



Turbulent times: Effects of turbulence and violence exposure in adolescence on high school completion, health risk behavior, and mental health in young adulthood



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ABSTRACT

Turbulent social environments are associated with health and developmental risk, yet mechanisms have been understudied. Guided by a life course framework and stress theory, this study examined the association between turbulent life transitions (including frequent residential mobility, school transitions, family structure disruptions, and homelessness) and exposure to violence during adolescence and high school completion, mental health, and health risk behaviors in young adulthood. Participants ($n = 4834$) from the U.S. National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, 1997 cohort were followed prospectively from age 12–14 years for 10 years. We used structural equation models to investigate pathways between turbulence and cumulative exposure to violence (CEV), and high school completion, mental health, and health risk behaviors, while accounting for early life socio-demographics, family processes, and individual characteristics. Results indicated that turbulence index was associated with cumulative exposure to violence in adolescence. Both turbulence index and cumulative exposure to violence were positively associated with higher health risk behavior, poorer mental health, and inversely associated with high school completion. These findings highlight the importance of considering the cumulative impact of turbulent and adverse social environments when developing interventions to optimize health and developmental trajectory for adolescents transitioning into adulthood.

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Introduction

Residential mobility is traditionally perceived as voluntary and opportunity-related. However, both the probability of repeated relocation and opportunities associated with moving are unequally distributed. Lower-income families are at higher risk for more frequent relocation (Astone & McLanahan, 1994; Scanlone & Devine, 2001) and lateral moves within limited geographical areas (Fitchen, 1994). African-Americans are more likely to move to more disadvantaged neighborhoods (St. John, Edwards, & Wenk, 1995). In 2007, 28% of families living below the poverty line moved in comparison to 12% of all families and 28% of renters relocated compared to 5% of home owners (U.S. Census Bureau, 2009). Youth from lower-income, single-parent, limited-English

proficiency, and immigrant families also experience a disproportionately higher rate of schools transitions (Branz-Spall, Rosenthal, & Wright, 2003; Schafft, 2005). More frequent residential mobility is associated with poverty, school transitions (Jelleyman & Spencer, 2008), and family structure disruption (Astone & McLanahan, 1994), and therefore is a marker of turbulence in the lives of youth.

Guided by a life course perspective and stress theory we posit that turbulent life transitions during adolescence may have long-term consequences for health behaviors, high school completion, and mental health trajectory. In addition, we investigate whether exposure to violence has an independent contribution to health behavior and mental health risk when considering turbulence.

Theoretical framework

The life course perspective provides a framework for positing that turbulent life transitions elevate risk for poor health behaviors, mental health, and failure to complete secondary school (Elder, Johnson, & Crosnoe, 2003), as well as mechanisms by which

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these transitions may have heterogeneous impacts on outcomes (George, 1993). While many life events are in fact transitions, unplanned, undesired, and non-normative transitions tend to be more harmful (Thoits, 1987). Evans and Kim (2010) have posited that a plausible mechanism linking socioeconomic status and health is multiple risk exposure, either simultaneous or sequential. Impoverished children are more likely to be exposed to chaotic living conditions (Evans, Gonnella, Marcynyszyn, Gentile, & Salpekar, 2005) and thereby multiple risk factors (Rutter & Quinton, 1977) that influence socio-emotional adjustment. Pearlin (1989) posits that stress proliferation is a process through which a primary stressor often triggers secondary stressors. Moreover, there is evidence that traumatic events are more likely to trigger the proliferation of stressors (Pearlin, Schieman, Fazio, & Meersman, 2005). Integrating stress proliferation theory and the life course framework suggests that correlated, turbulent events may have a cumulative effect on health outcomes. Based on theoretical (George, 1993; McEwen, 1998; Pearlin et al., 2005; Pollari & Bullock, 1989) and empirical (Barrett & Turner, 2005; Dong et al., 2005; Jelleyman & Spencer, 2008; Newcomb & Harlow, 1986; Seidman, Allen, Aber, Mitchell, & Feinman, 1994; Turner & Lloyd, 1995; Wood, Halfon, Scarlata, Newacheck, & Nessim, 1993) evidence we defined an index of turbulence—which includes frequent residential mobility, school transitions, homelessness, and family disruption—as a constellation of associated life transitions. Therefore, our index of turbulence is created to explore the cumulative impact of these associated stressors.

Empirical background

Higher rates of residential mobility are associated with adverse health and developmental outcomes in youth (Jelleyman & Spencer, 2008). A well-established research literature has documented the association between residential instability and elevated risk for behavioral problems (Simpson & Fowler, 1994; Wood et al., 1993), poor school performance (Ersing, Sutphen, & Loeffler, 2009; Hunke & Schaeter, 1995; Pribesh & Downey, 1999; Wood et al., 1993), delinquency (Astone & McLanahan, 1994), early sexual activity (Stack, 1994), teenage pregnancy (Jelleyman & Spencer, 2008), emotional problems (Simpson & Fowler, 1994; Stubblefield, 1955), and conduct disorder (Cohen, Johnson, Stuenkel, & Brooks, 1989). Although, studies of the association between frequent mobility and depression and substance use in adolescence have yielded mixed findings (Cohen et al., 1989; DeWit, 1998; Gilman, Kawachi, Fitzmaurice, & Buka, 2003; Jaffee et al., 2002); recent research has established an association between frequency of residential moves and suicide risk among adolescents (Haynie & South, 2005; Qin, Mortensen, & Pedersen, 2009).

Turbulence—or the turmoil associated with residential mobility—impacts health risk in that it may both contribute to and be symptomatic of family dysfunction and stressors (Schafft, 2005). First, residential transitions are major life events (Jalongo, 1985); associated feelings of helplessness may impair socio-emotional functioning (Newcomb & Harlow, 1986). Moreover, turbulence may lead directly to psychological distress (Pollari & Bullock, 1989; Simpson & Fowler, 1994; Stokols & Shumaker, 1982). Residential instability and associated turmoil may disrupt social networks and thereby diminish social capital (Coleman, 1988). These youth have fewer friends and decreased social intimacy, and higher rates of loneliness (Vernberg, 1990), and are vulnerable to victimization or engagement with more deviant peer groups due to weaker social networks (Haynie & South, 2005). Finally, parental responsiveness (Pollari & Bullock, 1989), surveillance (Hagan, MacMillan, & Wheaton, 1996), and awareness of peers (Pettit & McLanahan,

2003; Putnam, 2000) may diminish due to competing priorities associated with moving. Chaotic living conditions have been shown to adversely affect cognition, socio-emotional development, and influence physical well-being. Chaotic and unpredictable environments may undermine ability to self-regulate emotions and interfere with the development of competency and sense of mastery (Evans et al., 2005).

While the majority of studies have explored residential mobility as a single exposure, using frequency of moves to investigate dose-effects (Jelleyman & Spencer, 2008), research evidence suggests that cumulative adversity is associated with degree of psychological distress and the incidence of mental health disorders (Turner & Lloyd, 1995), and poor health behaviors (Anda et al., 1999; Dietz et al., 1999; Dube et al., 2003; Felitti et al., 1998), and causally linked to the onset of depressive and anxiety disorders (Turner & Lloyd, 2004). Area studies have found an association between rates of geographical mobility and rates of neighborhood violence (Crutchfield, Geerken, & Gove, 1982; Sampson, Raudenbush, & Earls, 1997). This study contributes to the existing literature by creating a cumulative index of turbulent life events, and investigating the association between turbulence and health and developmental outcomes in young adulthood relative to other predictors, such as violence exposure in adolescence.

We hypothesize that turbulence, cumulative exposure to violence, and gang involvement will be independently associated with reduced likelihood of high school completion, higher health risk behaviors, and poorer mental health. This study is unique in that we use structural equation modeling to test pathways between turbulence and health while controlling for associated individual, peer, family, and neighborhood attributes.

Methods

The U.S. National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1997 (NLSY97) is a nationally representative prospective cohort study of 8984 youth, ages 12–16, designed to investigate the transition from school to the labor force. Annual computer-assisted personal interviews (CASPI) are conducted to collect information on labor market participation, training, income, family formation, familial relationships, environmental exposures, behaviors, and health. Both youth and parent/guardian are surveyed in the first wave. Youth have been surveyed annually over 11 years (1997–2007). Participant retention rates between 1998 and 2004 were 93 to 86% and 94 to 88% for the cross-sectional and supplemental samples, respectively.

Our analyses were limited to the 4834 youth ages 12–14 in December of 1996 (baseline). We limited our sample to this group because they received the relevant family measures included in our analyses. This research was subject to review by the Boston University Institutional Review Board.

An index of turbulence was created in order to capture the number of transitional events associated with housing insecurity during adolescence. The index of turbulence was based on theoretical and empirical evidence (Seidman et al., 1994; Stubblefield, 1955; Wood et al., 1993). The index of turbulence included four measures: (1) homelessness between 1997 and 2002; (2) ≥ 3 schools attended prior to age 18 years; (3) ≥ 2 changes in address between 1998 and 2003; and (4) family disruption as measured by a change in family structure between 1997 and 2003. Family structure was organized in the following mutually exclusive categories living in a: family with two biological parents; one biological and one step-parent; adoptive parent family (with one or more adoptive parent); single parent family (with one biological or one adoptive parent); or a foster care or kinship care family. If a change occurred from one type of family structure to another at any point in time between 1997 and 2003, it was counted as a family

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