
The effect of unemployment on the mental health of young social vulnerable groups in the Brussels Capital Region

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Key messages

The relationship between unemployment and mental health is a complex one.

Social support, financial support and the educational level of the person and one's parents matter in understanding mental health outcomes.

Moreover, this relationship is not always straightforward. It is also associated with experiences such as feelings of deprivation and self-esteem.

In relation to our findings on the importance of the financial situation in relation to mental health, we recommend to re-evaluate the unemployment benefit system.

We highly recommend more research that further unravels the complexity of this issue.

Introduction

In the aftermath of the 2008 Great Recession, youth unemployment rates in the Brussels Capital Region increased. As to the labor market demand, the Brussels Capital Region can be denoted as a predominantly tertiary oriented labor market. This is related to its role as the capital of Belgium and Europe, and as the home town of many international institutions and headquarters. The labor market demand is contradictory to the high unemployment, which affects its inhabitants. One of the explanations for this phenomenon is the educational mismatch between labor supply and demand within the region. A large share of the Brussels population has no higher education, which excludes them from a vast amount of the employment offered. As a consequence, a large share of the employment is thus filled in by employees commuting from the Flemish and Walloon region. This structural contradiction is known as the ‘Brussels paradox’. More so, this paradox results in a vulnerable labor market position for many young people living in the Brussels Capital Region, possible without or with only very limited programming skills.

Methods, approaches and results

The aim of this study was to investigate the relationship between mental health and unemployment among a group of unemployed youth in the Brussels Capital Region. To investigate this, we worked together with the Public Employment Service of the Brussels Capital Region – Actiris and the data warehouse of Actiris – the Brussels Observatory for employment. With their support, we conducted a primary data collection between August and December 2015 (table 1). A self-administered questionnaire was distributed at an information session for youth entering the labor market. This session was organized by the Public Employment Service of the Brussels Capital Region – Actiris. We were able to collect data of 1.151 youth between 18 and 29 years of age. Our survey included information on mental health^I, socio-economic and -demographic situation, but also social support, self-esteem, feelings of deprivation^{II} etc. For the respondents who gave their consent, the survey data was linked with:

- 1 administrative follow-up data for 20 months after entering the labor market including information on coaching, training, internship, guidance and employment (N=540)
- 2 a follow-up survey after 1 year (N=133)

I Mental health in the HIS dataset and our own survey was calculated by the General Health Questionnaire 12. Two different cut-off values are applied, which results in two indicators for mental health being ‘mental distress’ and ‘a possible mental disorder’ (Goldberg & Williams, 1988).

II Feelings of deprivation is the perception that one’s future capabilities are limited and the conviction that it is impossible to ‘succeed’, no matter what, because of personal socio-economic and demographic characteristics (Pelleriaux, 2001).

Table 1 Overview of the different datasets used in our study

Data	N	Year	Population	Type of data
HIS	5.562	Waves: 1997/ 2001/2004/ 2008/2013	18-29 year old employed and unemployed Belgian youth	Cross-sectional
Own survey	1.151	2015	18-29 year old’s starting their job search	Cross-sectional
Follow-up own survey	133	2016	18-29 year old’s during their job search	Cross-sectional
Administrative follow-up	540	2015-2017	18-29 year old’s during their job search and participated in our own survey.	Longitudinal

Due to low sample sizes we were unable to use the follow-up survey in our analysis. Furthermore, we used a subsample from the last five waves of the Belgian Health Interview Survey (HIS) from 1997 to 2013, containing information of 5.562 employed and unemployed Belgian youth of between 18 and 29 years old. The HIS data served to frame our own data relative to a representative sample of the population. Based on both these datasets, we were able to investigate the complex relationship between mental health and unemployment.

The first step in our analysis was to investigate the evolution of the mental health gap between employed and unemployed youth and to examine the association of material and social resources with the mental health of unemployed youth entering the labor market in the Brussels Capital Region.

In a first analysis, we calculated the prevalence rates of adverse mental health for unemployed versus employed youth over time and region based on data from the Health Interview Survey. This trend analysis indicated that unemployed youth experienced higher mental health problems, compared to employed youth. More so, this was consistently found for each wave for both the Brussels Capital Region and Belgium as a whole. Our analysis also suggested a tendency towards an increasing mental health gap between employed and unemployed. Despite the fact that not all the differences between unemployed and employed youth were significant, the consistent trend over time emphasized the vulnerability of unemployed youth’s mental health compared to employed youth. However, it should be noted that the data at hand is cross-sectional and these results should be interpreted with cautiousness^{III}.

III In an additional Binary logistic regression on the HIS dataset, we analyzed the association between mental health outcomes and employment status for the different waves. These results showed significant adverse mental health outcomes among unemployed compared to employed. Next we controlled this analysis for one’s educational level. Our results indicate that the found association between mental health and employment status remained significant after controlling for the educational level of the respondent. Due to low sample sizes over the years in the Brussels Capital Region, the analysis was done on Belgian level.

Based on our own sample, we found that overall 61.3% experienced mental distress and 40.9% experienced a possible mental disorder – which are a remarkably high prevalence. This led us to the following question: ‘How can we understand these mental health outcomes among recently unemployed Brussels youth?’. Therefore, we investigated the role of two personal resources - social and material - in trying to understand the mental health of unemployed youth. Results showed that the perceived social support can be considered a consistent protective factor for mental health among men and women. This means that unemployed youth who receive support from their friends and family had a better mental wellbeing. We also found that, for both men and women, a poor financial situation was related to a higher likelihood of a possible mental disorder. Overall, we found an association of social and material resources with the mental wellbeing of unemployed youth.

A second step in the analyses was to further unravel the relationship between personal resources and mental health^{IV} of unemployed Brussels youth, this analysis is based on our own sample. Personal resources can be considered as relatively stable ‘life chances’ that enable people to avoid or deal with undesirable social situations, like unemployment. Therefore, strong relationships between the availability of such resources and the chance of becoming unemployed – but also the chances to leave unemployment rapidly and better cope with (mental) harm from the situations of unemployment - were often found in research. Along with a person’s financial situation (economic capital or resources) and the received social support (social capital or resources), we also included the educational level of both the parents and individual (cultural capital or resources) as forms of personal resources. Apart from the association with personal resources, we were particularly interested in the role played by feelings of deprivation and self-esteem as mediators of the relationship between personal resources and mental health. In other words: we were interested in trying to understand the mechanisms linking personal resources to mental health. This was done by applying Structural Equation Modelling, which enabled us to investigate how different forms of capital are associated with mental health and ‘statistically test’ the mechanisms behind this relationship.

Firstly, results indicated that – as found in our first analysis – a poor financial situation among women was related to adverse mental health. For men however, this association became more complex than initially assumed. We found that for men, a poor financial situation was associated with feelings of deprivation, and that these feelings were negatively related to their self-esteem, which was ultimately associated with worse mental health. Secondly, for the association between social support and mental health, our results also suggested a more complex relationship. Low social support was not only negatively linked with mental health (for women), we also found

two mediating pathways between this relationship for both men and women. On the one hand, low social support was associated with lower self-esteem, which in turn was linked with impaired mental health. On the other hand, low social support was related to higher presence of feelings of deprivation, this led to a lower self-esteem, ultimately harming mental health. Thirdly, the educational level of both parents and the individual resulted in some interesting findings. Unemployed men whose parents were higher educated show higher scores for impaired mental health. For women we found two mediating pathways. On the one hand, a higher educational level of the parents was associated with lower self-esteem, which in turn relates to adverse mental health outcomes. On the other hand, one’s own lower educational level was indirectly related to adverse mental health outcomes, running subsequently through feelings of deprivation and low self-esteem.

In a third step, we used our own sample combined with administrative follow-up data to investigate if different types of trajectories into employment existed, and how they were related to mental health at the start of these trajectories. A trajectory consisted of the combination of potential ‘actions’ and ‘changes of state’ that occurred during the follow-up period: training, coaching, internship, employment and unemployment. These trajectories covered 20 months starting from the entrance to the labor market of our sample and were registered in the administrative data of the Brussels Observatory for employment – the before-mentioned data warehouse of the Brussels’ public employment agency. We were able to differentiate 6 different types of trajectories from education to employment. A first type, ‘unemployed’, was a group of respondents who remained in unemployment during the 20-month follow-up. The second type, ‘stable employment’, contained respondents who, after a brief period of coaching, found employment and remained in employment during the rest of the study. The third type, ‘delayed employment’, was different from the previous type because the transition to employment of these respondents was preceded by a longer period of guidance. The fourth type, ‘unemployed with coaching’, included youth who largely remained unemployed during the follow-up period, but differed from the first type by the amount of guidance and coaching they received. Our fifth type, ‘set back to unemployment’, showed the inverse pattern of ‘delayed employment’: these respondents got employed quite rapidly but became unemployed before the end of the follow-up period. The last group, ‘drop-out’, included people of whom there is no administrative data present until the end of the 20-month follow-up period. Because the reasons for this attrition may be diverse and insufficient information on these reasons was available, we were not able to interpret this type. Subsequently, we evaluated these different types to see if they were different according to mental health at baseline. We used the ‘stable employment type’ as a reference category. The analyses showed that people in delayed employment had significantly higher risk at baseline of having mental distress and a possible mental disorder, compared to respondents in a stable employment trajectory. However, when statistically controlling for the respondent’s own educational level as well as the educational level of

IV As an advantage of Structural Equation modeling, mental health in this analysis was calculated as a latent construct based on the GHQ-12.

the parents, this association became insignificant. This was in part explained by the fact that respondents in delayed employment were youth with no higher education. For the other types, we found no significant differences with our reference group.

Conclusions

Altogether, these results underline the complexity of the relationship between unemployment and mental health. Our results clearly show that personal resources such as social support, financial support and the educational level of the person and one's parents do matter in explaining the mental health state of our sample of initially unemployed youth. Moreover, this relationship isn't always straightforward. It is influenced by strong (partly) subjective experiences such as feelings of deprivation and self-esteem. In view of these results, we can conclude that the relationship between unemployment and mental health is a complex one.

Policy recommendations

1. Financial resources

In relation to our findings on the importance of the financial situation in relation to mental health, our third recommendation to the Brussels Capital Region and the Federal level is to re-evaluate the unemployment benefit system. Our results show that a comfortable financial situation is linked with one's mental wellbeing. However, in recent years the unemployment benefit system for school leavers became more restrictive. Firstly, one needs to be younger than 25 years to apply for an unemployment benefit as a school-leaver without previous work experience. Secondly, the unemployment benefit is restricted in time with a maximum of three years. Thirdly, those without a degree or certificate under 21 years are excluded from unemployment benefits. We believe that all of these restrictions to some extent introduce the exclusion of different vulnerable groups.

As for the first measure – one needs to be younger than 25 years to apply for an unemployment benefit without previous work experience – we believe that this measure has the potential to exclude a group of youngsters that are unable to finish post-secondary education within the predetermined period. This is somewhat contradictory to the idea behind the policy on unemployment benefits. Namely that young people should be encouraged to pursue post-secondary education. Nevertheless, not all those who pursue post-secondary education, are able to obtain this degree within this predetermined period of 3 to 5 years. This retention can be related to various personal reasons. As a result, these youths obtain a degree, but are thereupon excluded from unemployment benefits during their search for a first job. Consequently, this could lead to disengagement from any form of job coaching. To avoid this disengagement, we believe that it would be better to raise the current age limit. By doing so, more people would be able to not

only benefit from unemployment benefits, but perhaps also be more stimulated to engage in highly needed job coaching trajectories, which would be favorable for their (fast) labor market insertion.

Another measure related to unemployment benefits is the restriction in time. Unfortunately, we know that not all youth are able to find a stable employment within this time frame. The ability to attain a permanent contract that – more so – offers a qualitative job, is not always within their control. Often, these youths find themselves in a precarious labor market position with predominantly fixed term contracts. When discussing the job search of youth, it is also important to acknowledge that employees often prefer more experienced and overeducated employees. These high requirements in job openings can potentially exclude youth who are not able to gain work experience for various reasons. But also, this excludes those with a less favorable profile, resulting in decreasing chances of finding employment among low-skilled youth (crowding-out). Therefore, we recommend that – instead of excluding those who are unable to find a stable employment from unemployment benefits – policy should be more sensitive to the external factors that can influence and hamper one's job search. We recommend that these young people should be able to remain in the system of unemployment benefits for a prolonged period. This prolongation can be a period in which increased attention can be given as to why an individual hasn't been able to find a suitable job resulting in a renewed personal project.

The third restriction, especially, systematically excludes vulnerable youth who drop out of school before graduating. Yet, our results show that lower educated youth are vulnerable for adverse mental wellbeing during unemployment. More so, we believe that this is a particularly vulnerable group who merits special attention. We therefore recommend to reconsider the restriction which excludes people under 21 without a degree or certificate. Contrary to the aim of this restriction – as a trigger or incentive to complete education – it can lead to the culpabilization and responsabilization of an already vulnerable group youth. Perhaps this additional penalization of the inability to obtain a degree or certificate (for various reasons) should make place for a more inclusive guidance towards a full-fledged employment. As a post hoc interpretation of our results, we can assume that exaggerated conditionality of benefits could push people away from public services, and potentially can also be related to mental wellbeing. Therefore, we recommend a more inclusive system that combines two important aspects of the job search. Firstly, young job seekers should be able to apply for unemployment benefit. At the same time, they should be provided with a personal and intensive guidance which offers them the opportunity to learn skills in a non-scholarly environment. A nice example of how well such on-the-job-trainings can make a difference is shown by JES-Antwerp and the educational institute Furbo^V that successfully coached youth to obtain the certificate of forklift driver. These kinds of

^V [Link
www.vrt.be/vrtnws/nl/2018/03/01/70-procent-van-jongeren-die-cursus-volgen--vinden-daarna-werk](http://www.vrt.be/vrtnws/nl/2018/03/01/70-procent-van-jongeren-die-cursus-volgen--vinden-daarna-werk)

initiatives can not only help them in their job search, but can also help them regain confidence, self-esteem and improve their mental health.

2. More research is needed

A fourth and final recommendation for the Brussels Capital Region relates to the important role of gaining new insights on what defines vulnerability. In this particular research project, the focus was on the mental health of unemployed youth. Yet, the association between unemployment and mental health is not merely restricted to recently graduated unemployed. Those who become unemployed after a short or long period of employment; those who leave school without a degree; those with an unacknowledged degree; those who are limited by a physical handicap or those facing labor market discrimination of all sorts are potentially vulnerable for mental health problems. More so, the inverse – mental health problems hampering a straightforward transition into employment - can also be a source of vulnerability that we need to be aware of. We recommend that policy should continue to finance research, for example with a yearly recurring Innoviris call focusing primarily on ‘vulnerability in the city’. These calls can enable researchers to investigate – among others – potential explanations for adverse mental health outcomes during unemployment that can result in policy recommendations that improve the situation of vulnerable groups.

List of publications

HUEGAERTS K., PUIG-BARRACHINA V. & VANROELEN C.
The mental health of unemployed Brussels youth: the role of social and material resources.
 2017
 Archives of Public Health, 75(19), 11.
<https://doi.org/10.1186/s13690-017-0187-7>

Forthcoming

HUEGAERTS K., SPRUYT B. & VANROELEN C.
Youth unemployment and mental health: the mediating role of mechanisms of embodiment in explaining mental health outcomes. Social Indicators Research.
 Submitted

HUEGAERTS K., WAGENER M. & VANROELEN C.
Is mental health at baseline a predictor for a smooth transition to employment? A 20-month follow-up study of Brussels youth.

**The author
& project**

Since June 2013, Kelly Huegaerts is connected to the research group Interface Demography of the VUB where she works as a PhD Candidate under the supervision of Prof. Dr. Christophe Vanroelen (VUB). Her research focuses on the relationship between unemployment and mental health amongst Brussels youth.

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disclaimer

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