literature on how economic recessions and unemployment affect the use of illegal drugs among adults.

Methods: We conducted a systematic realist literature review, which is an explanatory method that aims to understand underlying mechanisms that connect an event to an outcome in a specific context. A systematic search was performed in EconLit, Embase, Medline, PsycINFO, SocIndex, and Web of Science for studies examining mechanisms explaining how recessions or unemployment affect illegal drug use. **Results:** We synthesized 28 studies published between 1990 and 2015. Most evidence (17 studies) was found for the counter-cyclical mechanism that recessions and unemployment increase psychological distress, which increases drug use. Mainly supportive evidence for this mechanism was found in several high quality studies, in different contexts, and in a diverse number of countries and samples. In contrast, decreased income did not seem to decrease drug use (10 studies). Little evidence was available on the non-working time mechanism (4 studies) and the social exclusion mechanism (5 studies). Most of the studies that did examine these latter mechanisms confirmed the hypothesized counter-cyclical associations.

Conclusion: The current evidence is in line with the hypothesis that drug use increases in times of recession because unemployment increases psychological distress which increases drug use. During times of recession, psychological support for those who lost their job and are vulnerable to drug use (relapse) is likely to be important.

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Introduction

National and international economic recessions not only have financial and employment consequences for individuals living in those countries but also potential health consequences. During economic recessions, deteriorations in mental health and increases in suicides are observed at a population level (Catalano et al., 2011; Stuckler, Reeves, Karanikolos, & McKee, 2015; Uutela, 2010; Van Hal, 2015; Zivin, Paczkowski, & Galea, 2011). Both these outcomes are associated with illegal drug use (Miller, Mahler, & Gold, 1991;

Sinha, 2008). Several studies have examined the relation between recessions and illegal drug use at the population level. Examples are studies that compare illegal drug use in the period before and after a recession (Colell, Sánchez-Niubò, Delclos, Benavides, & Domingo-Salvany, 2015; Lakhdar & Bastianic, 2011; Rossi et al., 2011), examine the association between unemployment rates and illegal drug use (Arkes, 2011; Chalmers & Ritter, 2011), and the association between income per capita or gross salary growth rates and illegal drug use (Chalmers & Ritter, 2011; Lakhdar & Bastianic, 2011). It is important to investigate not only whether economic recessions affect illegal drug use at the aggregate level, but also which individual-level mechanisms might produce these effects (Catalano et al., 2011; Stuckler et al., 2015). This question is of scientific interest, but also of practical interest, because an intervention or policy to prevent possible increases in illegal drug

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use during recessions cannot be properly designed when it is unknown which mechanisms this intervention or policy should target (Stuckler et al., 2015; Xu, 2013).

The individual-level mechanisms through which events produce effects can be synthesized with the realist review method (Pawson, Greenhalgh, Harvey, & Walshe, 2005; Pawson, 2006). Realist literature reviewing is an explanatory method that aims to examine how complex phenomena work, and in what contexts they occur. The method is especially useful for synthesizing methodologically diverse empirical studies. Realist reviews start with a clarification of the scope of the review and a first exploratory background literature search. Then, an initial theoretical framework is constructed that focuses on contexts, mechanisms, and outcomes, and sets out how and why phenomena have certain effects. In the next stage of a realist review, this theoretical framework is tested using empirical evidence from both quantitative and qualitative studies. Finally, the initial theoretical framework is revised.

An initial scoping search indicated that few studies have directly examined the relationship between economic recessions and illegal drug use. Thus, in our systematic realist literature review, we also included literature on the relationship between

unemployment and illegal drugs. This was done because nine out of ten recessions coincide with increases in unemployment rates (Claessens, Kose, & Terrones, 2008) and because the same individual-level mechanisms that affect illegal drug use can apply to recessions and unemployment (Dubanowicz & Lemmens, 2015; Henkel, 2011).

In the current systematic realist literature review on how economic recessions and unemployment affect illegal drug use, the initial theoretical framework was constructed based on six key publications on the relationship between recessions or unemployment and illegal drug use or substance use in general (Bretteville-Jensen, 2011; Catalano et al., 2011; Dubanowicz & Lemmens, 2015; Falagas, Vouloumanou, Mavros, & Karageorgopoulos, 2009; Henkel, 2011; Ritter & Chalmers, 2011). In these publications, five potential mechanisms through which recessions or unemployment could affect illegal drug use were described (Fig. 1). Two of these mechanisms predict a *pro-cyclical effect*, which is a decrease in illegal drug use after the start of a recession. First, based on basic economic theory (Ruhm, 1995), one could expect decreased use of illegal drugs or use of cheaper drugs after the start of a recession, because individuals have reduced incomes and purchasing power, especially if they lose their job (Bretteville-Jensen, 2011; Catalano

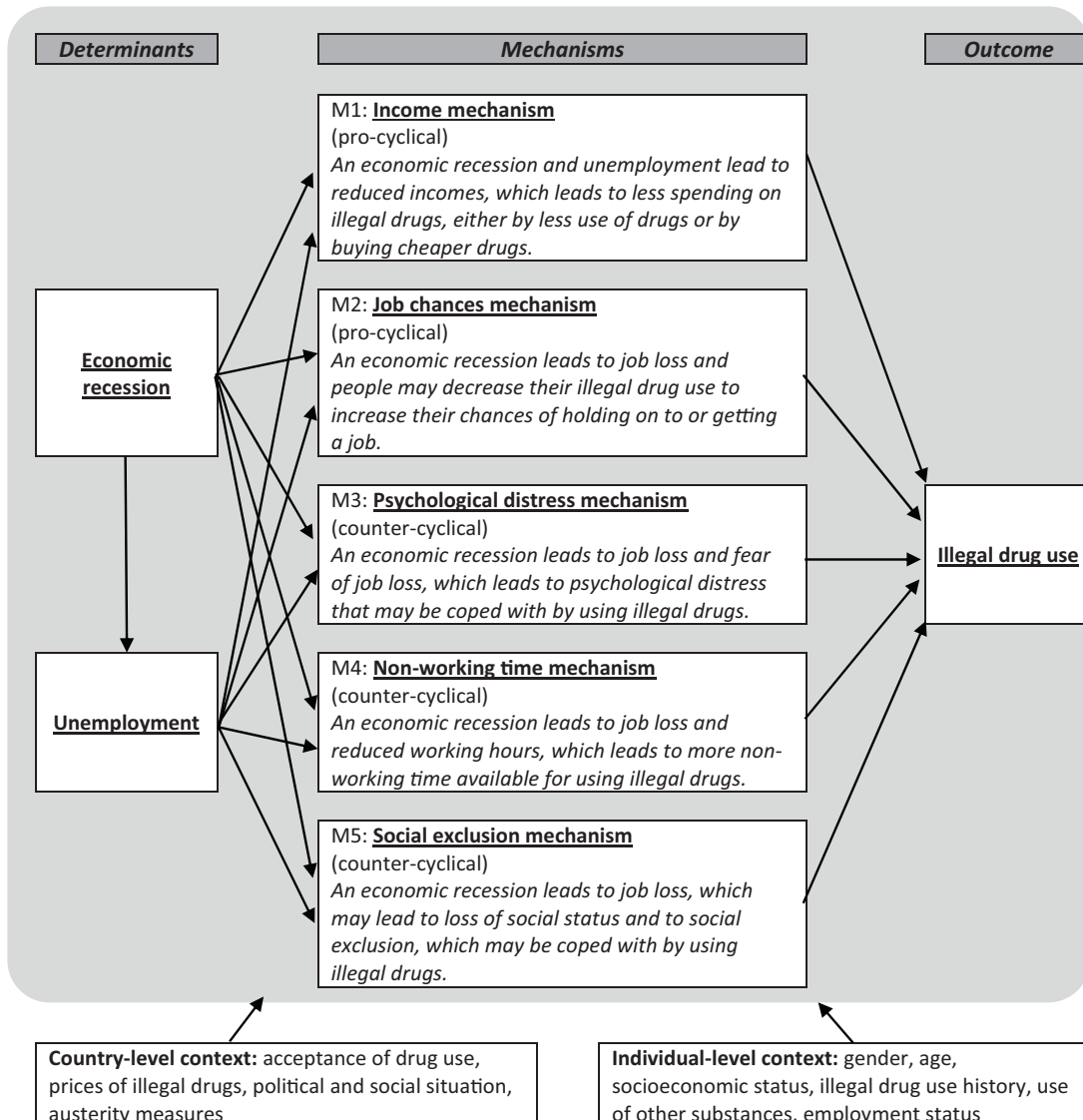


Fig. 1. Initial theoretical framework.

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