Is Dropping out of High School More Likely after Stressful Life Events?

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INTRODUCTION

High school dropout is associated with negative individual and social consequences. For example, dropping out of high school can lead to long-term economic hardships that can weaken health and family functioning. Dropout is typically viewed as the result of long-held vulnerabilities such as learning problems. But little is known about the immediate circumstances triggering high school dropout. Taking into account adolescents' circumstances at the time of dropping out and comparing those circumstances with similar students who do not drop out could illuminate why dropout sometimes occurs in the absence of long-term vulnerabilities or why vulnerable adolescents drop out at a specific point in time. This comparison might also help explain why only a fraction of vulnerable adolescents actually drop out.

The goal of this study is to examine whether recent exposure to stressful life events precipitate high school dropout over and above, or in interaction with, previous vulnerabilities. The authors used data from a case–control study of Canadian adolescents recruited from 12 disadvantaged public schools. Students were divided into three equal-sized groups: those who had just dropped out of high school (referred to as "dropouts"); students with a similar academic profile and family background as dropouts ("matched at-risk students"); and students with scores on the risk index that were close to their school's average ("average, not-at-risk students").

After a recent dropout was identified and interviewed, a matched at-risk student was interviewed, as was an average, not-at-risk student. During the interview, the students were asked about all the stressful situations that they had experienced in the past year. Their answers were then coded to identify the moment when these stressors occurred as well as the severity of the stressors, from mild to severe. For example, mild stressors included not being selected for an extracurricular activity or minor arguments with parents; moderate stressors were life events such as a significant conflict with a teacher or peer bullying; and severe stressors included teenage pregnancy, placement in foster care or rape.

KEY FINDINGS

> Dropouts experienced significantly more stressful life events than the other groups of students but only in the three months before dropout or interview (*see figure*).

> > Nearly 20% of dropouts experienced a severe life event in the three months before dropout compared 6% for matched at-risk students and 5% for average not-at-risk students in the three months before their interview.

> > Exposure to at least one significant stressful event (severe or moderate) was 40% for dropouts in the three months before dropout but only 18% for matched at-risk students and 17% for average not-at-risk students in the three months before interview.

> In multivariable analysis that accounted for underlying differences among the groups, adolescents exposed to severe stressors were over three times more likely to drop out in the following few months, as compared to similar schoolmates who were not exposed.

> This study therefore clarifies the time frame during which stressors matter: **adolescents are at an increased risk of quitting in the few months following exposure to a severe stressor**.

> Relevant severe stressors where not confined to the school domain; in fact, most of the stressors precipitating high school dropout occurred in other contexts and involved, for instance, family members, peers, work, health or legal issues.

EXPOSURE TO ACUTE STRESSORS IN THE YEAR BEFORE DROPOUT OR INTERVIEW IN THREE GROUPS OF STUDENTS
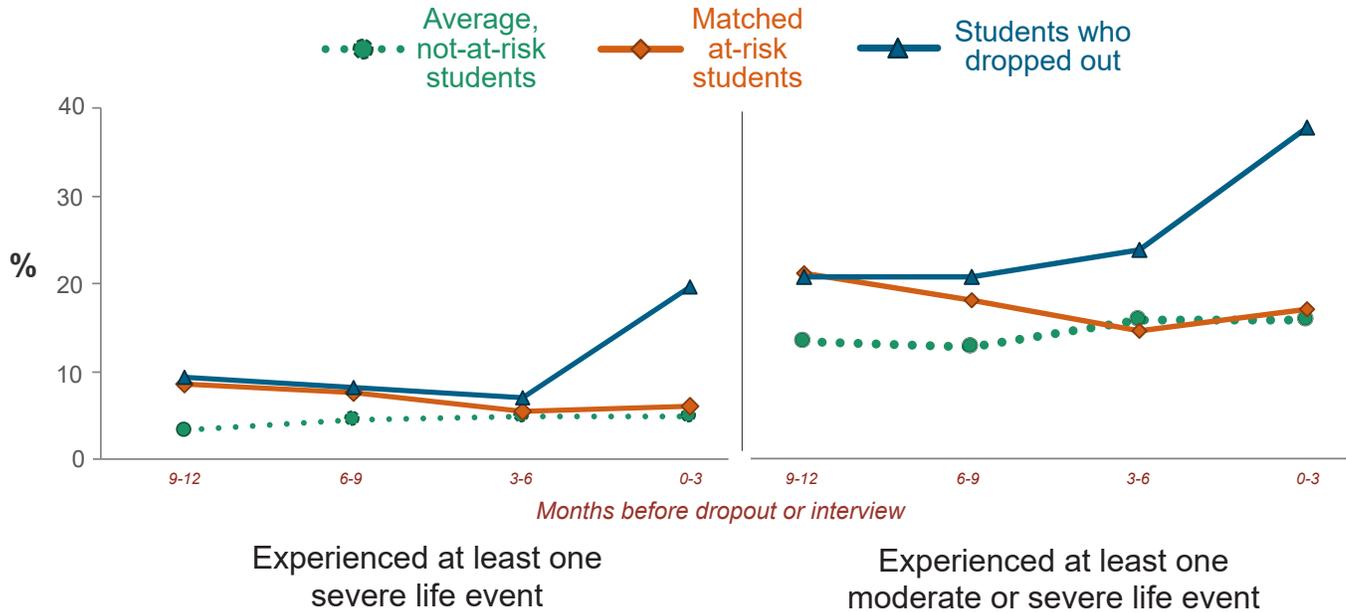
This figure[1] shows that students who dropped out of high school experienced a higher percentage of moderate or severe life events in the three months before they dropped out compared to matched at-risk students and average not-at-risk students in the three months before their interview.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

These findings show that the risk of high school dropout is not predetermined by vulnerabilities such as learning difficulties or conduct problems. Rather, it fluctuates and becomes higher when adolescents have to deal with challenging situations in their lives. School personnel thus need to be aware of their students' changing needs in and out of school to provide them with the right kind of support at the right time. To achieve this goal, a number of approaches could prove helpful, including the development of trusting relationships with teachers, the implementation of sensitive screening strategies that do not exclusively focus on academics, and the provision of broad services to address the academic and social needs of disadvantaged students.

REFERENCE

[1]Dupéré, V., Dion, E., Leventhal, T. Archambault, I., Crosnoe, R. & Janosz, M. (2017). High school dropout in proximal context: The triggering role of stressful life events. *Child Development*.

SUGGESTED CITATION

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