



# International Journal of Circumpolar Health

ISSN: (Print) 2242-3982 (Online) Journal homepage: <http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/zich20>

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To cite this article: Eiliv Lund , Magritt Brustad & Asle Høgmo (2008) The Sami—living conditions and health, International Journal of Circumpolar Health, 67:1, 6-8, DOI: [10.3402/ijch.v67i1.18218](https://doi.org/10.3402/ijch.v67i1.18218)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3402/ijch.v67i1.18218>



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Published online: 01 Mar 2008.



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# THE SAMI – LIVING CONDITIONS AND HEALTH

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The aim of this Special Issue is to show the diversity of living conditions among the Sami and their consequences on the health and rates of disease among this population living in the Sami areas of Norway, Sweden, Finland and Russia, often referred to as Sápmi. There has been a renewed interest in the Sami or Laps, as they were referred to some decades ago. Historically, relatively few studies have been carried out for a variety of reasons. In all countries assimilation policies removed the focus on ethnicity, and scientific studies often neglected the mixture of different ethnic groups in the Sami areas. In addition, the Sami in Norway still have a collective memory of when their skulls and bones were measured in the 1920s and 1930s as part of the eugenic theories (1). Lastly, ethnicity is not usually registered in the Nordic countries, and the national register information is not always available for scientific use.

## **The Sami people**

The Sami people are an indigenous people who have been living in the northern part of Sweden, Norway, Finland and Russia as

long as it is possible to trace cultural identity in the archaeology of this area. Recent geological research indicates that 12,000 years ago there was an ice-free zone from the Urals over the Kola Peninsula to the coastal area of northern Norway (2). The name Norway means the way north, and it is possible to think that there were two ways to reach the northern coastal area: one western and one eastern. The first Norse settlement came by the western way, and the first Sami settlement may have come by the eastern way.

Owing to cultural assimilation, it is difficult to give the exact number of Sami living in this area, but a good guess could be approximately 70,000: 40,000 in Norway, 20,000 in Sweden, 7,500 in Finland and 2,000 in Russia (3).

If we identify people by their languages, the Sami language belongs to the Finno-Ugric part of the Uralic family of languages, which includes the Sami, Finnish, Estonian and Hungarian areas of Europe. It is customary to distinguish between 10 variants of the Sami language, but there are no deep boundaries between these variants as

to structure and vocabulary. All of them are close to the Finnish language, and one can believe that the Sami and Finnish languages developed over time from a common Sami-Finnish protolanguage. The total number of Sami-speaking people today is probably around 20,000; less than 3,000 in Finland, 12,000 in Norway, 1,000 in Russia and 7,000 in Sweden (4).

There is a greater cultural variation among the Sami living in Norway than in the other circumpolar countries. In Norway, the Sami people have traditionally been engaged in reindeer herding, fishing and farming, while in the others countries the Sami have been associated with reindeer herding to a much greater extent. In addition, the different ethnic groups have lived in close proximity to one another in small multi-ethnic communities. Today, there is a growing well-educated younger population among the Sami.

As an indigenous people, the Sami have been a minority who have suffered from identity stigmatization (5). In modern Sami history, one can trace the Sami fight for recognition through three phases: recognition as human beings, recognition as a culture and recognition as a people or a nation (6). On the international level, different events have given the Sami culture new dimensions. One of these is the development and incorporation of indigenous peoples into the global network. This development has given the Sami people a feeling of belonging to a larger global community and has strengthened their position as an ethnic minority in relation to the

circumpolar nation states. The latter development has manifested itself in building modern Sami institutions in the fields of education, health, research, arts and politics. In Norway, the establishment of the Sami Parliament in 1989 was the most important contribution. The parallel processes of establishing modern Sami institutions in the various Nordic countries has resulted in a more extensive collaboration between the Sami people across the state borders in the northern areas. Since the fall of the Iron Curtain and the reappearance of the free Baltic States, there has been a growing interest in developing a Finno-Urgic cultural relationship and network.

#### **The definition of Sami for quantitative research – differences between and within the countries**

Readers of the articles in this Special Issue will soon discover that, because of the cultural variation of the ethnic context in Sápmi, there are many different ways to define Sami identity. It is, therefore, important to take this into consideration when comparing results from different studies. It is also important to realise that different definitions might be necessary in order to achieve meaningful analyses. However, as to developing public Sami statistics, a more common definition of Sami identity across the borders would be welcomed.

#### **Concluding remarks**

The Sami life-style varies greatly between the different groups. At the same time, many still adhere to their traditional culture.

This last glimpse of these specific dietary and physical activity patterns among traditional Sami gives us a unique opportunity to study the health effects of these characteristic ways of life. At the same time, it gives us a chance to look at the health effects being brought about by the rapid changes in the Sami's cultural and social lives as they move towards a more common Western life-style.

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