A review of population-based studies regarding addictive behaviours among German adolescents and young adults

What this research is about

Social inequality exists when there is an uneven distribution of wealth, education, and access to services. Recent reports suggest that many young people in Germany are unemployed and have lower socio-economic status (SES). Thus, they lack resources for healthy development and social participation. Living in poor social and economic conditions can lead to more risky behaviours. For instance, previous research has found that lower SES is closely related to heavy drinking and drug use. In regards to gambling, research has found that being young, male, unemployed, and having lower education place young people at risk for problematic gambling. This study aimed to provide an overview of the prevalence of addictive behaviours (e.g., alcohol, drug use, problematic gambling) among German adolescents and young adults. It reviewed 10 national surveys and 1 regional survey between 2002 and 2015. It also sought to determine changes in the rates of drug use and social inequality since 2003.

What the researcher did

The researchers did an extensive search for relevant studies. They found all published articles from 2000 to 2015. The researchers set up criteria to determine if an article was relevant for this study. These included: being done in Germany between the years of 2000-2015; including large samples that were nationally representative; including adolescents (ages 11-17 years) or young adults (ages 18-15 years); measuring prevalence rates of addictive behaviours; and having at least one indicator of social inequality (SES). Using these criteria, 10 national survey and 1 regional survey studies were identified. The surveys occurred between 2002 and 2015.

What the researcher found

Tobacco use was closely linked to lower SES. The unemployed and adolescents with lower SES were more likely to smoke and start smoking earlier. Unemployed youth also tended to smoke more heavily and to smoke e-cigarettes in particular. Non-smoking adolescents with lower SES were more likely to be affected by second-hand smoking.

Factors associated with social inequality (e.g., lower SES and lower education) can contribute to risk taking in young people. For instance, smoking, drinking, and gambling are more prevalent in groups living in poor social and economic conditions. This study reviewed 10 national surveys and 1 regional survey between 2002 and 2015 in Germany. Overall, the prevalence rates for tobacco, alcohol, and drug use had decreased. However, risks of heavy smoking, drinking and drug use were still linked to social inequality. For instance, lower educational level and unemployment were related to more smoking. There was some evidence that education and unemployment were also linked to heavier drinking. Finally, problematic gambling was associated with being male, having low educational level, being unemployed, receiving social welfare, and having a migration background.
Adolescents whose parents migrated from another country were less likely to smoke. Overall, there was a decline in the prevalence of smoking in the first decade of the 21st century. This was likely due to an increase in tobacco tax and legal changes that raised the minimum age from 16 to 18 years.

Similarly, alcohol consumption showed a link to lower SES. However, the relationship was less clear and not consistent across all studies. Some studies suggested that those with lower educational attainment drank more and had more severe problems due to alcohol use. Other studies did not find an association. Although reports for hospital admission due to intoxication had doubled between 2000 and 2013, there was an overall decline in binge drinking and hazardous drinking. Migration status was related to less problematic drinking. Adolescents and young adults of Turkish, Asian or Middle Eastern/Northern African backgrounds had lower rates of binge drinking and hazardous drinking.

Use of cannabis was not related to SES or migration status. Limited evidence pointed to lower educational level being a risk factor for cannabis use for adolescents. Unemployed young adults might also be at higher risk for cannabis use. In general, findings suggested an overall decline in cannabis use.

With respect to problematic gambling, lower educational attainment, unemployment (and receiving welfare), migration status, and being male were risk factors. For instance, a national survey found that German adolescents were more likely to be problem gamblers if they were male, attended schools with low educational level, and were of Turkish or Eastern European background.

How you can use this research

This research should be of importance to policy makers, particularly those in Germany, as it highlights the links between social inequality and addictive behaviours (e.g., alcohol and drug use, problematic gambling). Prevention initiatives should target at-risk groups. In particular, young males with lower SES and education level are at higher risk and should receive further support. The unemployed are also at higher risk. More support services should be made accessible to people who live in areas with poor living conditions.

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