

Income inequality and socioeconomic differences in adolescents' health and health-behavior in post-Communist countries of Europe

Citation for published version (APA):

Torchyan, A. (2024). Income inequality and socioeconomic differences in adolescents' health and health-behavior in post-Communist countries of Europe. [Doctoral Thesis, Maastricht University]. Maastricht University. <https://doi.org/10.26481/dis.20241217at>

Document status and date:

Published: 01/01/2024

DOI:

[10.26481/dis.20241217at](https://doi.org/10.26481/dis.20241217at)

Document Version:

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Please check the document version of this publication:

- A submitted manuscript is the version of the article upon submission and before peer-review. There can be important differences between the submitted version and the official published version of record. People interested in the research are advised to contact the author for the final version of the publication, or visit the DOI to the publisher's website.
- The final author version and the galley proof are versions of the publication after peer review.
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CHAPTER 10

Impact

Armen Torchyan

High income inequality within a country/society can affect population health by creating a harmful psychosocial environment (1). When income inequality is high, people become overly concerned about their position in the social hierarchy and standing in the community, experiencing heightened status anxiety. High income inequality can lead to poor health outcomes and unhealthy behaviors, such as violence and bullying, increased consumption of alcohol, and unhealthy food. Crucially, income inequality can harm both the rich and the poor, although its extent may depend on the SEP and health outcome (1).

Scientific impact

The dissertation focuses on post-Communist countries of Europe (PCCE), where income inequality increased significantly after the Cold War due to neoliberal reforms. It presents valuable evidence about the socioeconomic differences in adolescent health and risky health behaviors in PCCE, and the role of country income inequality in it. The research presented in this dissertation offers new insights into the psychosocial factors that can affect/protect adolescent health and provides a better understanding of the risky health behaviors among adolescents, which are possibly rooted in an increased desire for status and recognition. It sheds light on how upstream factors such as country income inequality can influence adolescent risky health behaviors. It also suggests that in particular cases, large income inequality can have a more adverse effect on high-SEP adolescents, who may engage in risky health behaviors that symbolize high social standing in PCCE more than their peers from lower-SEP families. This dissertation is the result of comprehensive research studies that employed robust methodologies and advanced statistical tests to investigate various aspects of adolescent health and risky health behavior and make a significant contribution to adolescent health research.

The results of this dissertation were disseminated through various channels to ensure that the findings are accessible to a wider audience and can contribute to the advancement of knowledge in the field. Almost all findings were published in reputable scientific journals and underwent rigorous peer-review processes to ensure the accuracy, validity, and reliability of the results. Additionally, we presented the research findings at relevant conferences, where we were able to engage with other scholars, researchers, and stakeholders in the field and receive feedback on our work.

Societal impact

Our findings showed a strong socioeconomic gradient in health among PCCE adolescents and suggested that risky health behaviors might be prevalent both among low and high-SEP adolescents. However, the underlying causes of risky health behaviors may differ between adolescents from low and high-SEP families. For instance, we showed that low-SEP adolescents may engage in risky health behaviors as a way of coping with or compensating for the negative health influences of their low SEP. On the other hand, high-SEP adolescents may use risky health behaviors, particularly those symbolizing high social standing in PCCE, as a means of demonstrating their high social status. Therefore, it is crucial to consider socioeconomic differences in designing targeted public health interventions.

The results from our studies confirmed that large income differences have far-reaching social consequences. Our findings highlighted the need for policies addressing income inequality to ensure the health and well-being of adolescents across socioeconomic strata in PCCE. Moving towards less neoliberal policies and creating a strong welfare state that promotes the economic and social well-being of the population and reduces income inequality might be a necessary component of macro-level strategies aimed at preventing risky health behaviors and improving the health of adolescents. The findings presented in this dissertation can contribute to the development of effective public health interventions aimed at reducing health inequalities and improving the health outcomes of adolescents in PCCE.

Meso-level interventions might be required as well. Our research showed that promoting healthier ways of seeking social status might potentially help reduce the prevalence of risky health behaviors among adolescents (2). This might include developing and mastering a range of competencies and skills that can help adolescents improve their self-efficacy and confidence and set them on a path toward success and fulfillment (3). Families and schools might need to have a more substantial role in building social skills, such as empathy, communication, and conflict resolution, which can help adolescents build positive relationships with peers (4). At the same time, our findings suggest that schools might need to implement more robust and effective antibullying policies, organize awareness campaigns, and provide students with resources to report bullying (5). Effective interventions for preventing substance use among adolescents, involving families and schools, might be necessary (6). Promoting healthy lifestyle habits such as exercise, healthy eating, and stress management can also help (6).

This dissertation underscores the importance of income inequality in adolescent health and behavior. It suggests that public health interventions should focus on addressing the underlying social and economic factors that affect adolescent health outcomes. Our findings provide a better understanding of the factors that contribute to these issues and can help policymakers and public health professionals design more effective interventions to improve adolescent health and well-being in PCCE. Various levels of interventions might be required, ranging from policies tackling structural determinants of health and reducing income inequalities to involving schools, communities, and families in preventing risky health behaviors and improving/protecting adolescents' health. A multi-faceted approach that addresses the root causes of risky health behaviors both among low and high-SEP adolescents can potentially contribute to safer and more supportive environments for all students in PCCE.

Therefore, it is essential that our findings are disseminated widely and that families, educators, schools, and policymakers are informed about the latest developments in this field. We utilized social media platforms, such as LinkedIn, to promote and share the findings with a diverse audience, including practitioners, policymakers, and the general public. This approach was adopted to ensure that the findings can contribute to the advancement of knowledge among key stakeholders. Workshops and seminars might also be an effective way of involving stakeholders. These events can provide an opportunity to engage in discussions and collaborate with families, schools, and policymakers to design interventions and programs based on our findings. This can help to ensure that the knowledge gained from our research is translated into practice and that it has a direct impact on adolescent health and behavior.

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