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Unemployment and the health of Slovak adolescents

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Summary

Chapter 1

Research on unemployment started during the 1930's and still attracts the attention of many researchers. It has been found that job loss has serious negative consequences for many aspects of the individual's life. However, the influence of unemployment on the individual is not simple and is moderated by a large number of individual and situational variables, many of which need to be explored. Unemployment is one of the factors which are important also for the health and well-being of adolescents. Relationships between the health of young people and unemployment can be viewed from two perspectives. Firstly, their own unemployment can have serious negative health consequences for them. Secondly, among those living with their parents, unemployment of one or both parents could also cause serious health problems. The main aim of the present study was to explore both perspectives. The first chapter of this thesis provides basic information about unemployment in society and individual joblessness. It also describes some differences in experiences of unemployment between adolescents and adults and shows possibilities of connections between parental unemployment and the health of adolescents. At the end of the chapter five research questions are formulated, focusing on the health of adolescents (chapter 3); the relationship between their employment status and health with mediating effects of financial strain and social support (chapter 4); the effect of parental unemployment with the mediating effect of financial strain (chapter 5); the effect of parental support on adolescents' health in situations of differing employment status of the parents (chapter 6); and finally, the cultural and societal context in the relationship between parental unemployment and adolescents' health is studied (chapter 7).

Chapter 2

Research samples and measures are described in the second chapter. Within this thesis, five research samples were used. One of them comprises of 2054 Dutch adolescents (mean age 16.3). The data were collected in the winter 1994/1995. The four other samples consisted of Slovak adolescents. The data from the oldest one were collected in 1998 from 2616 first grade secondary school students (mean age 14.9). The third sample comprised 1010 first grade secondary school students (mean age 15.9) and the fourth one 982 third grade secondary school students (mean age 17.8). The data for both of these samples were collected in 2002. The last sample consisted of 844 secondary school leavers (mean age 19.6), whose data were collected as the second wave of the longitudinal study (first wave in 1998) in the winter 2002/2003.

In this chapter the basic characteristics of the measures and statistical analyses used are also presented. The measures involve measurements of subjective health status, perceived financial situation and social support of respondents.

Chapter 3

In chapter 3 the health status of Slovak adolescents with regard to their gender, age and educational level was assessed using six subjective health indicators. Because the occurrence of serious health problems is rare in adolescence, subjective health indicators are more appropriate as measures of health and are used very frequently in this age group. The indicators used in our study covered general health (self-rated health), psychological health (vitality, mental health, long-term well-being) as well as physical health (long-standing illness and occurrence of health complaints, e.g. head-ache, back-ache, upset stomach). In accordance with other studies, we found significant gender differences in health which were unfavourable for females. However, these differences were less visible among the group of secondary school leavers (aged 19-20 years). Next, age differences in health between three age groups (15 to 16; 17 to 18; 19 to 20 years) were studied. Statistically significant worsening of health with age was confirmed among males, but among females mainly the middle age group (17-18 years) reported the worst health. This surprising finding could be explained by further analyses which have been done. Analysing the age differences in health with regard to the type of school which respondents attended, we found that only grammar school females from the middle age group reported the worst health status. We explain this finding by the fact that students from grammar schools are at age 17-18 under great pressure and high stress because of preparation for university entrance. Evidence from previous studies shows that females react more negatively to various stressful events than males. We therefore assume that females are less able to cope with the great pressure which occurs during 3rd grade at grammar school, which is subsequently visible in their worse health.

Chapter 4

Evidence from previous studies shows that it is important to study the effect of unemployment within the context in which it occurs. In this chapter we study the effect of youth unemployment on the health of unemployed school-leavers in Slovakia. We compare groups of unemployed, employed and studying secondary school-leavers. Youth unemployment seems to affect some aspects of adolescents' health, mainly their long-term well-being. However, perceived financial stress and social support mediated most of these relationships. Among those respondents who did not perceive high financial stress and/or had sufficiency of social contacts, unemployment did not affect health.

Chapter 5

In this chapter, relationships between parental unemployment and adolescents' health are studied. We found support for the hypothesis that the effect of job loss should be studied not only with regard to the unemployed individual but also with regard to his / her children. Furthermore, we found that the length of parental unemployment and the gender of the parent make a difference. Father's long-term unemployment had a negative effect on some aspects of adolescents' health. Mother's long-term unemployment also negatively affected some aspects of adolescents' health but to a lesser extent. The interesting finding was that neither father's nor mother's short-term job loss influenced the health of young people. In addition, the possible mediating effects of perceived financial stress and parental education are studied. The association between parental unemployment and adolescents' health in most cases remained significant also when financial stress and parental education were taken into account. Financial stress could fully explain this association only regarding self-rated health in the group of females.

Chapter 6

The aim of this chapter was to study the effect of parental support on adolescents' health with regard to parental employment. We found that adolescents with long-term unemployed fathers reported receiving less support from them than did those with employed fathers. On the other hand, mother's support was perceived as similar regardless of the employment status of the mother. Next, we analysed the effect of parental support on the health of adolescents. When analysed separately, high levels of both mother's and father's support were protective for the health of their children. However, when we adjusted the effect for the support of the other parent, the effect of mother's support decreased or disappeared while father's support remained highly significant. Based on the previous evidence that parent-child relationships should be understood within the context of family background characteristics, we also explored the effect of parental support on adolescents' health among those with employed and those with unemployed mothers and fathers. The results of these analyses suggest that in the case of unemployment of one parent, support from the other parent is an important protective factor for adolescents' health.

Chapter 7

In chapter 7 we study the effect of parental employment status on adolescents' health with regard to the context in which occurs. Comparisons of Slovak and Dutch adolescents show that parental employment status influences the health of adolescents differently in these two countries. Father's unemployment negatively influences several aspects of Slovak males' health but has no effect on the health of Dutch adolescents. The worse financial situation of unemployed Slovak fathers was discussed as a possible explanation for this finding. On the other hand, having a disabled father has a negative effect on some aspects of Dutch but not Slovak adolescents' health.

With regard to mother's employment status, having a mother who is disabled, unemployed or housewife has a negative effect on the self-esteem of Slovak males. Among Dutch adolescents, having their mother as housewife was protective for female adolescents' psychological well-being but was harmful for male adolescents' long-term well-being. These results show that distinguishing between the reasons for not being gainfully employed and between countries is appropriate when studying the health consequences of parental employment status.

Chapter 8

In the final chapter of this thesis, the main results are discussed at a more general level and embedded in the context of socio-economic health inequalities, especially in post-communistic countries. The problem of health causation or selection, effects of youth and parental unemployment in general, loss of latent and manifest benefits of employment and the role of gender in unemployment-health relationships are discussed. An attempt is made to answer the question whether adolescents' own or their parents' unemployment is more harmful for their health. In addition, the strengths and limitations of the present study are discussed.

Several recommendations for further research are made in this chapter, mainly with regard to research into parental unemployment. The use of longitudinal studies, which enable a better understanding of family processes in the situation when one or both parents are unemployed, is suggested. It is also recommended to focus the research into parental unemployment on the younger age groups of children, and carry it out in more countries with respect to the specific cultural and societal settings of the particular country. The use of data obtained additionally from parents is highly recommended for further research.

To conclude, both unemployment of adolescents and unemployment of their parents have significant consequences for the health of adolescents. To prevent them, we need the prevention of unemployment focusing mainly on disadvantaged groups, including school leavers, as well as support for those who are unemployed, not only by increasing their working skills but also by focusing on their coping strategies and their family life.