THE AUTHORS REPLY

We are grateful to Dr. Bhopal for his letter (1) regarding our analysis of summary measures of health inequality (2), and we generally concur with the points he raises. In particular, we agree that while both absolute and relative measures of health inequality provide the most complete picture of social group differences in health, absolute measures have greater utility for understanding the population health burden of health inequalities. Bhopal’s suggestion for the presentation of disease patterns (see his Table 1) is useful; however, as the number of ethnic groups increases, using many pairwise comparisons (e.g., standardized mortality ratios) becomes cumbersome, regardless of whether they are measured on the absolute scale or the relative scale. In such cases, summary measures of health inequality are likely to be more practical, especially when monitoring trends in inequality over time.

Appropriate definitions and classifications of ethnic group identity are critical for studies of health inequalities. Unfortunately, data constraints often require tradeoffs between the length of time series data and the specificity of ethnic group categorizations. Because our primary focus was to evaluate summary measures of health inequality as tools for monitoring trends over as long a time period as possible, the categories we used were aggregated to those of US federal guidelines. Hopefully this problem will be mitigated in the future as local and national data systems adapt to increasing ethnic diversity in populations. For example, starting in 2005, the US National Health Interview Survey began oversampling Asian Americans, and the California Health Interview Survey was designed to sample all of the major racial-ethnic groups as well as subgroups. With the large and growing number of racial-ethnic groups measured in US health data, summary measures of health inequality are likely to become useful tools for monitoring secular trends in health inequalities. Understanding the benefits and drawbacks of such tools remains an important challenge.

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REFERENCES


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