



## Unemployment and substance use problems among young adults: Does childhood low socioeconomic status exacerbate the effect?



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### ABSTRACT

The current study tested whether unemployment predicted young adults' heavy episodic drinking, cigarette smoking, and cannabis use after taking into account individual development in substance use. Furthermore, building on the life course perspective, this study examined whether the link between unemployment and substance use among young adults differed for those who experienced low childhood SES compared to those who did not. Data for the present study came from the Seattle Social Development Project (SSDP), a panel study examining a broad range of developmental outcomes from ages 10 to 33. A life history calendar (LHC) was administered to assess substance use and unemployment status during young adulthood. Covariates included baseline symptoms of psychopathology, baseline substance use, gender, ethnicity, and adult educational attainment. Results suggest that unemployment is associated with young adults' heavy episodic drinking and possibly cigarette use, but not cannabis use. Moreover, for all three substances, the detrimental impact of unemployment on substance use seems to be exacerbated among young adults who spent their childhood and adolescence in a lower SES household. Public health efforts that provide other viable and affordable options to cope with unemployment among young adults from low SES backgrounds are needed to address this disproportionate concentration of adverse impacts of unemployment on behavioral health.

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### 1. Introduction

During the financial crisis of 2007 and the subsequent Great Recession, the unemployment rate in the United States substantially increased. In January 2006, the unemployment rate was 4.7% (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2014)). Four years later, the rate climbed to 9.7% (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2014)). For young adults, the unemployment rate almost doubled in 2010 (17.2%) (U.S. Congress Joint Economic Committee, 2010). Such disproportionate concentration of unemployment among young adults (those from the late teenage years to the early 30s; Oesterle, 2013) has been historically persistent since 1971 in the United States (Edwards and Hertel-Fernandez, 2010), and thus warrants urgency in understanding the impact of unemployment for this specific age group.

Empirical evidence has consistently suggested that

unemployment may lead to psychiatric problems including substance use (Catalano et al., 2011; Henkel, 2011), which has provoked a decades-long and unresolved debate on the nature of this association (Catalano et al., 2011; Dooley et al., 1992; Henkel, 2011; Mossakowski, 2008). From this debate, three compelling lines of thought have emerged: the stress hypothesis, the income loss hypothesis, and the social selection/drift hypothesis (Catalano et al., 2011; Henkel, 2011). The stress hypothesis suggests a countercyclical association, i.e., loss of employment is associated with increased substance use. Specifically, the stress hypothesis posits that stressors, particularly salient stressors like unemployment and its associated stressors like economic hardship (Ross and Huber, 1985), might result in increased substance use, with people using substances as a coping mechanism (Boden et al., 2014; Catalano et al., 2011; Henkel, 2011; Mossakowski, 2008). In contrast, the income loss hypothesis argues for a procyclical association—where loss of employment decreases substance use. Specifically, the income loss hypothesis suggests that unemployment reduces the

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money available to an unemployed individual and thus this person cuts back on non-necessity items, such as substances (Catalano et al., 2011; Henkel, 2011). While the first two hypotheses argue that changes in employment predict changes in one's substance use, the social selection hypothesis argues for a reverse causality—it posits that preexisting substance use problems prohibit individuals from retaining their current job (Bowes et al., 2013; Sareen et al., 2011). The literature has not reached a conclusion about whether or not social selection processes also contribute to the association between unemployment and substance use (Catalano et al., 2011; Henkel, 2011; Sareen et al., 2011). Thus, it is important to evaluate whether a young adult's unemployment influences his/her substance use, net of the social selection possibility.

These hypotheses have been invoked in studies investigating the possible impact of unemployment on substance use among young adults, most of which have focused on alcohol use (Fergusson et al., 2001; Kestila et al., 2008; Merline et al., 2004; Mossakowski, 2008), with very few exceptions (Aitken et al., 2000; Merline et al., 2004; Reine et al., 2004; Melchior et al., 2015).

Overall, existing empirical evidence is mixed and inconclusive (Catalano et al., 2011; Mossakowski, 2008). Supporting the stress hypothesis, in one New Zealand longitudinal study the duration of unemployment in each year from age 16–21 years was predictive of increased odds of meeting DSM-IV criteria for alcohol abuse or dependence from age 17–21 years (Fergusson et al., 2001). Similarly, using data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY), Mossakowski (2008) reported that duration of unemployment from the 1979 wave to the 1991 wave was associated with increased frequency of heavy drinking at the 1992 wave when respondents were ages 27–35. On the other hand, although fewer in number and relying on data from a wide range of age groups, some studies have provided some evidence supporting the procyclical income loss hypothesis. In a U.S. cross-sectional study by Ettner and colleagues, unemployment was associated with decreased alcohol dependence symptoms among working-age adults (Ettner, 1997). In another study, Khan et al. (2002) also reported that recent unemployment was associated with a decrease in alcohol use among a sample of working-age adults. However, supporting neither hypothesis, in a U.S. study using data from the Monitoring the Future study, unemployment was not associated with heavy drinking at 35 years of age (Merline et al., 2004).

Such mixed findings call for further inquiries in this topic area. With few exceptions (Fergusson et al., 2001; Merline et al., 2004; Melchior et al., 2015), most prior studies have focused on one substance at a time (predominantly alcohol) (Catalano et al., 2011). This limits our ability to draw a more definite conclusion about the relationship between unemployment and substance use problems (Catalano et al., 2011; Reine et al., 2004), particularly when differential findings arise between varying substances across studies. The present study examines the association between unemployment and multiple types of substance use in order to minimize the possibility that differential association might arise simply due to differences in study samples or chosen analysis approach.

In addition, the present study is guided by a life course perspective (Elder, 1994; McLeod and Almazan, 2003). A life course perspective encourages researchers to consider the unique characteristics of each developmental stage to disentangle the complex processes of labor market activity and substance use career (Adler and Rehkopf, 2008; Berkman, 2009; Braveman and Barclay, 2009; Elder, 1994; Kawachi et al., 2010; McLeod and Almazan, 2003). Young adulthood is a period of constant transition in various aspects of life, including labor market activity and substance use. Young adults go through a “churning” period of short-lived employment as they navigate different career paths and employers (Edwards and

Hertel-Fernandez, 2010). One longitudinal panel study showed that 69% of respondents' jobs ended in less than a year when respondents were age 18–24 compared to only 33% when respondents were 40–46 years old (Bureau of Labor Statistics (2012)). There are also dynamic changes in substance use as adulthood progresses (Bachman et al., 2002; Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration [SAMHSA], 2009; Windle and Wiesner, 2004). For example, on average, harmful drinking reaches its peak at the outset of young adulthood (ages 21–24) and then gradually decreases with age (Bachman et al., 2002; SAMHSA, 2009; Windle et al., 2005).

Not taking into account the age-specific nature of labor market activity and substance use may potentially be a source of mixed findings in studies of the association between these two phenomena. The absence or presence of a relationship between unemployment and substance use may simply be a function of where a young adult stands developmentally with respect to his/her labor market activity and substance use trajectory. For example, Reine et al. (2004) reported a statistically significant association between unemployment and daily cigarette smoking at age 21 (the normative peak age for substance use). In the same study, unemployment was not associated with daily cigarette smoking at age 30 (beyond the normative peak age for substance use). This suggests that the relationship between unemployment and substance use should consider the developmental nature of substance use unique to young adults. Yet, very few relevant studies to date have made such considerations. This calls for a longitudinal analytic approach, such as linear mixed modeling, which can take into account the development of substance in each individual, as well as their unemployment status across young adulthood (Mossakowski, 2008). Such a longitudinal analytic approach can also provide a rigorous test of the effects of unemployment on substance use in that each individual's own history of substance use will function as his/her own control (Shaw et al., 2011), and can help diminish the potential for social selection in the association between unemployment and substance use.

It is also possible that changes in unemployment and substance use in adulthood are the result of common determinants. A life course perspective not only underscores the salience of the unique characteristics of each developmental period, it also suggests that each developmental period should be understood in tandem with the events and circumstances of an individual's prior development (Elder, 1994; McLeod and Almazan, 2003). Specifically, child/adolescent socioeconomic status has been widely reported as casting long-lasting effects on adult labor market activity (Duncan and Magnuson, 2011; Lee et al., 2012). In contrast, the relationship between child and adolescent low SES and later substance use is not straightforward. Some studies have documented that early low SES functions as a risk factor for adult substance use (Gilman et al., 2003; Patrick et al., 2012), while some have reported early SES to be a protective factor (Humensky, 2010; Kestila et al., 2008; Schulenberg et al., 2005). Other studies have reported no relationship between child or adolescent SES and substance use (Reine et al., 2004).

More importantly, less is known about whether child/adolescent SES conditions the association between unemployment and adult substance use (Catalano et al., 2011; Henkel, 2011), although a potential interplay between child/adolescent SES and adult employment with regard to adult health has been consistently noted in the literature (for example, Adler and Rehkopf, 2008; Berkman, 2009; Bowes et al., 2013; Braveman and Barclay, 2009; Kawachi et al., 2010). In particular, in their resource substitution hypothesis, Ross and Mirowsky (2011) suggest that negative change in an individual's own socioeconomic status attained during adulthood might have a more detrimental impact on health outcomes for those from low SES families of origin. Given that these

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