Reviewer's report

Title: Economic hardships in adulthood and mental health in Sweden. The Swedish National Public Health Survey 2009.

Version: 2 Date: 28 June 2011

Reviewer: Anu Molarius

Reviewer's report:

This is a population-based cross-sectional study about the relationship between different dimensions of economic hardship and mental health problems. The study seems well conducted and the analyses are clear and robust. I have however some questions, comments and suggestions, mainly about the background and the conclusions of the study.

Major Compulsory Revisions

Why were three different measures of mental health problems used (background) and what do they show (discussion)?

Why were the results adjusted for long-term illness?

Why was low income added to the combined index? If it was not associated with mental health problems it will probably not add any real information to the combined index either.

It is stated that missing data were completed by the use of weighting procedures. Were weighted data used in the logistic regression analyses? Would the results be similar with unweighted data?

The background can be shortened by concentrating on what is known on this issue and what is not known and why it is important to study different measures of economic hardship.

The correlations between the different measures of economic hardship are said to be low. What were the exact correlation coefficients?

The discussion is unnecessary long. It would help to shorten it and to concentrate on the main findings, limitations and strengths and to specify what implications the results have in public health context. More effort should be put on to explain why low income seems not to be related to mental health problems but economic difficulties are. For example, do the results imply that increasing income or decreasing poverty will not lead to better mental health, can one draw the conclusion that it would be beneficial to intervene so that the level of subjective economic hardship will decrease in the population and how would that be possible etc.

Reference 70 in itself had a very low response rate (only 7-27% of the
non-respondents were reached). It is uncertain whether it can be used as evidence for that the response patterns do not differ between respondents and non-respondents.

It is not surprising that the combined index will produce larger odds ratios than single dichotomous items. The reader may wonder whether similar large odds ratios had been obtained even if one single item but with more gradient would have been used.

Severe anxiety also included nervousness and uneasiness (worries). Is this a widely used measure of severe anxiety?

Minor Essential Revisions
Page 9, age group (iii) should be 45-64 years.

Wasn’t the study population a combination of a random sample of the Swedish population and an extra sample of some areas?

Page 11, first par, last sentence: the prevalence of antidepressant medication is reported twice for men, 9% should be for women.

It is not commented why men with low income had more often antidepressant medication (may it be a chance finding?).

Antidepressant medication is referred to as “anti depressant medication”, “antidepressant medication”, “anti-depressant medication” and “anti depressive medication”. Please choose one and be consequent.

Which covariates were self-reported and which were register-based?

Ref. 70 (page 20) is presumably not a follow-up study.

Abstract: The variables the results were adjusted for should be mentioned in the methods section.

Page 20, conclusions, first sentence: since the study was cross-sectional it can only reveal associations, not predictors. Also, it was limited to self-reported mental health problems, so referring to “poor health” in general seems too wide.

Discretionary Revisions

There is no need to report all odds ratios and confidence intervals in the text (pages 11-12) when they are given in the tables.

There are 70 references in the manuscript which seems unnecessary many in relation to the scope of the study, some sorting out might be useful.

Level of interest: An article whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests
Quality of written English: Acceptable

Statistical review: No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.

Declaration of competing interests:
I declare that I have no competing interests.