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Re: Race and Health Initiative

Dear Drs. Satcher and Hamburg:

I have followed for some time the attention given to increasing racial and other demographic disparities in mortality with a concern that data on such issues have been misinterpreted. For more than a decade I have been writing about the tendency whereby whenever two groups differ in their susceptibility to some condition, the less prevalent the condition, the greater will be the disparity between the rates at which the two groups experience the condition and the smaller will be the disparity between the rates at which the two groups avoid the condition.

With regard to mortality, this means that declining mortality will generally lead to increasing disparities in mortality rates and declining disparities in survival rates. It also explains why, for example, with regard to an issue that caught Dr. Satcher's attention in 1992, mortality differentials between better-educated segments of the black and white populations will often equal

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or exceed those between the black and white populations at large, notwithstanding greater similarity of health related factors of more affluent blacks and whites than of blacks and whites in the nation at large.

My views in this area so far have not influenced the interpretation of data in the medical or social sciences or in any of the other areas I have written about. But one article explaining the statistical tendency ("Divining Difference" from the Fall 1994 issue of *Chance*) is on a reading list in a statistics course at Duke and another ("The Perils of Provocative Statistics" from the Winter 1991 issue of *The Public Interest*) is required reading in a statistics course at Massachusetts Institute of Technology. So I think the ideas will eventually gain widespread acceptance. And if the views are valid, one cannot either identify the most serious demographic health disparities or interpret the results of efforts to correct those disparities without taking the described statistical tendency into account.¹

In any event, I enclose for such use as you make of them the two articles mentioned above, along with an unpublished piece that explores the epidemiological implications of the statistical tendency in greater depth.

Sincerely,

/s/ James P. Scanlan

James P. Scanlan

¹ The statistical tendency has been also misunderstood in varied contexts in the law and social sciences (e.g., where banks are faulted for racial disparities in mortgage rejection rates without recognition that the banks with the largest racial disparities in mortgage rejection rates tend to have the smallest racial disparities in mortgage approval rates or that the relaxing of lending criteria will tend to increase racial disparities in rejection rates; or where no recognition is given to the relationship of declining or increasing overall poverty rates to increasing or decreasing demographic disparities in poverty rates. See Both Sides Misuse Data in the Credit Discrimination Debate," *American Banker*, July 22, 1998; "Responsive Banks Hurt by Improper Data Interpretation," *The Montgomery Journal*, May 5, 1998; "Perils of Using Statistics to Show Presence or Absence of Loan Bias," *American Banker*, Dec., 1996; "Statistical Anomaly Penalizes Fair-Lending Effort," *American Banker*, Nov. 18, 1996; "Mired in Numbers," *Legal Times*, Oct. 21, 1996; "When Statistics Lie," *Legal Times*, Jan. 1, 1996; "Getting it Straight When Statistics Can Lie," *Legal Times*, June 28, 1993; "Bias Data Can Make the Good Look Bad," *American Banker*, Apr. 27, 1992; "Low Entrance Standards Hardest on Minorities," *NCAA News*, Dec. 18, 1991; "Comment on McLanahan, Sorensen, and Watson's 'Sex Differences in Poverty, 1950-1980,'" *Signs: Journal of Women In Culture and Society* (Winter, 1991) "An Issue of Numbers," *The National Law Journal*, Mar. 5, 1990; "Feminization of Poverty' is Misunderstood," *The Cleveland Plain Dealer*, Oct. 9, 1987 (reprinted in *Current* (May, 1988) and *Annual Editions: Social Problems* 1989/90 (1989)). See the first two articles cited in this note for a description of the misfocus on mortgage rejection rate disparities among higher-income groups that reflects the same misunderstanding observed in the interpretation of disparities in infant mortality rates where parents have college degrees.

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Enclosures