Health Inequalities in Europe: Setting the Stage for Progressive Policy Action

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In some ways, the health of Europeans is better than ever
Life expectancy at birth

**Men**

- LE 2008
- LE 2016

**Women**

- LE 2008
- LE 2016

Source: Authors, based on data by Eurostat (2018).
But substantial inequalities in health persist
Between country inequalities

Note: Data refer to 2015. Observations are weighted by the relative population size, indicated by circle size.

Source: Authors, based on data by Eurostat (2018).
**Between country inequalities** (continued)

**Men**
- Malta
- Ireland
- Greece
- Belgium
- Italy
- Denmark
- Portugal
- Slovakia
- Lithuania
- Latvia

**Women**
- Malta
- Ireland
- Greece
- Belgium
- Italy
- Denmark
- Lithuania
- Portugal
- Slovakia
- Latvia

**Note:** 2016 values for Italy refer to 2015.

**Source:** Authors, based on data by Eurostat (2018).
Within country inequalities

Note: Data refer to 2016.
Source: Authors, based on data by Eurostat (2018).
How to understand health inequalities?
Social gradients in health

Health

better

worse

lower ⬅️ Social standing ➡️ higher

[A]

[B]
Non-communicable diseases in Europe

Note: Data refer to 2014.
Source: Authors, based on data by McNamara et al. (2017) from the European Social Survey 2014.
Risk of being a daily smoker by education

Note: Data refer to 2014.

Source: Authors, based on data by Huijts et al. (2017) from the European Social Survey 2014.
Problematic health literacy

Note: Data refer to 2015. Social status is self-assessed.
Source: Authors, based on data by Sørensen et al. (2015).
What determines health inequalities?
Institutions matter!

**Social & Health Policy:**
- Welfare provision;
- Health systems

**Social Determinants of Health:**
- Education;
- Occupation;
- Income

**Economic Policy:**
- Labor market deregulation;
- Fiscal policy

**Social Gradient in Health**
The role of health systems
The role of health systems

Note: Data refer to 2015. Observations are weighted by the relative population size, indicated by circle size.

The role of health systems (continued)

Note: Unmet needs for a medical examination due to costs, distance to travel, or waiting times. Data refer to 2016.

Source: Authors, based on data by Eurostat (2018).
The role of health systems (continued)

• Various health system arrangements in Europe result in differential population coverage, but high in most countries.

• Even so, higher socioeconomic status may carry benefits in terms of accessing health services (e.g., due to income, health literacy, social support, or personal networks).

• Individuals in particularly vulnerable situations:
  • Unemployed or atypical forms of work
  • Lacking citizenship, e.g., migrants
  • Ethnic minorities, e.g., Roma populations

• Unmet needs socially patterned across the entire population.
The role of economic policies
The role of economic policies

• Institutional complementarities: different policy elements (e.g., health and social policy, economic regulation, and allocation of resources) fit together

• The link between economic policies and health systems varies across the EU: Social health insurance-based health systems rely more heavily on employment contributions; tax-based health systems depend on fiscal policy.
The role of economic policies (continued)

Note: Total unemployment rate is the annual average as a share of the active population, from 25 to 74 years. Data refer to 2016.

Source: Authors, based on data by Eurostat (2018).
The role of economic policies (continued)

Note: Government expenditure refers to total general government spending.

Source: Authors, based on data by Eurostat (2018).
The role of social determinants of health
The conditions in which people are born, grow, live, work, and age have important implications for population health and health inequalities.

The role of social determinants of health (cont’d)

Good work
✓ Higher wages
✓ Self-worth
✓ Social networks

Precarious Employment
✗ Stress and Insecurity
✗ Long working hours
✗ Lower wages

Note: Percentage of employees aged 20 to 64. Data refer to 2016.
Source: Authors, based on data by Eurostat (2018)
What is the impact of health inequalities?
The cost of health inequalities

• Good health empowers individuals by allowing them to make better, informed choices regarding their lifestyle and health service access and utilisation.

• Ill-health associated with
  a) substantial welfare costs; and
  b) sizeable economic costs, due to absenteeism, unemployment, and lower productivity.
A word of caution:
We know a lot,
but we could know more
Future research

• Better document the human, social and economic consequences of health inequalities.

• Focus on systematic analyses on what can be done to reduce health inequalities, rather than merely documenting the extent of health inequalities.

• Adopt an intersectional approach in research: study populations at the intersection of different demographic elements (e.g., gender, migrant status, or ethnicity).
A progressive agenda for action
Thank you!