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Transitions: A Study of Stress and Well-being in Young Adulthood

1. Study Description

Transitions is a two-wave panel study of non-institutionalized young adults from South Florida that is designed to provide epidemiological estimates of drug use in early adulthood. In addition to a structured interview that measures lifetime prevalence of DSM-IV substance use and psychiatric disorders, the study includes an extensive battery of measures that assess lifetime and recent stress exposure, subsyndromal depression and anxiety, social support, and psychosocial risk and protective factors thought to be implicated in their etiology. This community-based epidemiological study is motivated by theoretical linkages between the social system, differential exposure of individuals within the system to social factors that can harm health, and to others that are protective, to explain persistent health disparities at the population level.

2. Methods and Sampling

The project employs face-to-face interviews of a representative sample of former students in Miami-Dade Public Schools. This sample is from a cohort who entered 6th and 7th grade in 1990, who were selected for a previous investigation known as the South Florida Youth Development Study (W. Vega, P.I.). The Transitions project used a representative sample of the same school cohort, N=1803, gathering survey interview data between January 1998 and June 2000, when participants were between 18 and 23 years of age (93 percent were ages 19-21). All female participants from the previous study (n=410) and a random sample of 1273 male participants, were selected for the Transitions study. Because a relatively small number of girls was included in the parent study, a supplementary sample was randomly drawn from the 1990 sixth- and seventh-grade public school system roster. The participation rates are 75.6% among boys, 80.5% among original girls, and 58.2% among supplementary girls.

A random sample of 1200 participants was selected for the second wave of interviews conducted between January 2000 and April 2002. While the cohort represented by this sample was originally enrolled in the public school system of Miami-Dade County, Florida, some had relocated to other counties, some outside Florida, by the time the present study was conducted. Those who had relocated outside the continental US, or were on military duty outside the country, or were institutionalized, are not represented. The sample is stratified by sex and race/ethnicity, with approximately equal proportions male and female, and equal proportions African American, non-Cuban Hispanic, Cuban American, and non-Hispanic White. Post stratification weights were developed to adjust the obtained sample fractions to match those of the 1990 US Census for the county and age cohort. Additional weights were formed to correct a participation bias that was found in the supplementary female sample. Girls from lower-SES families were more likely to participate than those from higher-SES families. Application of the correction weights matches the family SES distribution of girls with that of boys.

Data on the lifetime occurrence of psychiatric and substance use disorders were obtained through computer assisted personal interviews that allowed estimation of DSM-IV diagnoses. Our basic instrument was the Michigan Composite International Interview (CIDI) that was employed in the National Comorbidity Survey. We assessed major depression, dysthymia, generalized anxiety
disorder, social phobia, panic disorder, alcohol abuse and dependence, drug abuse and dependence, posttraumatic stress disorder, and antisocial personality disorder. Modules from the Diagnostic Interview Schedule (DIS) were included to assess the latter two disorders, and to assess AD/HD. Sub-clinical depression was measured using the Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression scale (CES-D). Our measures of stress exposure involve four dimensions of stressful experience: recent life events, chronic stress, lifetime major and potentially traumatic events, and discrimination stress. Recent life events were assessed using a 33-item checklist covering the past 12 months; the chronic stress measure consisted of 36 items developed using Wheaton’s measure as a starting point, and modified on the basis of the judgment of the research team and focus group sessions with young adults of African American and Hispanic heritage. Lifetime exposure to major and potentially traumatic events was measured with a relatively comprehensive set of 41 questions. Discrimination stress was assessed in terms of both major events and day-to-day experiences using measures developed by Williams. Additional measures include social support (developed by the PI), self-esteem, mastery, emotional reliance, religiosity. Additional details about the study are published in Turner, RJ & Gil, AG (2002) “Psychiatric and Substance Use Disorders in South Florida: Racial/Ethnic and Gender Contrasts in a Young Adult Cohort” Archives of General Psychiatry 59: 43-50.