

Claiming benefits improves the health of the unemployed

March 6 2009

Unemployment benefits help reduce the negative health-related behaviours often associated with being unemployed. A study published in the open access journal *BMC Public Health* has found that unemployment benefits recipients are less likely to increase drinking or have changes in weight whilst out of work.

Kelly Bolton and Eunice Rodriguez of the University of California, the University of Cambridge, UK and Stanford University School of Medicine, USA, examined the impact of unemployment on tobacco smoking, use of alcohol and fluctuations in body weight among re-employed workers.

Their research centred on data provided from the Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID) - a survey of a representative sample of US citizens that reports on economic and demographic behaviour. The researchers identified 3451 healthy workers falling into three groups: those who were employed continuously over a given time period and those who experienced unemployment with and without unemployment benefits. The study investigates the persistence of changes in health behaviour after re-employment.

Bolton and Rodriguez found that after experiencing unemployment the jobless-without-benefits group drank more alcohol and lost more body weight. While these are not necessarily unhealthy behaviours, they may reflect a stress reaction. According to the authors, "Our results indicate that those who experience periods of unemployment are more vulnerable

and at a higher risk of adapting potentially unhealthy behaviours than the continuously employed. Our findings may suggest that higher levels of stress exist among those who experience unemployment without compensation". The authors suggest that receiving benefits reduces both the economic and the psychological stress associated with loss of income and reinforces the perception of support.

These findings provide new insights on the role of financial support in times of job-instability. The authors conclude that, "Unemployment assistance programs should not only aim to reduce the financial impact but also the detrimental health effects of unemployment".

More information: Smoking, drinking and body weight after re-employment: does unemployment experience and compensation make a difference? Kelly L Bolton and Eunice Rodriguez, *BMC Public Health* (in press)

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Citation: Claiming benefits improves the health of the unemployed (2009, March 6) retrieved 26 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2009-03-benefits-health-unemployed.html>

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