The Spirit Level

Why Equality is Better for Everyone

Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett

‘A big idea, big enough to change political thinking’ Sunday Times
‘A sweeping theory of everything’ Guardian

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http://www.equalitytrust.org.uk
Among the rich countries life expectancy is not related to national differences in average income

…but life expectancy is related to income differences within rich societies.

Income per head and life-expectancy: rich & poor countries

How much richer are the richest 20% than the poorest 20%?

**Income gaps**
How many times richer are the richest fifth than the poorest fifth

- **Japan**: 3.4
- **Finland**: 3.7
- **Norway**: 3.9
- **Sweden**: 4.0
- **Denmark**: 4.3
- **Belgium**: 4.6
- **Austria**: 4.8
- **Germany**: 5.2
- **Netherlands**: 5.3
- **Spain**: 5.6
- **France**: 5.6
- **Canada**: 5.6
- **Switzerland**: 5.7
- **Ireland**: 6.1
- **Greece**: 6.2
- **Italy**: 6.7
- **Israel**: 6.8
- **New Zealand**: 6.8
- **Australia**: 7.0
- **UK**: 7.2
- **Portugal**: 8.0
- **US**: 8.5

**Source:** Wilkinson & Pickett, *The Spirit Level* (2009)
Health and Social Problems are Worse in More Unequal Countries

Index of:
- Life expectancy
- Math & Literacy
- Infant mortality
- Homicides
- Imprisonment
- Teenage births
- Trust
- Obesity
- Mental illness – incl. drug & alcohol addiction
- Social mobility

Health and Social Problems are not Related to Average Income in Rich Countries

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Child Well-being is Better in More Equal Rich Countries

Child-Wellbeing is Unrelated to Average Incomes in Rich Countries

Table 2 | Correlations of measures of child wellbeing with income inequality, and average income across the 50 US states (including District of Columbia)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measure of child wellbeing</th>
<th>Income inequality</th>
<th></th>
<th>Average income</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>r</td>
<td>P value</td>
<td>r</td>
<td>P value</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teenage births(^1)(^2)</td>
<td>0.72</td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
<td>-0.55</td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Juvenile homicides(^1)(^2)</td>
<td>0.31</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Infant mortality(^*)</td>
<td>0.55</td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
<td>-0.20</td>
<td>0.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low birth weight(^*)</td>
<td>0.65</td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
<td>-0.01</td>
<td>0.99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educational performance (combined maths and reading scores for 15 year olds)(^\dagger)(^4)</td>
<td>-0.69</td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>0.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dropping out of high school(^\dagger)(^4)</td>
<td>0.66</td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
<td>-0.28</td>
<td>0.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overweight</td>
<td>0.64</td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
<td>-0.07</td>
<td>0.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mental health problems</td>
<td>0.37</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>-0.14</td>
<td>0.33</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^*\)Similar findings have been reported elsewhere.\(^1\)\(^1\)\(^1\)\(^1\)\(^4\)\(^0\)
\(^\dagger\)Similar findings have been reported elsewhere.\(^1\)
Levels of Trust are Higher in More Equal Rich Countries

Levels of Trust are Higher in More Equal US States

www.equalitytrust.org.uk
The Prevalence of Mental Illness is Higher in More Unequal Rich Countries


www.equalitytrust.org.uk
Drug Use is More Common in More Unequal Countries

Index of use of: opiates, cocaine, cannabis, ecstasy, amphetamines

Infant Mortality Rates are Higher in More Unequal Countries

Male mortality (25-64 yrs) and income inequality in US states and Canadian provinces.

More Adults are Obese in More Unequal Rich Countries

Teenage Birth Rates are Higher in More Unequal Rich Countries

Homicide and income inequality: 
US States and Canadian Provinces

Rates of Imprisonment are Higher in More Unequal Countries


www.equalitytrust.org.uk
Social Mobility is Higher in More Equal Rich Countries

Almost everyone benefits from greater equality.

Usually the benefits are greatest among the poor but extend to the majority of the population.
Infant Mortality by Social Class: Sweden and England & Wales

Source: Leon DA, Vagero D, Olausson PO. BMJ 1992; 305; 687-91
Literacy Scores of 16-25 year olds by Parents' Education

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Single parents and child wellbeing

Lone parents as % of all households with dependent children

Better

Worse

Australia
Austria
Belgium
Canada
Denmark
Finland
France
Germany
Greece
Ireland
Israel
Italy
Japan
Netherlands
Norway
Portugal
Spain
Sweden
UK
USA
New Zealand
UK
Why are we so sensitive to inequality?
Psychosocial risk factors for ill health

- Low social status
- Weak social affiliations
- Stress in early life (pre- and postnatally)
What kind of stress most reliably raises cortisol levels?

Source: Dickerson SS & Kemeny ME. Psychological Bulletin 2004; 130(3): 355-91
Stereotype Threat

The effect of caste identity on children's performance

"...the prison inmates I work with have told me repeatedly, when I asked them why they had assaulted someone, that it was because 'he disrespected me', or 'he disrespected my visit' (meaning 'visitor'). The word 'disrespect' is central in the vocabulary, moral value system, and psychodynamics of these chronically violent men that they have abbreviated it into the slang term, 'he dis'ed me.'" p.106

A few pages further on Gilligan continues:-
"I have yet to see a serious act of violence that was not provoked by the experience of feeling shamed and humiliated, disrespected and ridiculed, and that did not represent the attempt to prevent or undo this "loss of face " - no matter how severe the punishment, even if it includes death." p.110
The effects of inequality - a two stage process

1. adult experience of inequality
2. passed on to children – epigenetics?
Inequality and Sustainability

Consumerism is one of the greatest threats to sustainability

Because inequality increases status competition, it also increases consumerism. People in more unequal societies work longer hours because money seems even more important.

Concern for the common good is a crucial resource if we are to reduce carbon emissions

Because inequality harms the quality of social relations (increasing violence, reducing trust, cohesion and involvement in community life), people become more self-interested, less public spirited, less concerned with the common good. This is shown in the amount of overseas aid countries give, in the proportion of waste recycled, in how countries score on the global peace index, and in how important business leaders think it is that their governments abide by international environmental agreements.
Working hours are longer in more unequal countries.
Trends in income inequality 1979-2005/6 (Gini coefficient, Great Britain.)

For more information:

... a book

and a website...

The Equality Trust

http://www.equalitytrust.org.uk