

## **SOS4150 – Population Health and Health Inequalities**

### **Course content**

This course will provide social science and social epidemiological perspectives on population health and health inequalities. The course surveys social determinants of health and links theoretical work (e.g., material, psychosocial, and fundamental cause theories) to empirical analyses of health, focusing on recent developments in the field, such as exploring the links between political populism and health, the role of genes, new challenges related to the global pandemic and planetary health.

The course is structured around the following five consecutive themes:

1. Rational - explaining background, the key topics, and conceptualization of health and illness in sociology and social epidemiology;
2. Theories - describing the key theoretical explanations of existing health inequalities;
3. Ascription - considering inequalities in health based on the key ascriptive characteristics such as gender and ethnicity;
4. Politics - reviewing the role of political populism within countries and the effect of global organizations on health outcomes internationally;
5. COVID-19 and future - understanding the implication of COVID-19 for health and revisiting our approach to population health by shifting emphasis on global and planetary health rather than health in individual countries.

The aim of the course is three-fold:

- First, to explain to students a paradox of the persistence of health inequalities in modern welfare states, Norway being one of the unequal societies in Europe regarding differences in health outcomes between advantaged and disadvantaged groups.
- Second, to equip students with an awareness that health care systems account for only a part of the variation in health outcomes and that socioeconomic explanations of health are of primary importance to understand why health outcomes in some societies are better than in others.
- Third, to present to students cutting-edge theoretical and empirical insights on how and why health inequalities within societies exist, why they also intensify, in some instances, and which policy interventions, if any, effectively tackle health inequalities within and across countries.

The course will address these and related questions:

- How did an epidemiological transition from communicable to non-communicable diseases change the patterns of health inequalities?
- Which are the most influential theories explaining social inequalities in health?
- What are potential social determinants of health at the micro-level (e.g., socioeconomic status, health behaviors)?
- How do meso-level institutions and organizations such as social networks and communities influence health?
- How do macro-level environments, institutions, policies, and the mode of radicalized politics shape individuals' health?
- Is there enough evidence to claim that the association between socioeconomic status and health is causal?
- How does health selection (i.e., healthier individuals achieving higher socioeconomic status) explain the observed social gradient in health?
- What are the implications of COVID-19 for health inequalities in communicable diseases?
- How do health-related social movements shape population health?

Throughout the course, we will discuss one of the central questions in this area of research - how population health and health inequalities should be measured. Socioeconomic status and health are associated, but there is no consensus about the causal direction of the association. We aim to make sense of conflicting findings and theories in a causal framework. In recent decades, health inequality researchers have been primarily focusing on noncommunicable diseases that afflict aging and industrialized societies such as Norway, but with COVID-19 and decreasing life expectancies in some countries, this focus can be shifting again by more actively considering inequalities related to communicable diseases such as the SARS-CoV-2 unprecedented global spread of the virus. Health is a contentious public issue, with government and non-government actors being heavily engaged. We will examine political populism and social movements, which at present actively shape population health.

## **Learning outcome**

### *Knowledge*

This course will provide students with:

- An analytical perspective on the most widely acknowledged theories in social sciences and social epidemiology;
- A familiarity with novel and ground-breaking empirical studies on health inequalities conducted in recent years;
- Knowledge of how micro-, meso-, and national-level developments complement each other to explain the extent of health inequalities;
- An understanding of difficulties in reducing health inequalities in different historical periods and country contexts;
- An overview of the methods researchers use to answer questions about health inequalities.

### *Skills*

Students will be able to:

- Understand, explain, discuss, and use core concepts, such as relative vs. absolute measures of inequalities in health, sectoral vs. comprehensive strategies to address health inequalities, planetary health, etc.;
- Link the state of health inequalities in Norway to the most important theoretical explanations and to the state-of-the-art comparative empirical studies on this issue;
- Use acquired knowledge from the course to come up with appropriate theoretical and empirical frameworks to be used in students' own research;
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Admission to the course

This course is an elective course in the Master's programme in Sociology. Students enrolled to this programme must each semester register which courses and exams they wish to sign up for [in Studentweb](#).

The course is also open for students from the follow master's programmes:

- Human Geography and [Organisasjon, ledelse og arbeid](#) (OLA) at UiO.
- [Master specialisation in didactics for social science in the Teacher Education Programme \(Lektorprogrammet\)](#) - please see the link for information regarding admission.

Others may also, on application, be admitted to the course as a [guest student](#). Admission as a guest student will vary from semester to semester, as guest students will be allotted any vacant seats on the course.

Teaching

The course will be organized as 12 lectures with discussions every week.

The lectures will be given in English.

## Examination

6 hour school exam (multiple choice, concept definition and essay).

- [Previous exams and examiner guidelines](#) (please note that the exam form has been changed)

It is possible to take the exam up to 3 times. If you [withdraw from the exam](#) after the deadline or during the exam, this will be counted as an examination attempt.

### Examination support material

Students may use dictionaries at this exam. Dictionaries must be handed in before the examination. Please read [regulations for dictionaries permitted at the examination](#).

### Language of examination

The examination text is given in English. You may submit your response in Norwegian, Swedish, Danish or English.

### Grading scale

Grades are awarded on a scale from A to F, where A is the best grade and F is a fail. Read more about [the grading system](#).

### Resit an examination

If you are sick or have another valid reason for not attending the regular exam, we offer a [postponed exam](#) later in the same semester.

See also our information about [resitting an exam](#).

### More about examinations at UiO

- [Use of sources and citations](#)
- [Special exam arrangements due to individual needs](#)
- [Withdrawal from an exam](#)
- [Illness at exams / postponed exams](#)
- [Explanation of grades and appeals](#)
- [Resitting an exam](#)
- [Cheating/attempted cheating](#)

You will find further guides and resources at [the web page on examinations at UiO](#).