Time in the 'Great Recession': The Impact of the 2008/2009 Economic Recession and Unemployment on Time Spent in Healthy Behaviors and with Family Members

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Introduction
The “Great Recession” gripped the American economy starting in 2008 and though it officially ended in 2009, many experienced its lingering consequences as late as 2010. With the recession came high levels of unemployment and experiences of economic insecurity across both the United States and the broader global economy. My dissertation investigated the effect of the Great Recession and being unemployed on time spent engaging in healthy behaviors, sleeping, and with family members, including how such patterns differed by gender, life stage, spouse’s employment status, and education. I drew on the American Time Use Survey (ATUS) collected by the US Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) to examine the time use patterns of a sample of respondents in the United States between the ages of 23 and 55.

Through this research I found that unemployment was critical for how individuals spent their time. Though the unemployed had worse outcomes for sleep, they also spent more time in healthy behaviors and more time with family members. In addition to employment status, state economic conditions and the recessionary time period were also related to how people spent their time. Poor state economic conditions were related to positive indicators of sleep and more time spent in healthy behaviors while also predicting being more likely to spend time with family members. Respondents interviewed during the Great Recession reported worse sleep outcomes but more likely to engage in active travel and eat breakfast. During the recession respondents also spent more time with children and spouses/partners while also spending less time with extended family members. Many questions remain regarding the implications of this increased time available for alternative activities besides work in part because it is unclear if greater time spent in healthy behaviors or with family members indicates strong or improving health or family relationships.

Financial summary
My award funds were used to pay for my time between May and August of 2012. This allowed me to focus my attention on writing a strong dissertation by forgoing other summer employment options. Specifically, I finished writing my second dissertation paper and completed the analysis for and wrote my third paper during this time. This additional time and focus made it possible for me to finish writing my dissertation, defend it, and accept a post doctoral associate position with the Cancer Related Health Disparities Education and Career Development Program (R25T funded by NCI/NIH; Co-PIs, Drs. Jean Forster and Kola Okuyemi).
Results
I have several publications from my dissertation that are in various stages of development listed below. I was also able to present my dissertation research findings at the Population Association of America Annual Meeting in New Orleans and the American Sociological Association Annual Meeting in Denver.

Planned Publications

Presentations

Future project plans
The funds from this award enabled me to complete my dissertation and defend it in August of 2012. Since that time, I have worked as a postdoctoral associate developing my dissertation manuscripts for future publication and pursued additional training in health disparities research and public health. I am currently enrolled in the School of Public Health pursuing a degree in Epidemiology and in the process of transitioning to a position with the U.S. Census Bureau. In this position I will be managing access to their non-public data through their data center located on the University of Minnesota Twin Cities campus. Once in this position I plan to continue to work towards publishing my dissertation chapters and delve deeper into the unexpected results of my dissertation and the questions that it raised for me regarding the increased time spent in healthy behaviors and with family for the unemployed. Working with data available from the U.S. Census Bureau I hope to investigate detailed employment status histories and indicators of health and family relationships.