

JAN 2025

Num. 037

The Impact of Job Insecurity on Depressive Symptoms of Parents

**Jordi Gumà Lao***'Ramón y Cajal' Research Fellow (CED-CERCA)***Anna Baranowska-Rataj***Full Professor (CEDAR-Centre for Demographic and Ageing Research, Sweden)*

The negative effects of unemployment can go beyond the person who is directly affected. In this issue of *Perspectives Demogràfiques* we examine the relationship between unemployment of adult children and their parents' mental health. The results show that parents with an unemployed child or children present a higher average of depressive symptoms than their counterparts whose children are all employed. The magnitude of the effect varies among countries. Those that are more family centred with a less protective welfare state (in southern and eastern Europe) show the worst values. In Spain, the impact is similar for mothers and fathers, although this additional effect is notable for mothers since it implies their showing values that are higher than that at which the clinical manifestation of depression appears. The impact of unemployment of offspring is non-existent among parents with a higher level of education. Taken together, the results are an invitation to contemplate a multigenerational approach in the study of mental health in the elderly population.

This research is the result of a joint initiative of the Centre for Demographic Studies (CED-CERCA) at the Autonomous University of Barcelona (UAB) and the Centre for Demographic and Ageing Research (CEDAR) at the Umeå University (Sweden), under the auspices of the ERC Starting Grant project titled "The effects of unemployment on health of family members" (HEALFAM), which is led by Full Professor Anna Baranowska-Rataj.

Does unemployment of adult children affect symptoms of depression in their parents?

Declining fertility has resulted in concentration of parenting resources on fewer offspring. Parents use these resources to offer their children the best possible conditions to make the transition into adulthood, a key aspect of which is joining the labour market (Gauthier and de Jong, 2021). This concern has become even more pressing as the years of flexibilisation policies mount up with the result that young people today move between employment and unemployment more frequently than they did in the past.

A focus on unemployment reveals that this situation, with negative effects beyond the strictly economic domain, can also affect people's wellbeing and health. Moreover, these consequences often extend beyond the individual to affect cohabitants like partners and children. However, the effect of the younger generation on the older one has not yet been analysed. In this regard, the question is: can unemployment of adult children also affect the health of parents? Although it may seem logical to assume a positive answer, less or even zero economic dependency between these generations raises questions. The possible effect on parents of unemployment of adult children can be contextualised using the "spillover cross-over model" (Bakker and Demerouti, 2013), which suggests that a negative situation first spreads like an oil slick influencing other dimensions of the person who suffers it and eventually affecting others in his or her circle through a deterioration of personal relations or possible overexertion resulting from the need to give help to those who require it.

With the aim of corroborating this intergenerational impact, the present study explores the association between the unemployment status of adult children and parents' symptoms of depression, on a Europe-wide scale but with special attention to the Spanish case. In contrast to studies in the opposite direction, which is usually the case in the literature, this is one of the first to quantify the intergenerational effects on parents of unemployment in younger generations. The singularity of the Spanish case is due to the country's high unemployment rate combined with the prominent role of the family in welfare provision.

To this end, we analysed data from the 2022 edition of the *Survey of Health, Ageing and Retirement in Europe (SHARE)*, with particular attention to people aged 50 or over who reported having one or more children in an active employment situation (i.e. employed and/or unemployed). This means that, in most cases (93 %), the younger group live in a different household from their parents. In this group, we identified those who reported being unemployed since this was our variable of interest. Information on depression was obtained by means of a set of questions concerning a total of 12 symptoms associated with this condition.

First, an overall account is given of the relationship between unemployment of adult children and depression among their parents in several European countries (Spain, Italy, Germany, France, Sweden, Denmark, Poland, and the Czech Republic) representing the major welfare state typologies (Mediterranean, Continental, Nordic, and Eastern European). For this purpose, data for a total of 14,566 people were analysed. Second, we study the Spanish sample (1,042 people) to ascertain whether the intersection between the two most relevant sources of inequality in western societies (gender and socioeconomic status) can influence the relationship between unemployment of adult children and depression among their parents.

In all models, we take into account the individual characteristics of mothers/fathers that have previously been shown to be associated with depression (age, gender, educational level, marital status, and migration status) in order to rule out any kind of spurious association.

Parental depression in relation with adult children's employment situation in Europe

The average number of depressive symptoms by country (Figure 1) reveals that, with the single exception of France, parents with one or more adult children in a situation of unemployment show higher values than those for parents whose children are all employed. The difference is much greater in the cases of Spain, Poland, and the Czech Republic. Indeed, these countries, together with Italy, are the only ones that show values above the three-symptom threshold, which is identified as the value at which the clinical manifestation of depression occurs (Prince et al., 1999). At the other extreme, Sweden and Denmark show average values that are clearly below this threshold.

Descriptive analysis is complemented by estimating the number of depressive symptoms using the multivariate linear regression model, which includes the relationship between the employment situation of adult children and country of residence (Figure 2). The results confirm, with the exception of France and Sweden, a higher number of depressive symptoms among parents with unemployed adult children after controlling for individual characteristics (age, gender, marital status, and migratory experience). The largest differences are observed in Spain, Italy, Poland, and the Czech Republic, where unemployment of adult children is associated with a more acute impact. Despite the different employment contexts in these four countries as shown by the overall employment rates (values ranging from 13 % in

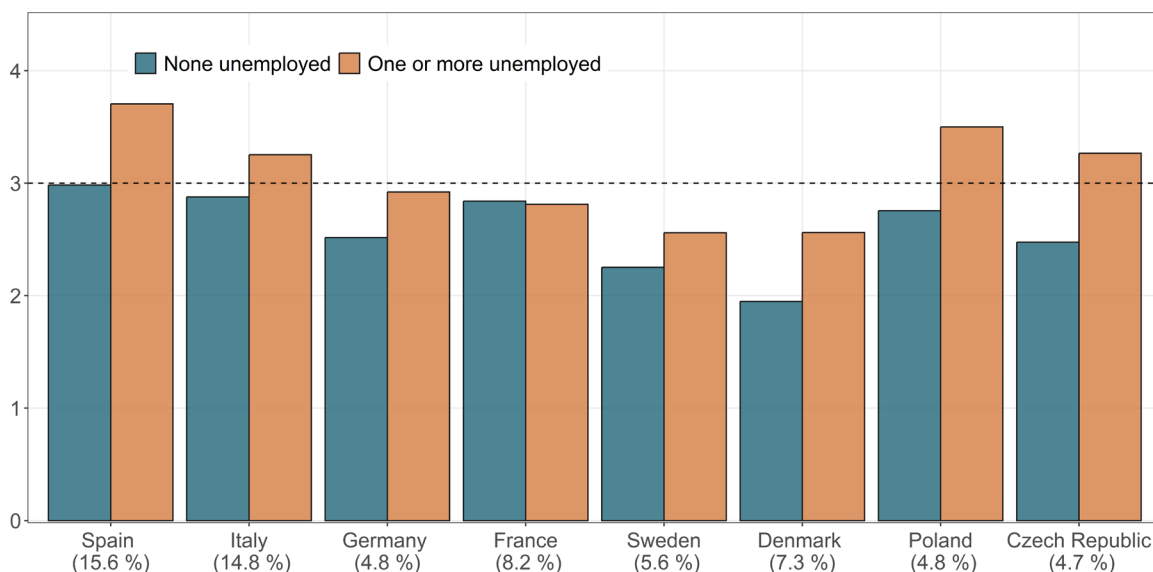


Figure 1. Average number of depressive symptoms in relation with adult children's employment status by country of residence. Parents with a minimum of one adult child in the labour force.

Note: Percentages in each country of parents with an unemployed adult child are included. Value 3 defines the threshold at which depression becomes clinically manifest.

Source: SHARE 2022 survey.

Spain to 2.9 % and 2.2 % in Poland and the Czech Republic respectively in 2022, according to EUROSTAT), what they do have in common is that their various welfare states offer less protection to the unemployed population, as well as giving a subsidiary role to the family. This lower level of protection would increase the impact on parents of their adult children's unemployment because this can entail a greater burden on parents in cases where their children need to provide them with some kind of assistance.

The Spanish case: intersection between gender and educational level

The role of gender and socioeconomic states is crucial for understanding the relative effect on depression among Spanish parents. We use educational level as a proxy for the number of resources available to parents. These resources, which may go beyond the economic sphere (knowledge of the public system, social network support, etc.), can mitigate the negative effects of unemployment and hasten the transition

to a new job. It is also important to consider how unequal gender norms, which assign a predominant role to women in the private sphere, might lead to a greater impact on the mental health of mothers when their adult children are facing adverse situations like unemployment. The multivariate linear regression model, with the triple interaction between having unemployed offspring, gender, and educational level of parents (Figure 3) seeks to shed light on these two issues of gender and educational level in the case of Spain.

Although mothers present a higher number of depressive symptoms overall, the difference is not because the unemployment of their adult children has a greater impact on them, since the magnitude of the differences is similar. Nevertheless, the additional effect of having unemployed adult children, taken together with the greater everyday domestic burden of women, means that mothers with unemployed adult children end up declaring values that are well above the three-symptom critical threshold.

In a complementary way, although a negative relationship between educational level and depression is confirmed (the higher the educational level, the lower the average number of symptoms of depression), the most striking finding is that, regardless of gender, people with a medium-high level of education do not show any difference in the number of symptoms of depression in relation with the employment situation of their adult children. This result is probably due to the greater availability of resources for reversing the negative results of unemployment, which would mean that unemployment would be perceived as a less serious situation,

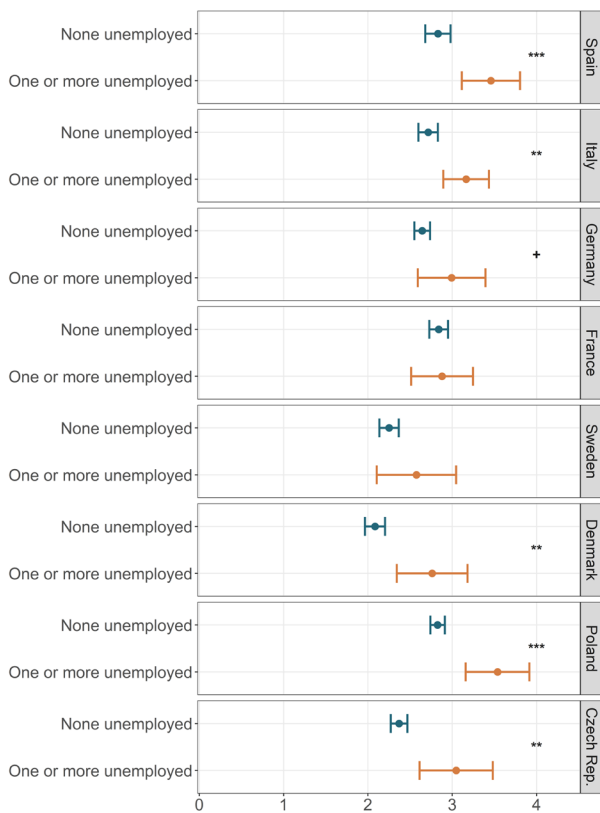


Figure 2. Prediction of number of symptoms of depression according to whether parents have an unemployed adult child. Relationship between country and employment situation of adult children.

Note: Results controlled for age, gender, marital status, and migration status. Significance of the difference between values for employed versus unemployed adult children by country is indicated (***) < 0.001; ** < 0.01; * < 0.05; † < 0.1).

Source: SHARE 2022 survey.

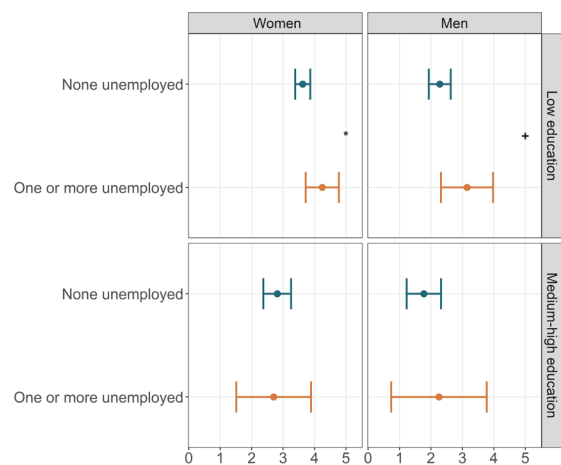


Figure 3. Prediction of number of symptoms of depression for interaction between having unemployed adult children, gender, and educational level. Spain 2022.

Note: Results controlled for age, gender, marital status, and migratory status. Significance of the difference between values for employed versus unemployed adult children by educational level is indicated (***) < 0.001; ** < 0.01; * < 0.05; † < 0.1).

Source: Spanish sample, SHARE 2022 survey.

and this would then offset the impact on parents. However, this difference is significant among parents with a lower level of education, and greater difficulties in remedying the unemployment situation of their adult children.

Discussion

The old refrain, “small children, small problems; big children, big problems”, would be perfectly summarise the results of this research. The study provides robust evidence that parents continue to look after their offspring even when they have joined the labour market and the two generations no longer cohabit. Unemployment of adult children is a negative situation that not only affects them but also spills over to their parents.

This overall finding seems to be moderated by both contextual and individual factors. In the former case, countries whose welfare systems offer lower levels of protection to the unemployed population, as well as counting on the family as a subsidiary element, as happens in the southern and eastern countries of Europe, show a greater impact on parents when their adult children are unemployed.

In the specific case of Spain, there is no evidence that the greater predominance of women in the domestic sphere and family responsibilities entails a greater impact on symptoms of depression when their adult children are unemployed. However, this additional effect does mean that they exceed the threshold that identifies problems of depression at the clinical level. In a complementary way, parents with a higher educational level do not show differences in the number of symptoms of depression in relation with the employment

situation of their adult children, most probably because a greater availability of resources allows them to remedy the negative consequences of an adult child's unemployment. The results of this study should be interpreted from the perspective of coexistence of different generations with varying contexts of reference. In the case of parents, their employment careers occurred in a highly masculinised labour market characterised by low levels of employment insecurity, while younger generations face higher levels of precariousness. This generational difference probably influences parents' perceptions of their adult children's unemployment because, for them, unemployment represented a qualitatively different situation by comparison with what pertains in the current labour market.

Furthermore, the importance of employment as an element of identity for men of older generations might mean that unemployment of their adult children is more negatively perceived. This could be equal to the effect on mothers resulting from their key role as carers in the family. Hence, the unequal roles of men and women in the private and public spheres would be resulting in a similar impact from the unemployment of their descendants, although possibly due to different reasons.

In general, this study highlights the need to approach analysis of the health and wellbeing of the elderly population from a standpoint that extends beyond the individual perspective to incorporate the influence of younger generations. This shift in perspective would enrich the study of health inequalities in a situation of population ageing in which the incidence of coexistence among different generations is higher.

Bibliographic references

Bakker, A. B., Demerouti, E. (2013). The spillover-crossover model. In J. G. Grzywacz & E. Demerouti (Eds.), *New frontiers in work and family research* (pp. 55–70). Psychology Press.

EUROSTAT. Total Unemployment Rate. <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/tps00203/default/table?lang=en> (last accessed 4 December 2024).

Gauthier, A. H., de Jong, P. W. (2021). Costly children: The motivations for parental investment in children in a low fertility context. *Genus*, 77(1), 1–19.

Prince, M. J., Beekman, A. T., Deeg, D. J., Fuhrer, R., Kivela, S. L., Lawlor, B. A., et al. (1999). Depression symptoms in late life assessed using

the EURO-D scale. *The British Journal of Psychiatry*, 174(4), 339–345. <https://doi.org/10.1192/bjp.174.4.339>.

Citation

Juni, M. (2024). “The Impact of Job Insecurity on Depressive Symptoms of Parents”, *Perspectives Demogràfiques*, 37: 1–4 (ISSN: 2696- 4228). DOI: 10.46710/ced.pd.eng.37

ISSN

ISSN 2696-4228

DOI

<https://doi.org/10.46710/ced.pd.eng.37>

Editors

Andreu Domingo and Albert Esteve

Correspondence to

Jordi Gumà
jguma@ced.uab.es

Credits

Graphics: Anna Turu

Layout

Eva Albors and Xavier Ruiz

Acknowledgements

This study has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No 802631 for the project “The effects of unemployment on

health of family members” led by Anna Baranowska-Rataj. Jordi Gumà-Lao has received funding from the Spanish State Research Agency (RYC2022-037781-I).

Twitter

@CEDemografia

Contact

Centre d'Estudis Demogràfics
Carrer de Ca n'Altayó, Edifici E2
Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona
08193 Bellaterra / Barcelona
Spain
+34 93 5813060
demog@ced.uab.es
<https://ced.cat/eng/>