



Unemployment, drugs and attitudes among European youth[☆]



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ABSTRACT

This paper studies changes in the patterns of drug consumption and attitudes towards drugs in relation to sky-high (youth) unemployment rates brought about by the Great Recession. Our analysis is based on data for 28 European countries that refer to young people. We find that the consumption of cannabis and 'new substances' is positively related to increasing unemployment rates. An increase of 1% in the regional unemployment rate is associated with an increase of 0.7 percentage points in the ratio of young people who state that they have consumed cannabis at some point in time. Our findings also indicate that higher unemployment may be associated with more young people perceiving that access to drugs has become more difficult, particularly access to ecstasy, cocaine and heroin. According to young Europeans, when the economy worsens, anti-drug policies should focus on the reduction of poverty and unemployment, and not on implementing tougher measures against users.

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1. Introduction

If there is an age group that has been particularly hit by the Great Recession in Europe, it is certainly that of young people. Youth unemployment rates have reached unprecedented levels in many countries, labour market opportunities have clearly worsened, and the careers of many young people have been abruptly interrupted. The consequences of these deteriorating labour market conditions in several different spheres of life currently form the subject of

analysis of much research – i.e. career prospects, the possibility for young people to leave the parental home and set up their own families, subjective well-being, etc. This paper adds to this literature by analysing the extent to which changes in the labour market have also translated into changes in the patterns of drug consumption and youth attitudes toward drugs.

Drug consumption among European youth is not a minor problem: 17.8 million young adults (15–34) used drugs in 2015 according to the European Drug Report 2016, published by the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction (EMCDDA, 2016). The same study estimates that cannabis was used in 2015 by 16.6 million young adults – that is, by 13.3% of the age group. In the case of cocaine, the figure was 2.4 million (1.9%), and for ecstasy (MDMA) and amphetamines, 2.1 million and 1.3 million (1.7% and 1.0%), respectively. Moreover, it is estimated that 8% of the youngest group (15–24) have used new psychoactive substances at some time. The same source estimates that EUR 24.3 billion were spent in 2013 on illicit drugs in Europe; that there were 1.6 million

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reported drug offences in 2014; and that at least 6800 overdose deaths occurred that same year (EMCDDA, 2016).¹

But why should changes in the labour market be related to changes in drug consumption or attitudes toward drugs? The theoretical literature analysing the link between the business cycle and substance use highlights three causal pathways: an ‘income effect’, ‘economic stress’ and an ‘opportunity cost’ (also called ‘substitution effect’). The ‘income effect’ asserts that if drugs are normal goods, then in a bad economy consumers should adapt their demand to a tighter budget, and therefore reduce their consumption. Evidence for this pro-cyclical result can be found in Neumayer (2004), Tapia Granados (2005), Gerdttham and Ruhm (2006), Charles and DeCicca (2008), Catalano et al. (2011), Freeman (1999), Ruhm and Black (2002), Ruhm (2005), Ásgeirsdóttir et al. (2012) and Xu (2013), and references within.²

The ‘economic stress’ mechanism links substance consumption to psychological reasons. In this case, to deal with uncertainty about future income, the increased probability of being unemployed or the lack of opportunities found in the labour market, young people may resort to self-medication, which causes an increase in substance use. Furthermore, economic recessions can change the ‘opportunity cost’ of substance consumption: given that fewer jobs are available and wages are lower, spending time using drugs has a smaller opportunity cost, which may enhance consumption.³ Böckerman and Ilmakunnas (2009), Arkes (2011, 2012), Dee (2001), Bradford and Lastrapes (2014) and Currie and Tekin (2015) present evidence for such counter-cyclical results.⁴ All in all, the relationship between substance use and the business cycle will be pro-cyclical if the income effect offsets the other two mechanisms, and counter-cyclical if it is the other way round.

This paper is the first to provide evidence of the relationship between sky-high (youth) unemployment rates brought about by the Great Recession and drug use among young people across Europe (28 countries). More importantly, our study goes beyond an analysis based solely on consumption to analyse certain attitudes towards drugs that have been identified in the literature as good predictors of future drug consumption. In particular, we analyse how changes in the local labour market may have had an effect on the availability of drugs and on young people’s perceived access to them; on the perceived risk of drug consumption; and on youth opinion as to the most effective ways of combating the problems that drugs cause in society. The analysis of good predictors is important because, particularly when interviewed about drugs, individuals may be reluctant to admit actual consumption. Moreover, and as explained by Bachman et al. (1990), any complete explanation of drug use needs to account for drug-specific factors – for example, perceived risk and perceived availability. As those authors point out, only by accounting for drug-specific factors are we able to understand the different patterns of trends.⁵ Indeed drug-specific factors are good predictors because they are more

likely to change over time than are general factors related to the broad range of problem behaviour. In this respect, this paper adds to the literature a new analysis of how the economic environment may have shifted attitudes toward drugs.⁶

Our study focuses solely on young people (aged 15–24 years). This is important because, as the specialized literature shows, early consumption is one of the factors that can lead to progressive dependence (Swift et al., 2008; Coffey et al., 2003; von Sydow et al., 2001). In the case of cannabis, for example, several authors point to the possibility that early consumption can work as a gateway to harder drugs (Melberg et al., 2010; Beenstock and Rahav, 2002; Pudney, 2003; Van Ours, 2003; Fergusson et al., 2006; Bretteville-Jensen et al., 2008).

Our main findings indicate that rising levels of total and youth unemployment may be associated with increased consumption of cannabis and ‘new substances’ by European youth. According to our results for the period between 2011 and 2014, a 1% increase in the regional unemployment rate at the NUTS-1 level is associated with an increase of 0.7 percentage points in the probability that young people respond that they have consumed cannabis. In the case of new substances, the figure is 0.5 percentage points. Our results also indicate that a link can be established between changes in the local labour markets and perceived availability of drugs: as the unemployment rate rises, so access to drugs becomes more difficult, in the opinion of young Europeans (in particular, access to cocaine, heroin and ecstasy).⁷ On the other hand, no link could be established between changes in the local labour markets and changes in young people’s opinion of the health risk of using drugs. Finally, and when asked about effective policies to combat the problems that drugs cause in society, in contexts of rising unemployment young people say they are more in favour of measures that reduce poverty and unemployment than they are of tougher measures against users.

Our findings are important because they provide evidence of other effects of the Great Recession on young people that go beyond those more closely associated with the labour market. Moreover, our results should prove informative to policy makers: drug consumption is linked to the opportunities afforded to young people in the local labour markets, and so special attention needs to be focused where career prospects have worsened the most. Furthermore, our paper takes into account young people’s own views on which policies are effective in combating the problems caused by drugs. Anti-drug policy should not ignore these views.

After this introduction, the paper continues as follows. The next section presents the dataset and some descriptive statistics. Section 3 introduces the methodology and the econometric techniques used. Section 4 shows our results on consumption, perceived availability, perceived risk of drug use and young people’s opinions regarding effective anti-drug policies. Finally, the conclusions summarize our main results and discuss avenues for future research.

2. Data

The data used come from four Eurobarometer surveys on ‘Young people and drugs’, collected across Europe in four different years: 2004 (Flash Eurobarometer (EB) 158), 2008 (Flash EB 233), 2011 (Flash EB 330) and 2014 (Flash EB 401).⁸ The pooled dataset suits

¹ The literature that links drug use and violence is large – see Boles and Miotto (2003) for a review.

² Results are called pro-cyclical because drug consumption changes have the same sign as economic growth rates: when an economy grows (GDP increases and unemployment falls), consumption is found to increase. Instead results are found to be counter-cyclical when in a growing economy (with lower unemployment rates), consumption diminishes.

³ The planning horizon of young people during an economic crisis could be shorter than during better economic years, inducing short-term recreational consumption.

⁴ The rise of unemployment during recessions increases people’s free time to engage in other activities outside the labour market. On the other hand, it is also true that with more free time, adults can increase their control over activities undertaken by youth or teenagers (Arkes, 2007).

⁵ As defined in Bachman et al. (1988: 95), drug-specific factors are ‘those factors which relate primarily to the use of a particular drug rather than to drug use in general (or problem behaviour)’. Such factors include awareness of the drug, per-

ception of the effects of using it, availability, perceptions by friends and others and perceptions that friends and relatives disapprove of using a certain drug.

⁶ Attitudes, as personality traits, are not set in stone and change with the social and economic environment (Almlund et al., 2011).

⁷ Our paper does not make any claims for causality: we simply wish to consider different predictors to try to understand possible future trends in consumption.

⁸ The surveys used in this study have been explicitly designed to obtain information on drugs among young people between the ages of 15 and 24, and so our results

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