

Activity spaces and urban adolescent substance use and emotional health

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Abstract

This study analyzed routine locations (activity spaces) of urban adolescents enrolled in a substance abuse treatment program to understand the relationship between their spatial lives and health outcomes such as substance use and mental health. Sixty-eight adolescents were interviewed and produced a list of 199 locations identified as most important, safe, and risky. A TwoStep Cluster analysis resulted in two mutually exclusive groups of adolescents ($n = 58$). Clusterwise importance analyses showed that sex, distress, anxiety, emotional problems, and drug use significantly distinguish clusters from each other. An important finding was that activity spaces vary according to the frequency of substance use and the amount of emotional problems. School was frequently perceived as a risky place — followed by friend's house and nature — for those who used alcohol and marijuana more frequently and had more emotional distress. The intersection between environment, emotion regulation, and health outcomes is discussed.

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Introduction

The examination of contextual influences on self-regulation is considered an important area of developmental research, yet one that is very understudied (McCabe, Cunningham, & Brooks-Gunn, 2004). While research has demonstrated that adolescents develop social strategies through their social networks to regulate emotions (Berkman & Glass, 2000), a broader approach compels the researcher to consider the role of place in producing environmental strategies to regulate emotions and promote identity development (Korpela, Kytta, & Hartig, 2002). Adolescents regulate their own development, such as identity formation, by selecting and shaping appropriate outer contexts or settings to moderate internal states (Korpela, 2002; Silbereisen, Eyferth, & Rudinger, 1986). More specifically, the chosen locations can address developmental needs through processes of control, creativity, mastery, privacy, security, personal displays, and serenity (Korpela et al., 2002; Low & Altman, 1992). These healthful outcomes are linked to appropriate self and emotional regulation, which in turn serve as protective factors against mental health problems (Cole, Michel, & O'Donnell Teti, 1994; Eisenber, Smith, Sadovsky, & Spinrad, 2004; Gross & Munoz, 1995; Kring & Werner, 2004) and against substance use (Hull & Slone, 2004; Sayette, 2004).

This present study is an analysis of the routine, chosen locations (activity spaces) of urban adolescents enrolled in a substance abuse treatment program to understand the relationship between their spatial lives and behavioral health outcomes. The overall aims of this study are (a) to describe the activity spaces of this sample and the participants' evaluations of these locations, and (b) to analyze activity spaces by age, gender, mental health, and substance use. We seek to add to the literature by utilizing a broad framework from which to study substance abusing adolescents by including a spatial dimension into the analysis of their lives. We will analyze the unique spatial signatures (activity spaces) of adolescents and how they perceive risky, safe and important locations in order to examine correlates of these places with substance use and emotional health outcomes.

How to conceptualize and delineate the parameters of environmental settings that exert influence on developmental processes such as self-regulation is an open question. Recent research with urban youth informs us that the typical locations in which youth spend their time are varied and geographically dispersed, and are not delimited by traditional geographical boundaries such as census tracts, neighborhoods, block groups, or political wards (Mason, Cheung, & Walker, 2004). An important construct that can provide heuristic guidance for these processes is activity space. Activity space has a long and interdisciplinary history with traditions such as geography, public health, sociology, transportation studies, time–space studies, social psychology, and human–environment interactions. It can be defined as all the locations that an individual has direct contact with as a result of his or her daily activities (Miller, 1991). It represents an index of an individual's daily or routine spatial movements. More broadly, activity spaces are the manifestation of ones' spatial lives, representing their routine locations and all the accompanying psychological, social, and health-related experiences of these places (Golledge & Stimson, 1997; Sherman, Spencer, Preisser, Gesler, & Arcury, 2005).

Research demonstrates that daily life is notably concentrated at a few places, with an average of three activity spaces (Schönfelder & Axhausen, 2004). Mason et al. have found that with urban youth, the average number of activity spaces is five (Mason et al., 2004). Mason et al. examined

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