

Exploring relationships between housing and health among youth in the context of adverse structural conditions – an explorative research study

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ABSTRACT

Housing problems of youth are rarely considered in the context of youth health, although housing problems can be seen as a source of worry and stress, which, as evidenced by past studies, is negatively associated with health. Thus, the main aim of the present study was to examine whether and how housing stability, quality, and perception of having a housing problem were related to stress and assessment of health among Slovenian youth. Additionally, the study explored the effect of youth's economic background, as differences in health outcomes are often attributed to differences in socioeconomic status. The results indicated significant direct and indirect relationships between the financial situation of the family, housing status, living conditions, and fear of having a housing problem. Latter was statistically significantly associated with the feeling of stress, which in turn was significantly related to the health assessment among youth. The results also indicated that poor living conditions directly affected the youth's health assessment. Implications for future work are suggested.

1- Introduction

Health is defined as one of the eleven key areas of the European Youth Strategy 2019-2027 (Csuday, 2019), which seeks to “promote mental and sexual health, sport, physical activity, and a healthy lifestyle, and the prevention and treatment of injuries, eating disorders, addictions, and substance abuse” (Publications Office of the European Union, 2018: 61). Understanding factors of youth health is thus crucial, especially in the context of the rising problem of (youth) mental health issues (APA, 2022; OWD, 2022), where the issue of rising anxiety disorders and stress are often highlighted.

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Past research lists various factors that help to understand why youth today might feel more anxious and stressed (e.g., changes in the labor market, climate crisis, high expectations regarding standards of success, crisis of meaning, etc.), but the issue of housing, which World Health Organization (WHO) recognizes as a key social factor of health, is relatively rarely explored. This is somewhat surprising, as one might reasonably assume that, for example, a lack of affordable housing or low housing stability (e.g., rent) induces worry and stress (see Seo & Park, 2021).

As suggested by various authors (e.g., Baker et al., 2016; Navarro et al., 2010; Park & Jung,

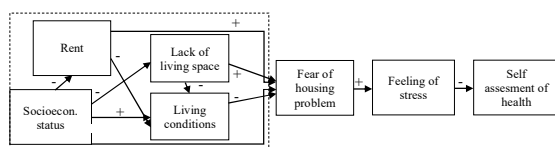
2019), more research effort is needed in this regard, also in terms of assessing the relationships between various housing factors (e.g., residential instability, affordability, housing safety, and quality) (Hernandez & Swope, 2019; Mwoka et al., 2021) and various dimensions of health among youth.

Dedicating more research focus to these issues is important not only because the consequences of failing to address youth health conditions extend to adulthood, impairing both physical and mental health and limiting opportunities to lead fulfilling lives as adults, but also because recent housing trends suggest that affordability is becoming a key hurdle in achieving “existential milestones” (Baert et al., 2022), including childbearing (Mulder, 2006).

2- Experimental details

Acknowledging the lack of empirical studies that would analyze the relationship between the different dimensions of housing and health among youth, the primary purpose of the current research was to analyze whether and how housing status (rent/ownership – aspect of stability), housing conditions (lack of space, poor living conditions – aspect of quality) (Hernandez & Swope, 2019) and perception of housing problems (fear of having a housing problem) were related to the self-assessed health of young people (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Conceptual model – housing and health



To achieve these goals, a representative sample of young people (aged 15-29, N = 1200, 53% male, M age = 22.5, SD = 4.25), formed for the needs of the national youth survey “Youth 2020” in Slovenia, was used (Lavrič et al., 2021). As such, the current research is a pilot study that could be adapted and used in a broader (i.e., EU-level) context.

Measures used to test the proposed relationships were as follows.

Economic situation. The economic situation was studied through the subjective assessment of the “material position of one’s family”: “How do you rate the material position of your family compared to the Slovenian average?” 1 = Very below average, 5 = Very above average.

Housing status. Housing status was observed through the indicator “Is the property in which you live...?” 1 = Owned by you and/or your partner, 2 = Owned by parents (yours and/or your partner’s), 3 = Rented, 4 = Other. For this analysis, this variable was dichotomized so that all respondents who do not live at home and are renting received a value of “1”, while others received a value of “0”. This indicator only included those who no longer live with their parents or guardians (N = 279, 23.3% of the sample).

Living conditions. The living conditions were analyzed through two indicators: 1) “How would you rate the living conditions in the room where you spend most of your time?” 1 = Very poor/unfit for living; 5 = Very good; 2) “Do you feel a lack of space in the property where you live (or in the room where you spend most of your time)?” 1 = No, 2 = Yes.

Fear of having a housing problem. Perception of the housing problem was studied within a set of questions addressing various fears/worries of young people. Fear of the housing problem was measured as follows: “There are some possible problems for young people listed below. For each of them, assess to what extent it applies to you personally – housing problem:” 1 = Not at all, 5 = Very much.

Perceived stress. The stress level was observed through a single indicator: “How often do you feel stressed (stress is a situation when you feel tense, restless, nervous, worried, and cannot focus)?” 1 = Never or a few times a year, 5 = Most days of the week.

Health assessment. Health assessment was also studied through a single indicator: “How

satisfied are you with your health?" 1 = Very dissatisfied, 5 = Very satisfied.

In the first step, a descriptive analysis of the included variables was conducted (detailed results available upon request), followed by an analysis of simple relationships (i.e., zero-order correlations) between the included variables. IBM SPSS 27 software was used for this purpose. In the next step, path analysis of the paths between the included variables and an analysis of direct, indirect, and combined effects on health assessment among young people will be carried out (not shown here). This step will be performed using structural modeling with IBM AMOS 22.0 software.

3- Results and discussion

First, the results of the correlation analyses indicated that "wealthier" youth were less likely to rent, rated their living conditions as being better/less cramped, and experienced less fear regarding having a housing problem.

Second, reporting fear of having a housing problem was statistically significantly associated with feeling stressed ($r = 0.20$; $p < 0.001$), which was statistically significantly related to health assessment ($r = -0.23$; $p < 0.001$; detailed results available upon request).

The results thus indicated that concern/fear of having a housing problem, which was statistically significantly associated with lower economic status, renting, lack of space, and poor living conditions, can be a potential generator of stress that, in turn, lowers health assessment among youth. Consequently, the initially suggested relationships were supported, although it is worth noting that economic status, housing status (renting), and lack of space were not directly linked to stress. The latter was negatively statistically significantly associated only with the assessment of living conditions ($r = -0.06$; $p < 0.05$). Furthermore, when it came to different dimensions of housing issues and health assessment, it was evident that the latter with better living conditions and more living space. As expected, differences in health assessment

were related to differences in economic status ($r = 0.13$; $p < 0.001$).

The first set of analyses thus suggested that the issue of housing problems among young people can be linked to their health assessment and that, due to the complex nature of the connections between observed variables, the need suggested in the introduction to investigate these connections simultaneously was warranted. In sum, initial results suggested many direct and indirect effects that will be analyzed in the next step of planned research.

4- Conclusion

Existing literature points to a complex relationship between dimensions of housing issues and health, although this issue is underrepresented in the scientific literature (see, for example, Baker et al., 2016; Seo & Park, 2021).

The present study attempted to address this gap, where the initial research results offer the following general conclusions.

(1) The family's economic background significantly affects various dimensions of housing status (stability, quality) among young people. Specifically, a worse economic situation increases the likelihood of renting and living in cramped and overall worse living conditions: if the family's economic situation decreases by one standard deviation, the probability of renting increases by 0.21 standard deviations, and living in cramped and unfavorable living conditions increases by 0.20 and 0.28 standard deviations, respectively.

(2) Inappropriate living conditions (as an indicator of housing deprivation) directly affect health. In contrast, the effects of the other two variables (rental, lack of space) are more indirect, where, as indicated, the question of mediation should be explored. For example, initial results from mediation analysis indicated that rent and lack of space reduce health assessment through fear and stress, which can be seen as factors of the mental component of health. Both rent and lack of space strengthen the fear of housing problems, which affects the

stress level, significantly lowering the health assessment. Specifically, the assessment of living conditions (which is significantly associated with lack of space: if the lack of space increases by one standard deviation, the assessment of living conditions decreases by 0.33 standard deviations) is directly linked to health assessment. If the assessment of living conditions decreases by one standard deviation, the health assessment decreases by 0.20 standard deviations.

(3) The fear of housing problems significantly correlates with stress: if the fear of housing problems increases by one standard deviation, stress increases by 0.18 standard deviations.

(4) Stress is statistically significantly associated with health assessment: an increase in stress by one standard deviation reduces the health assessment by 0.22 standard deviations.

As such, the present study confirms the findings of studies indicating the significant role of socioeconomic factors in housing issues (e.g., Hernandez and Swope, 2019; Libman et al., 2012) and studies showing that housing issues have effects on both physical and mental health (e.g., Chung et al., 2020). Specifically, while poor living conditions (dampness, inadequate lighting, mold, insufficient heating, etc.) directly impact physical health (Baker et al., 2016; Navarro et al., 2010), stability, accessibility, and quality exert more indirect effects on (mental) health. For example, instability, limited access, and poor housing quality trigger worries/fears/stress, which subsequently affect an individual's (mental) health (Bentley et al., 2016; Cannuscio et al., 2012; Green et al., 2013; Seo & Park, 2021; Waldron, 2022).

The general conclusion that can be drawn is that housing supply, stability, quality, and provision need to be considered in the context of youth health, a fact that is often overlooked, not only in Slovenia but also elsewhere (Baker et al., 2016; Seo & Park, 2021).

5- Perspectives of future collaborations with the host laboratory

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The foundations for future cooperation between the two partnering institutions/labs (Sociology dept., University of Maribor, REMELICE lab, University of Orleans) were laid during this research phase. Specifically, since several results have opened avenues for future research, including international comparative research, both authors are convinced that this has also opened the potential for future collaboration of the said institutions, thus honoring and strengthening the essence of the ATHENA program.

6- Articles published in the framework of the fellowship

Due to the relatively short duration of the visit (5 months), the work on the presented topic is still ongoing (testing the proposed model, detection for potential mediation, etc.). However, the first set of results is being prepared for publication (journal article) under the title:

Housing concerns as a factor of self-assessed health among Slovenian youth in the context of adverse structural conditions – the mediating role of stress

The initial version of the current work was previously published in Slovene:

Klanjšek, Rudi. (2022). Stanovanjsko-bivanjska problematika in ocena zdravja med mladimi v Sloveniji v kontekstu neugodnih strukturnih razmer in bivanjskih preferenc. *Teorija in praksa*: ISSN 0040-3598. 59/2, p. 548–567.

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