

Differences between rich and poor are increasing in Norway, says report

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The social differences in Norway have increased since 2014, according to a brand new report. Norway's Ministry of Health and Care Services commissioned the report.

People who struggle with poverty live shorter lives than rich people.

Young people who have parents with low socioeconomic status struggle more often psychologically. People with limited education smoke five times as much as those with higher levels of education.

These are just a few of the many different areas where people with little money and education are worse off than people with more of both. And this trend is not moving in a positive direction.

"The inequalities between people in Norway have increased, despite political ambitions to reduce [social differences](#) in health and quality of life," says Ottar Ness.

Ness is a professor at NTNU's Department of Education and Lifelong Learning. He also heads WellFare, the Nordic Research Center for Well-being and Social Sustainability.

The work has been led by Professor Sir Michael Marmot, Director of the Institute of Health Equity at University College London (UCL). Marmot is an honorary doctor at NTNU.

NTNU-WellFare was the Norwegian partner in the work on the report and coordinated input from a number of Norwegian researchers and practitioners.

Child poverty is increasing more than overall poverty

"Child poverty is a cause of health inequalities in a society and a marker for what needs improvement," says Sir Michael Marmot.

Although [child poverty](#) in Norway is low by international standards, it has been increasing. The fact that child poverty has increased at a faster rate than for the population as a whole is a call to action, he believes.

"Child poverty is associated with low parental education, weak links to the labor market, single-parent households and immigrant background. Universal child support has not kept pace with inflation," says Marmot.

The need to 'opt in' for benefits means that those with low language or financial management skills are potentially missing out on vital benefits to keep the family out of poverty.

"The good news is that we know what to do, and there is the political will to implement the recommendations laid out in our report," says Marmot.

He believes the rise in child poverty, in particular, provides a strong rationale for increasing spending on benefits and services in line with the cost of living.

First and foremost a moral matter

"A number of groups who struggle with living condition issues and who experience discrimination live far shorter lives, with lower participation in society and a poorer quality of life," says Ness.

These are differences that are reflected in wealth inequalities among people in Norway.

"The richest ten percent of Norway's population have become much richer since 2010. The lowest 50 percent have hardly had any increase in wealth at all," says Ness.

But this trend does not have to continue.

"Equalizing social differences is first and foremost a moral matter, but also a question of sustainable development," says Ness.

He believes that the inequalities are socially created, and that it is possible to do something about them if there is the political will to tackle the problems properly.

"We can reduce the inequities by doing something about people's living conditions, where they are born and grow up, where we live, play, learn, work and age," says Ness.

High socioeconomic status increases life expectancy

One of the most dramatic differences can be found in life expectancy. Here, the difference between rich and poor and between low and high education levels is sometimes very large.

Depending on how and whom you measure, women with high socioeconomic status can expect to live between 3.5 and 5.5 years longer than women with low socioeconomic status.

The differences in life expectancy are even greater for men, ranging from 5.0 to 7.3 years.

The discrepancies are closely linked to lifestyle habits among the various groups. People with the lowest socioeconomic status smoke five times as often as those with the highest status. They also have far less healthy eating habits, largely because living healthy is expensive.

People lower down the social ladder thus struggle more with many different health problems than people higher up do, both physically and psychologically.

Key is to start while children are young

We need to start early if we want to reduce inequalities. Children are often the hardest hit. What kind of home they come from plays a big role in their development.

If your parents struggle with poverty and have little or no education, you are more likely to experience the same problems throughout your life.

If you come from a home with low socioeconomic status, your chances of succeeding later in life are considerably worse than if you come from a home with higher socioeconomic status.

Almost 12 percent of all children in Norway come from homes with long-term poverty. This has consequences. These children have a greater risk of feeling ill at ease in school, of struggling mentally and being bullied. They often have poor school results in mathematics, writing and reading.

"A family's socioeconomic status is strongly linked to how well 15-year-olds do at school, and to what extent they further their education," says Dina von Heimburg.

Heimburg is an associate professor at NTNU's Department of Education and Lifelong Learning. She is also co-leader at WellFare: Nordic Research Center for Well-being and Social Sustainability.

Kindergarten is an advantage

Families on limited incomes, where the parents have a low level of education and [immigrant families](#) send their children to kindergarten less often. This can contribute to reinforcing social inequalities.

The kindergarten a child attends can already give the researchers a clue as to how things will most likely go for him or her.

"Children who go to a good nursery school have a greater chance of developing well than those who don't, says Heimburg.

Getting an education even more important

Higher education provides access to a wider labor market and is therefore one of the keys to opening up more opportunities for people having lower socioeconomic status.

Changes in the labor market mean that people with little education are struggling more in the labor market than before. Fewer jobs are available for them, which in turn contributes to increasing the socioeconomic differences.

"In 2019, 18 percent of the population between 18 and 66 years old in Norway were unemployed and at the same time not receiving any training," says Heimburg.

This segment of the population has a growing tendency to remain in a difficult situation. To an increasingly large extent, this group of people include those who have never worked or who have been long-term unemployed.

Social support measures have been tightened in recent years to try to encourage more people to work. These measures do not seem to have worked as intended.

Attempts to bring more people with disabilities into the work force have not fully succeeded either.

"Employers and support services have not succeeded well enough at including people with various forms of disabilities across all socioeconomic groups in working life," says Heimburg.

Pandemic increased inequalities

The COVID pandemic contributed to the increase in social differences. The jobs that disappeared were largely jobs for people with little [education](#), [young people](#) and those with an immigrant background from outside the EU.

Fewer people with an immigrant background got vaccinated than others. Immigrants from Africa and Asia in particular were overrepresented both among those who were infected and those who became seriously ill from COVID.

Worrisome, says the minister

"The report shows that [Norway has] a society with some large health inequalities, depending on individuals' background, and that these differences have only become greater in recent years. This is cause for concern," says Ingvild Kjerkol, Norway's Minister of Health and Care Services in a press release.

Kjerkol states that the work to reduce these differences is essential.

"Reducing inequities is the goal of all our public health work, and it is the common thread in the public health report we will be presenting on Friday 31 March," Kjerkol states in the press release.

Possible to reverse the trend

We therefore have the ability to reverse the trend of recent years. Norway can once again become a society with fewer inequalities.

"The most important thing we can do to equalize social differences is to

give all children the best possible start in life, and to strengthen solidarity and community across generations," says Ness.

Above all, this work is about equalizing differences in income, wealth and power. We have to strengthen empowerment and democratic social participation for excluded and marginalized groups, he says.

"That way we can move society in the direction of a better quality of life for everyone," says Ness.

More information: Report: [www.instituteofhealthequity.or ... in-norway-since-2014](http://www.instituteofhealthequity.or...in-norway-since-2014)

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