

Health inequality in South Africa: a systematic review

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Abstract

This study presents a review of key empirical studies on health inequalities in South Africa with the aim of contributing to a comparative examination of social inequalities in health across different countries in Europe and other parts of the World. Studies reviewed were identified through a computerised search of key words such as inequalities, health, health inequalities, race, health in South Africa, health systems, socio-economic determinants of health and livelihoods in South Africa. Studies were included if the primary objective was to explore health inequality as a variable in child/adult mortality.

Introduction

Research has shown that the health of the general population of a nation depends in part on access to health care¹, the major determinants of which range from the availability of health services to the quality and effectiveness of professionals and the financial resources to access general and specialised care by patients². Consequently, it is not surprising that policy makers, practitioners and other stakeholders in the global³ health sector should be concerned about the growing disparities in health especially, despite the intervention efforts by governments.

Researchers show that health inequalities are determined by a range of social factors such as; race, education, ethnicity, gender, geographical location and income amongst others, and these factors reflect on and affect other components of a health system, resulting in poor health outcomes, mortalities and financial losses. This is observed more in Low and Middle Income Countries where life expectancy varies between 36 to 57 years compared to 80 years in high income countries. In South Africa, life expectancy at birth is 61 years (South Africa's life expectancy ranked 162 for females and 169 for males out of the 188 countries)⁴. Statistics reveal that health inequalities grew. This growth in health inequalities correspond to an increase in income inequalities. For example, income inequality in the country increased from 0.6 in 1994 to 0.679 in 2013. Of significance is the regional variation in health inequalities: for example, in the Western Cape Province where the white population in South Africa are mostly based, health inequalities and indeed income inequalities are stark.

¹ The world health report (2000). Health systems: improving performance. Geneva, World Health Organization, 2000.

² World Health Organization (2006). Quality of care: A PROCESS FOR MAKING STRATEGIC CHOICES IN HEALTH SYSTEMS. WHO, France

³ Howson C, Fineberg H, Bloom B (1998). The pursuit of global health: the relevance of engagement for developed countries. *Lancet* 1998;351:586–590.

⁴ Statistics South Africa (2014) statistical release: Mid year population estimate-2014. Accessed 20/07/2015 available <http://www.statssa.gov.za/publications/P0302/P03022014.pdf>

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