

## **Misinterpretation of Health Inequalities in Nordic Countries**

In 1997, *The Lancet* published a study ranking western European countries by the size of their socioeconomic inequalities in morbidity and mortality. The study surprised many by finding that despite being relatively egalitarian societies, certain Nordic countries showed unusually large socioeconomic inequalities in morbidity and mortality. Those findings led to increased interest in such inequalities in these countries, and considerable resources have been devoted to their study in recent years.

However, the Lancet study and the research following it have overlooked an important statistical tendency that calls into question the meaning of the seemingly large health inequalities in Nordic societies. Specifically, when two groups differ in their susceptibility to an outcome, the rarer the outcome, the greater the disparity in experiencing the outcome. This tendency flows from the fact that the rarer an outcome, the more it is concentrated in the segment of the overall population that is most susceptible to the outcome, and disadvantaged groups comprise a higher proportion of each increasingly more susceptible segment of the overall population. Such pattern can be observed in virtually any data set that allows one to examine the situation at various points in a continuum where two groups have different distributions of factors related to experiencing some outcome (e.g., income data, risk profiles, test score distributions).

The implication with regard to the study of Nordic health inequalities is that Nordic countries will tend to have large socioeconomic inequalities in health precisely because the incidence of morbidity and mortality is low in such countries.

