



The impact of social, structural and physical environmental factors on transitions into employment among people who inject drugs

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ABSTRACT

Despite growing awareness of the importance of context for the health of people who use drugs, studies examining labour market outcomes have rarely considered the role that physical, social and structural factors play in shaping labour market participation among drug users. Using discrete time event history analyses, we assessed associations between high-intensity substance use, individual drug use-related risk and features of inner-city drug use scenes with transitions into regular employment. Data were derived from a community-recruited cohort of people who inject drugs in Vancouver, Canada ($n = 1579$) spanning the period of May 1996–May 2005. Results demonstrate that systematic socio-demographic differences in labour market outcomes in this context generally correspond to dimensions of demographic disadvantage. Additionally, in initial analyses, high-intensity substance use is negatively associated with transitions into employment. However, this negative association loses significance when indicators measuring exposure to physical, social and structural features of the broader risk environment are considered. These findings indicate that interventions designed to improve employment outcomes among drug users should address these social, structural and physical components of the risk environment as well as promote the cessation of drug use.

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Introduction

The consumption of psychoactive substances is often considered to be incompatible with or to have a highly negative impact on employment. Injection drug users (IDUs) have often been categorized as either unable or unwilling to participate in conventional social and economic activity (Platt, 1995). Prior research on work and health has documented that work- and non-work-related morbidity and mortality are higher among socio-demographically and socio-economically disadvantaged populations (Bambra, 2011; Morris, Cook, & Shaper, 1994). Given this relationship, there is a need for research that examines employment patterns among IDUs, who often face considerable obstacles to labour market involvement (Richardson, Sherman, & Kerr, 2012). Exploring influences on labour market engagement may increase understandings of the barriers to employment and those factors that

contribute to material deprivation among this highly vulnerable population.

Functionalist theories of drug use, such as strain (Cloward & Ohlin, 1960; Merton, 1938), control (Hirschi, 1969) and differential association theory (Akers, Krohn, Lanza-Kaduce, & Radosevich, 1979; Groves & Sampson, 1987; Sutherland, 1947) characterize drug use as symptomatic of a general retreat from culturally ascribed goals, social controls or conventional institutions. These theories generally anticipate a concurrent tendency towards both substance use and non-employment. Whether through economically structured disconnections between culturally enshrined aspirations and socially approved opportunities (as in the case of strain theory), a lack of strong ties to the workplace (as theorised by control theory), or socially reinforced non-participation in the labour market (described by differential association theory; Shaw, 2002), these deviance-oriented perspectives characterize non-employment and substance use as emergent by-products of the material, social or institutional aspects of social disorganization.

Empirical evidence that confirms, contradicts, or builds upon the theoretical accounts described above may have implications for subsequent explorations of the relationship between substance use and employment. In North America, endemic drug use and

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acquisitive crime in areas of high unemployment have been connected to the absence of adequate, licit economic opportunities and to the consequences of economic and social service restructuring. This restructuring has been away from both manual work and rehabilitative social service provision (Bourgois & Schonberg, 2009; Draus, Roddy, & Greenwald, 2010; Johnson et al., 1985; Pearson, 1987). Other studies suggest that high-intensity drug use does not preclude employment (Harling, 2007; Zimmerman & Wieder, 1977; Zinberg, 1984). Draus et al. (2010), identify three conceptions of the working drug user: the “stabilized junkie” (Faupel, 1987), who engages in daily heroin use but still maintains reasonably predictable routines; the working addict (Caplovitz, 1976), who maintains work-related behaviour similar to that of the non-using population and whose use fluctuates according to levels of income; and the controlled user (Harling, 2007; Zinberg, 1984), whose use is self-regulated and who remains high-functioning. Much of this research observes the presence of routines that structure daily life, value commitments outside of drug use, and drug-use rituals that facilitate concurrent employment (Caplovitz, 1976; Faupel, 1987; Pearson, 1987; Zinberg, 1984). Further, ethnographic studies have demonstrated organizational skill, forward planning and relationship development among drug users (Bourgois & Schonberg, 2009; Draus et al., 2010; Feldman, 1968; Johnson et al., 1985). These studies have drawn attention to the role of environmental conditions in shaping the character of income generating activity. They importantly suggest that understandings of the relationship between drug use and economic activity depend on considerations of the broader context within which drug users live and operate.

Consideration of this broader context is notably absent from much research on the relationship between drug use and work and has, to our knowledge, not yet been addressed by quantitative study. Adopting hypotheses consistent with functionalist characterizations of substance use – that illicit drug use and labour market outcomes will be inversely related – the results across studies using large, often nationally representative samples are equivocal. Results indicate negative associations between drug use and job stability as well as the probability of being in employment, and a positive association with time spent in unemployment (DeSimone, 2002; Kandel, Chen, & Gill, 1995; Kandel & Davies, 1990; Kandel & Yamaguchi, 1987). Conversely, other research shows that employment outcomes are not systematically worse with higher levels of use (Zarkin, Mroz, Bray, & French, 1998) or with the use of ‘hard’ compared to ‘soft’ drugs (Gill & Michaels, 1991). While differentiating between the use of different substances (DeSimone, 2002) and low- versus high-intensity patterns of use (Bray, Zarkin, Dennis, & French, 2000; French, Roebuck, & Alexandre, 2001) may help clarify results, conclusions elsewhere maintain that these studies fail to produce evidence of a robust labour supply-drug use relationship (Kaestner, 1998). This ambiguity may be attributable to a lack of consideration of the broader social, structural and physical environment.

A select number of studies compare the characteristics of employed and unemployed drug users using data from community and street-recruited samples (Alexandre & French, 2004; Atkinson, Montoya, Trevino, & Richard, 2000; Koo, Chitwood, & Sánchez, 2007; McCoy, Comerford, & Metsch, 2007). These analyses provide opportunities to situate explorations of labour market outcomes within drug use contexts. They may therefore be crucial to more detailed understandings of environmental influences on localized patterns of income generation among people who use drugs. However, to our awareness, few if any of these studies have utilized long-term longitudinal data, nor have they considered the broader risk environment of IDUs.

An emerging body of research has reinforced the important role that drug use scenes, as distinct risk environments, play in shaping

the health and risk trajectories of drug users (Curtis & Wendel, 2000; Hough & Natarajan, 2000; Kerr, Kimber, & Rhodes, 2007). Drug scenes have been described as specific geographical inner-city areas characterized by high concentrations of drug users and drug dealing (Curtis & Wendel, 2000; Hough & Natarajan, 2000). These geographic areas host elaborate socio-spatial networks within which are further embedded the practices associated with the day-to-day realities of securing basic necessities such as money, shelter, and drugs (Bourgois, 1996; Fast, Shoveller, Shannon, & Kerr, 2010; Maher, 1997). Evidence has recently begun to highlight how drug-use milieus operate to isolate and push individuals towards harm (Bourgois, 1998; Fast, Small, Wood, & Kerr, 2009; Lovell, 2002; Mayock, 2002; Small, Kerr, Charette, Schechter, & Spittal, 2006), evoking a more nuanced version of the structural determinism of earlier functionalist accounts.

The potential relevance of these milieus to the income generating practices of drug users raises the issue of how to conceptualize these contexts in analyses of drug-related harm. The heuristic offered by Rhodes’ (2002, 2009) Risk Environment Framework offers one such characterization. It accounts for the interplay of physical, social, economic and policy components that impact the production and reproduction of drug harms at the micro-, meso- and macro-environmental level. Goldenberg et al. (2011) importantly identify that the purpose of the framework is not to provide a comprehensive categorization and labelling system for what are impossibly complex relationships between multifaceted and multilevel aspects of the broader risk environment. It instead serves to facilitate an explicit recognition and identification of environmental influences on health and risk.

The use of an analytical heuristic such as the Risk Environment Framework may be crucially important to an understanding of how contextual features influence the relationship between drug use and income generation in quantitative study. We therefore incorporate the Risk Environment Framework into an examination of the relationship between labour market participation and drug use among a long-term community-recruited cohort of IDU in Vancouver, Canada. In keeping with previous studies (Richardson, Wood, Li, & Kerr, 2010), we account for individual characteristics, different substances and specific patterns of use. In an effort to identify aspects of the risk environment that are consequential to labour market outcomes, we include select variables measuring the social, structural and physical features specific to a local drug scene. Analyses are designed to isolate the specific role of exposure to features of the broader risk environment in employment entries. We test the general hypothesis that immersion in the local drug scene and associated exposure to increased vulnerability and risk across individual attributes, drug use patterns, drug-related events or practices and contextual features will be negatively associated with labour market outcomes.

Data and methods

Relationships with the labour market may involve processes related to labour market entry, transitions into work, employment maintenance, job transitions, job losses and labour market exits. In contrast to previous work using a coarser indicator of employment (Richardson et al., 2010), here we isolate a specific aspect of the labour market relationship – transitions from non-employment into regular employment – using data from the Vancouver Injection Drug User Study (VIDUS).

Sampling and recruitment

Described in detail elsewhere (Wood et al., 2001), VIDUS is a longstanding community-recruited cohort study, designed with

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