

Defining Health Disparities

This section introduces concepts of health disparity and discusses important issues involved in their measurement. It also highlights the fact that “disparity” is a fundamentally ambiguous concept with multiple dimensions that different measures of disparity emphasize to a greater or lesser extent. On its face, the concept of a health disparity seems rather simple. In fact, when one attempts to formally define what constitutes a health disparity, difficulties emerge. For example, consider the following definitions of what constitutes a health disparity for the purposes of measurement:

“Health disparities occur when one group of people has a higher incidence or mortality rate than another, or when survival rates are less for one group than another.”—NCI Center to Reduce Cancer Health Disparities, 2003 (46)

“A population is a health disparity population if...there is a significant disparity in the overall rate of disease incidence, prevalence, morbidity, mortality, or survival rates in the population as compared to the health status of the general population.”—Minority Health and Health Disparities Research and Education Act of 2000 (47, page 2498)

“For all the medical breakthroughs we have seen in the past century, there remain significant disparities in the medical

conditions of racial groups in this country... [W]hat we have done through this initiative is to make a commitment—really, for the first time in the history of our government—to eliminate, not just reduce, some of the health disparities between majority and minority populations.”—Dr. David Satcher, Former U.S. Surgeon General, 1999 (48, page 18–19)

“Health disparities are differences in the incidence, prevalence, mortality, and burden of diseases and other adverse health conditions that exist among specific population groups in the United States.”
—NIH Strategic Research Plan and Budget to Reduce and Ultimately Eliminate Health Disparities, Vol. 1, Fiscal Years 2002–2006

Although these definitions share the same basic sentiment, there are some potentially important differences that reflect underlying assumptions (explicit or implicit) about what constitutes a health disparity. For instance, under the first definition above, a disparity is a difference in health between *any two populations*, whereas in the second definition (from the law that established the NIH initiative), a disparity is a difference in health between some specific population and *the general population*. This definition also introduces the idea that a disparity must be “significant” in magnitude. These differences may seem to be inconsequential semantics, but for the purposes of monitoring

progress toward eliminating health disparities, the different definitions imply different metrics for assessing progress. One could imagine a scenario in which two minority groups have identical mortality rates, both of which differ substantially from that of the general population. A more extreme (but unlikely) scenario might be a case in which one minority group's health is better but not "significantly" different from that of the general population, whereas another minority group's health is worse but also not "significantly" different from that of the general population. It is possible, however, that the difference in health between the two minority groups is "significant." Thus, for the same observed data we might conclude either that a disparity exists (under the first definition above) or that a significant disparity does not exist (under the second definition above). Also note that the definition

offered by former Surgeon General Satcher states that disparity exists between the minority and majority population, which suggests a third possible reference point—the majority population—though it is not clear how that majority is to be defined.

Our purpose is not to focus on semantics but rather to illustrate the lack of clarity in health disparity definitions and how this is important in choosing measures to monitor disparity. It is unlikely we will agree on a single definition of disparity. It is more likely that there are several legitimate, competing perspectives on health disparity that can be adopted. We want to emphasize the importance of understanding the link between ethical perspectives and the choice of quantitative health disparity measures.