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Letter

Health inequalities under New Labour

Authors' reply

EDITOR—Low and Low highlight how the widening gap in mortality between areas in the United Kingdom should be measured. Earlier, concern was raised that the changing size of social class groups could lead to increases in differences between groups at the top and bottom of the social hierarchy (whether measured in relative or absolute terms) despite an overall reduction in inequalities.¹ Both the measure we used and that advocated by Low and Low were introduced to provide estimates of inequality that were not dependent on the size of the social groups used to categorise people.²

However, neither approach is the "correct" way of reporting these data. They reflect different aspects of the data, but both are valid. In epidemiology, relative risks are taken as better indices of aetiological effect, absolute differences as better indices of public health importance. We think inequalities in health are more relevant to public health policy than aetiology. However, which matters more to you, whether your life expectancy disadvantage has increased from 10 to 11 years or whether the relative improvement in your life expectancy is 0.8925?

Both Low and Low's approach³ and ours represent appropriate ways of measuring overall inequalities in mortality, rather than merely comparing the highest and lowest life expectancy areas, as Bajekal and Baker do. Consider whether inequalities in England between local authority districts (the geographical unit the government has chosen to assess the life expectancy inequality target) have risen over time, rather than in the UK as a whole, which we considered in our original paper. The table shows that when men and women are considered together, if only the absolute difference between the worst and best off areas is compared then it might seem that there is no trend.

Life expectancy in England by poverty, slope index of inequality, and difference between poorest and richest local authority districts, 1992-2003. Values are life expectancy differences in years

England	1992-1994	1995-1997	1998-2000	2001-2003
SII	3.65	3.77	3.83	3.98
Difference	7.47	7.04	7.38	7.54

However, in England the slope index of inequality (SII) has risen consistently over time and, compared with table 1 of our original paper, began lower and ended up higher than for the UK as a whole. Rising inequalities within England—in particular life expectancies rising most quickly where they were highest to begin with—are therefore driving rising inequalities in the UK as a whole. Whichever appropriate measure is used, trends in inequalities in life expectancy are rising in both the UK and (at an even greater pace) England.

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