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Original Research

Factors affecting the well-being of adolescents living with unemployed parents in times of economic recession: findings from the Portuguese HBSC study



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ABSTRACT

Objectives: Using a national representative sample of adolescents with unemployed parents, this study examined which factors (sociodemographic and of satisfaction with family life and peers) are related to the negative effect of parents' unemployment on emotional well-being.

Study design: Cross-sectional survey study.

Methods: Data on adolescents (14.1 ± 1.7 years old), with at least one parent unemployed ($n = 1311$, 53.2% girls), was provided by the Portuguese Health Behaviour in School-aged Children study. Descriptive statistics and logistic regression analyses were performed.

Results: A high proportion of adolescents reported being emotionally affected by father's unemployment but not by their mother's. Older boys and older girls were more likely to report that their same-gender parent's unemployment situation (sons-fathers and daughters-mothers) has had a negative effect on their well-being. Girls from low socio-economic status and with poor family satisfaction were more likely to report negative emotional well-being related to parental unemployment.

Conclusions: This study presents evidence on factors that can shape adolescents' emotional well-being related to parents' unemployment situation. Given the recessionary context and

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high unemployment rates, these insights are valuable to assist the design of an action to improve the levels of well-being of Portuguese adolescents from unemployed families.

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Introduction

There are reports that the negative impact of the economic crisis on youth's well-being was stronger in countries facing the harshest unemployment rates (e.g. Portugal, Spain and Greece);¹ and young people's health and well-being decline was found to be anchored to parents' unemployment.^{2–4} Furthermore, evidence from countries in recession has also provided support for the association between increasing unemployment rates and rise in the prevalence of adolescents' psychological symptoms.⁵ At the individual level, losing a job has been highly correlated to poor mental well-being in adults.^{6,7} Moreover, previous research on parental employment and youth's well-being also suggests that parents' unemployment is associated with young people's lower well-being.^{8–12} This is consistent with the family stress model that states that economic changes in the family generate parental distress, as well as adolescents' emotional and behavioural maladjustment through disruptive parent–child interactions.¹³

Growing up under adverse socio-economic conditions and events can compromise the possibilities of young people achieving higher health and well-being status, and such disadvantages can endure into adult health and perpetuate into the next generations.¹⁴ Given the importance of the association of parental employment status to youth's well-being, especially during the economic recession, it is increasingly pertinent to monitor youth's well-being in relation to parents' unemployment.

Differences in socio-economic and demographic characteristics of adolescents living in unemployed families are important issues for research consideration because they may contribute to further affect their well-being.¹⁵ Family socio-economic status (SES), for instance, is a reliable predictor of mental health problems in adolescents.^{16–18} Age might also be an important factor. A study from Giuliano and Spilimbergo¹⁹ found that older adolescents with unemployed parents may start to worry more about future expenses, and their own expectations might be perceived as more limited especially considering the poor macroeconomic environment. In contrast, good family relations and strong peer connections have been positively associated with youth's well-being and may, therefore, counteract the negative effects of family stress and disrupted relationships possibly shaped during the unemployment situation.^{11,20–22}

Although associations between adolescents' well-being and parental employment status were explored in the abovementioned studies, these are limited by either using general well-being scales, by not considering gender-specific differences (e.g. father's and/or mother's unemployment). Moreover, data from countries that strongly felt the effects of the economic crisis is still lacking.

Therefore, this article uses data from the Portuguese Health Behaviour in School-aged Children (HBSC/WHO) survey for the year 2014 to further explore youth's emotional well-being in the context of parental unemployment. Specifically, this study aims to: 1) describe the sociodemographic characteristics of boys and girls living with unemployed parents (unemployed father, mother or both); 2) study the relationship between reporting feeling affected by paternal and/or maternal unemployment and sociodemographic and relational factors in boys and girls; and 3) estimate the associations between risk variables (age, type of parental unemployment, socio-economic position, satisfaction with family life and peers) and feeling affected by paternal and/or maternal unemployment.

To our knowledge, this is the first study that empirically examined which sociodemographic and relational factors are associated with adolescents' worse well-being during parental unemployment. Such information is essential given that Portugal faces an historical economic recession, has the fifth highest unemployment rate in Europe (14% in 2014),²³ and tailored interventions to protect families during unemployment are urgently required. Thus, evidence can be useful to inform decision-making and to take into account when tailoring specific interventions for adolescents facing parents' unemployment.

Methods

Participants and procedures

The present analysis of data derived from a representative sample of Portuguese school-aged children obtained from the cross-sectional 'HBSC' study, conducted in collaboration with the World Health Organization Regional Office for Europe in 2014. The HBSC is an international epidemiological study carried out every 4 years in 44 countries and regions across Europe and North America, and surveys adolescents' health and health behaviours. The participants were recruited via a clustered sampling design (the sampling unit was the class) to meet the required number of students for each school grade from selected national public schools, according to the HBSC/WHO international standardized research protocol.²⁴ Web-based online surveys were administered in the classroom by teachers, with voluntary student participation and self-completion. Beforehand, all schools gave their approval and legal guardians gave signed informed consent. Furthermore, confidentiality was ensured as questionnaire responses were anonymous. For the purpose of this research, we only considered adolescents (14.1 ± 1.7 years old) living with both parents and with at least one parent unemployed ($n = 1311$, 53.2% girls).

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