

Abstract

In the aftermath of the 2008 Great Recession, youth unemployment rates in the Brussels Capital Region increased. The aim of my dissertation is to investigate the relationship between unemployment and mental health among Brussels' youth entering the labor market. To do so, in 2015, a primary data collection among 1.151 unemployed young adults between 18 and 29 years of age was performed. The survey collected information on their mental health, socio-economic and -demographic situation, but also on social support, self-esteem and feelings of deprivation. For sub-samples of these respondents, the survey data was linked with (1) administrative follow-up data for 20 months including information on coaching, training, internship, guidance and employment (N = 540) and (2) data from a follow-up survey conducted after 1 year (N = 133). Lastly, 18 in-depth interviews with respondents who participated in the initial 2015-survey have been conducted.

The research findings of four empirical studies constituting the core of this dissertation showed that the mental health burden of unemployed youth hides important internal variation. More specifically, our analysis showed that perceived social support and a good financial situation were protective factors for mental health for both men and women. Further analysis revealed that these different forms of capital are not only related to mental health but also that this relationship is in part mediated through feelings of deprivation and self-esteem. The analysis of a third empirical study revealed 6 different school-to-work trajectories and for men in the 'delayed employment' trajectory, results showed significantly poorer mental health at baseline. Lastly, based on a qualitative study it was found that young people in our research are very much aware of their socio-economic position in society and the advantages and constraints this position imposes on their school-to-work trajectory. Our respondents emphasized the importance of personal resources in their understanding of why they made a (un)successful transition from school-to-work.

The four empirical studies presented in this dissertation provide a deeper understanding of the association between unemployment and mental health among young people residing in the Brussels Capital Region. Based on these empirical studies, several policy recommendations are formulated. Firstly, policy should consider a re-evaluation of the eligibility criteria for unemployment benefits which currently excludes vulnerable groups from financial aid. Secondly, mental health care should be made more accessible and affordable for all young people. Lastly, public services should be encouraged – through additional financial means - to pay additional attention and support towards other potential problems faced by unemployed youths.