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Gain of employment and perceived health status among previously unemployed persons: evidence from a longitudinal study in the United States

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ABSTRACT

Objectives: Using longitudinal datasets, we investigated whether gaining employment was associated with improvements in perceived mental health and overall health among previously unemployed U.S. residents. We additionally examined whether the association varied across types of employment and socio-demographic characteristics.

Methods: We used multiple two-year panel datasets of the Medical Expenditure Panel Survey during 2004–2012. We studied two health outcomes: perceived mental health and overall health. Our independent variables were employment status: full-time, part-time, self-employment, and unemployment. To examine the association between gaining employment and perceived health, we employed population-averaged models with generalized estimating equations. We secondarily examined the association across subpopulations (gender, race/ethnicity, and education).

Results: Those who gained full-time, part-time, and self-employment were more likely to report good mental health than those who stayed unemployed (AOR [Adjusted Odds Ratio] = 2.90, 95% CI 2.23 to 3.78, AOR = 1.63, 95% CI 1.28 to 2.06, and AOR = 3.24, 95% CI 1.08 to 9.70, respectively). Those who became full-time and part-time employed were more likely to report good overall health relative to those who stayed unemployed (AOR = 2.28, 95% CI 1.82 to 2.86 and AOR = 1.91, 95% CI 1.52 to 2.40, respectively). For both measures of perceived health, the magnitudes of the association were larger for those who gained full-time employment than part-time employment. AORs were relatively higher for males, black persons, and people with less than a college education relative to other groups in each subpopulation.

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Conclusion: Improving employment outcomes may improve perceived health. Transiting toward full-time employment, in particular, may maximize the benefits of employment.

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Introduction

In the United States (US), a nationwide survey shows that the number of people who have poor perceived health status has increased over time. During 1993–2001, the percentage of respondents who reported poor, fair, or good health increased from 40% to 45%, whereas that of respondents who reported excellent or very good health decreased from 60% to 55%.¹ Given the adverse trends in perceived health, it is critical to identify factors associated with poor perceived health. Since perceived health is a subjective indicator of overall health status, it is likely to reflect aspects of health not captured in other measures,² which indicates an individual's integrated perception of health or well-being.³ Therefore, factors associated with health status are likely to extend beyond health care.⁴

Employment may be one such arena. Employment is thought to be important for persons' livelihood because it increases financial security and promotes higher living standards, which may stimulate economic activity.⁵ These mechanisms may also relate employment outcomes to improved health or well-being. Specifically, there are several pathways via which perceived health may improve as a result of changes in employment. First, employment may contribute to improving perceived health by securing psychological stability.⁶ Employment may also enhance perceived health by providing economic benefits.^{7,8} Moreover, employment may improve perceived health by assisting in building and maintaining supportive relationships.^{9–11}

While empirical evidence has supported the hypothesis that gaining employment is associated with improvements in perceived health,^{12–14} the benefits of employment on health may depend on the type of employment gained. Full-time employment often is accompanied by a regular, reliable salary as well as health and retirement benefits, which may reduce stress related to financial insecurity but may compromise one's sense of autonomy. Other types of employment, such as part-time or self-employment may share similar features such as being accompanied by fewer benefits and more limited or uncertain employment tenure.^{7,15–18} These features may result in worry about job loss and mental strain regarding ambiguity about the future, which may have adverse effects on perceived health.^{14,16,19} However, these work arrangements may offer more autonomy and sense of control over one's life, which may result in improved perceived health.²⁰

Furthermore, gaining employment may be more important for improving perceived health in some subpopulations than others. Employment is considered as a key component of socio-economic status, or the position held by an individual or group in society that determines that individual or group's access to various resources.²¹ Hence, for groups that have

been historically disadvantaged, such as females, racial/ethnic minorities, and individuals with low education levels, gain of employment may result in a shift in social status, which may impact health.

Although previous studies have examined the associations between gaining employment and perceived health,^{12–14} most were conducted in other countries, which are different from the US regarding social, economic, and political contexts. Thus, the results from those studies may not be applicable to the US settings. Moreover, previous literature has mainly focused on employment relative to unemployment. However, since various work arrangements exist, separate investigation of varying employment types and perceived health is needed. Finally, although the magnitude of the association may vary across subpopulations, previous studies have mainly estimated population-averaged effects on a whole population. Consequently, it is hard to detect whether the benefits of employment on health may be greater for some disadvantaged groups.

Hence, the objective of this study was to investigate whether gaining employment is associated with improved perceived mental health and overall health among previously unemployed people in the US. Specifically, among previously unemployed persons, we examine whether gaining full-time, part-time, or self-employment is associated with increased likelihood of reporting good mental and overall health relative to remaining unemployed. Secondly, we examine whether gaining employment is associated with increased likelihood of reporting good mental and overall health across subgroups of previously unemployed US residents, defined by gender, race/ethnicity, and education.

Methods

Data source

We used multiple two-year panel datasets of the Medical Expenditure Panel Survey (MEPS) during 2004–2012 (Panel 9–16), a nationally representative survey of US residents sponsored by the Agency for Health care Research and Quality.²² In each MEPS panel dataset, five rounds of interviews were conducted to collect demographic and health information on all respondents through the two-years. Response rates range from 53.5% to 63.1%.²³ For this study, we combined eight two-year panels.

Study population

Our study population consisted of US residents who participated in the MEPS Panel 9–16, reported being unemployed

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