CORRESPONDENCE

Unemployment and Health – a Public Health Perspective

by Prof. Dr. med. Andreas Weber, Prof. Dr. mult. Georg Hörmann,
Dr. med. Walther Heipertz, in volume 43/2007

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Model Project

Weber et al. present the consequences of unemployment for adults and focus on the "social causation" hypothesis (1). According to this hypothesis, unemployment is a co-factor in the development of disease. In younger people, another aspect has to be taken into consideration (selection hypothesis): in unemployed people younger than 25, job searches through job centers may fail because psychiatric disorders may make integration into the labor market difficult or impossible.

The city of Essen has a model project to evaluate the mental health of unemployed people under the age of 25. Referrals to the psychologist and the psychiatrist of the project team are undertaken by case managers in job centers. If a young adult appears conspicuous, he or she is informed about the project and asked to participate in the psychiatric assessment if he or she so desires. These project workers have their offices in the job center so that the job seeker does not have to undertake any extra journey. If a disorder is diagnosed that requires treatment the client receives help in finding a therapist or commencing inpatient treatment.

About 80 young adults have participated in the program so far (55% female; average age 21.4 years, 45% without school graduation); in 95% a psychiatric diagnosis was made – such as depression, anxiety disorder, or personality disorders. Only 10% of participants were receiving treatment at the time. The severity of the psychiatric disorders is often so pronounced that integration into the labor market seems unlikely without treatment.

A methodological problem is the project allocation. Case managers will refer youths that seem conspicuous to them. The sample is therefore selective. In future, it would be interesting to compare these data with a more representative sample of young adults under 25. Treatment options for this target group are in the planning stages. "Support 25" is a cooperative project between the Department of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry and Psychotherapy and the Department of Psychiatry and Psychotherapy of the University Duisburg-Essen, the Essen Job Center, and Essen Health Services Office. DOI: 10.3238/arztebl.2008.0127a

In Reply:

We thank Hebebrand and Wiltfang for their important contribution with regard to unemployment in younger adults under the age of 25, especially those with mental disorders. This does indeed present a particular problem, which requires intense multiprofessional collaboration. Without creating entirely new and complementary care structures, those forming the primary point of contact need to be enabled there and then to recognize the need for appropriate diagnostics and treatment, and to put into practice their implementation in the context of case management. The interesting Essen project fulfils exactly this purpose. The results reported by Hebebrand and Wiltfang do not only underline the importance of competent medical (specialty) involvement but are also in accordance with the results of the current German Health Interview and Examination Survey for Children and Adolescents of 2007 (www.kiggs.de). The survey data show that 22% of the children and adolescents under age 18 examined in 167 locations (n ~ 18 000) had mental and addiction disorders. However, opening up the perspective of a job position and thus the opportunity of forging an independent life for young people exceeds the scope of medical activities or model projects – especially as evidenced by these data – and remains a priority sociopolitical challenge.

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Conflict of interest statement

The authors of both articles declare that no conflict of interest exists according to the guidelines of the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors.

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