Job quality and inequalities in mental health: The 'suicide epidemic' in South Korea

Does growing inequality exacerbate people’s mental health? In South Korea, there is a high degree of inequality originating from the labor market. Since the Asian financial crisis of 1997, the country has experienced a sharp increase of suicide rates. And suicide is now the fourth leading cause of death. Although the issue of mental health inequalities is undoubtedly an important public health concern, the relationship between job quality and mental health is not well understood. In this paper, I examine the relationship between job quality and self-destructive behaviors, using all five waves from Korea National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (KNHANES). Specifically, I investigate: 1) whether there is a pathway linking job quality to mental health disparities; 2) how the strength of the pathway has changed since the financial crisis. Using logistics regressions, I estimate, by the types of labor contract, the odds ratio of depression, suicide ideation, para-suicide, high stress and compensatory health behaviors. My analysis suggests that employment and job quality are associated with depression, and suicidal thoughts/attempts, even after adjusting for socioeconomic positions; job insecurity seems to have an independent and adverse effect on mental health. And my findings confirm that there has been an increasing time trend of depression since 2005. Furthermore, the relationship is strongly patterned by gender; women are significantly more associated with self-destructive behaviors. This has some worrisome implications, as female workers are over-represented among non-regular workers. As flexible labor market arrangements have become more common in the industrialized countries, the implications from this study are not limited to South Korea.