

Health Inequalities in the EU

Health inequalities refer to a broad range of differences in both health experience and health status between socio-economic groups, countries and regions.

Almost all important health problems are more prevalent among people with a low education, professional status and income. Death rates from Coronary Heart Disease in England are, for example, three times higher among low skilled than among highly skilled men, while health damaging behaviours such as smoking are two to three times higher among low-income than among high-income women in Northern European countries. In many European countries, people from higher socio-economic groups can expect to live 12 years longer in good health than people in lower socio-economic groups.

It is not only a limited access to health services that generate health inequalities; they are mainly caused by differences in the impact of health determinants, or factors that affect health, such as life-style, housing, income and economic situation and psycho-social circumstances. These factors are closely interrelated.

The fact that there are systematic differences in smoking, drinking, nutritional and exercise patterns between people with higher and lower socio-economic status indicates that these behaviours aren't simply the result of individual choice.

Closing the Gap': Strategies for Action to Tackle Health Inequalities in Europe

In order to find concrete solutions to address health inequalities, EuroHealthNet and the German Federal Centre for Health Education (BZgA) are coordinating a project entitled "Closing the Gap': Strategies for Action to Tackle Health Inequalities in Europe." (2004-2007). This project is being co-funded by the European Commission, under the EU Public Health Programme.

There are 22 national public health and health promotion agencies participating in the project.

The project also benefits from the involvement of a Scientific Advisory Board consisting of leading experts in the field of health inequalities, namely Prof. Hilary Graham, University of Lancaster, Dr. Andreas Mielck, Institute of Health Economics and Health Care Management Neuherber, Prof. Margaret Whitehead, University of Liverpool, Erio Ziglio, WHO European Office for Investment for Health and Development and Dr. Joan Benach, University Pompeu Fabra, Barcelona.

Project Partners

NIPH, National Institute of Public Health, CZ

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HDA, Health Development Agency, ENG/ UK

NIHD, National Institute for Health Development, EE

STAKES, National Research and Development Centre for Welfare and Health, FIN

INPES, Institut National de Prévention et d'Education de Santé, F

BZgA, Bundeszentrale für gesundheitliche Aufklärung, D

ISPM, Institute of Social and Preventive Medicine, EL

National Institute for Health Development, HU

CSESI, Centro Sperimentale per l'Educazione Sanitaria, I

Latvian Health Promotion Centre, LV

The Institute of Public Health in Ireland, IRL

HEMIL Centre, The Research Centre for Health Promotion, NO

NIGZ, Netherlands Institute for Health Promotion and Disease Prevention, NL

Polish Society of Health Education, PL

Ministry of Health, Direcção Geral da Saúde, P

NHS Health Scotland, SCOT/ UK

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Key Activities

The project, which focuses on the development and implementation of strategies to reduce health inequalities, is operational at the EU, the national and at the local level.

- At the **national level**, project partners will analyse and map policies, structures and actions being taken to tackle health inequalities in their countries, and develop a national Situation Analysis. Participating countries will share information and expertise in fields that are key to tackling health inequalities, such as awareness raising, health impact assessment (HIA) and health in other policy areas, developing evidence and evaluation, and supporting EU regions, in their efforts to address this problem. Each country will use what they have learned to develop and implement their own Strategies for Action to tackle health inequalities.
- The project also involves an assessment of **EU level policy** processes and their positive or negative impact on health inequalities in EU Member States. The project aims to generate greater awareness amongst EU citizens, as well as within EU Institutions themselves, of the impact of EU level decisions on health equity in Europe, so that this will be taken into greater account in the decision-making process.
- At the **local level**, project partners are also collecting good practices, or policies and interventions that have proven effective in helping to reduce health inequalities. These will be made available through a database.

Implementation and Dissemination of Outcomes

- ✳ All project outcomes will be available on the **Health Inequality Portal www.health-inequalities.org**, which is currently on line, and in the process of development. A marketing strategy will be instigated to ensure widespread awareness and usage of the Portal.
- ✳ Initial outcomes of the National Situation Analysis have been incorporated into one of the **background papers** of the Tackling Health Inequalities Summit, which took place on 17-18 October 2005. This theme was the main health-related priority of the UK Council Presidency of the EU health programme. This paper, 'Health Inequalities, a Challenge for Europe', is available on the Health Inequalities Portal (under 'publications').
- ✳ All project partners will organise **National Seminars** at the end of 2006 to exchange and raise awareness within their countries and to discuss, launch and generate support their Strategies for Action.
- ✳ A **Final Event** will take place under the German Presidency (first half 2007), and marked by a Final Declaration on the issue of Health Inequalities.

This paper was produced for a meeting organized by Health & Consumer Protection DG and represents the views of its author on the subject. These views have not been adopted or in any way approved by the Commission and should not be relied upon as a statement of the Commission's or Health & Consumer Protection DG's views. The European Commission does not guarantee the accuracy of the data included in this paper, nor does it accept responsibility for any use made thereof.