

The multidimensional effects of labor unions on workers' health

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Social epidemiology pays attention to the detrimental role of social factors in explaining population health among which work and employment play a great part. However, even though such a relationship has been identified, very few studies have given attention to collective bargaining and the way work and employment are regulated. In their recent paper titled 'Does the Union Make Us Strong? Labor-Union Membership, Self-Rated Health, and Mental Illness: A Parametric G-Formula Approach', Eisenberg-Guyot et al. (1) have made an attempt to assess the topic using data from the Panel Study of Income Dynamics. The study was clearly needed but does not seem to frame accurately the way collective bargaining is organized in the US for three major reasons.

Firstly, union membership is the poorest indicator that one could use to assess the potential impact of unions on health. Instead of using an individualistic view that compares, on a binary basis, those who are unionized with those who are not, I have suggested the use of the 'union presence' (2) that distinguishes companies in which there is a collective organization from companies where the collective bargaining process is not efficient. Such a distinction is capital as unions do not work only for their members but are beneficial to the non-affiliated members of the company as well.

Secondly, the US collective bargaining system has several levels of negotiation. If company-level negotiation should be taken into account, other levels of negotiation should be controlled and, particularly, the sector of activity as there are unionization gaps across sectors (3) and different health-related issues across the workforce (4). The variable is controlled but multilevel

modelling would be the accurate way to deal with it (this is a criticism that I would address to my own studies as well).

Thirdly, the study does not pay attention to the impact of unions on the employment relationship (e.g. the different forms of precarious employment) nor does it pay attention to working conditions, two aspects on which unions have a mediating role and that clearly affect workers' health (5).

The paper is a great attempt to assess a topic that has been underestimated and the authors remain modest about their own results, particularly in the current context of a massive disaffiliation. Though, their current findings provide a clear policy view according to which unions would not protect workers' health in a significant way. As the role of labor unions goes beyond union density (6), one could not be satisfied with such a finding and this certainly requires going further.

References

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