

## **The Spirit Level: Why More Equal Societies Almost Always Do Better by Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett**

John Carey, The Sunday Times, March 8, 2009

This is a book with a big idea, big enough to change political thinking, and bigger than its authors at first intended. The problem they originally set out to solve was why health within a population gets progressively worse further down the social scale; they estimate that together they have clocked up more than 50 person-years gathering information from research teams across the globe. Their eureka moment came when they thought of putting the medical data alongside figures showing the extent of economic inequality within each country. They say modestly that since dependable statistics both on health and on income distribution are internationally available, it was only a matter of time before someone put the two together. All the same, they are the first to have done so.

Their book charts the level of health and social problems as many as they could find reliable figures for against the level of income inequality in 20 of the world's richest nations, and in each of the 50 United States. They allocate a brief chapter to each problem, supplying graphs that display the evidence starkly and unarguably. What they find is that, in states and countries where there is a big gap between the incomes of rich and poor, mental illness, drug and alcohol abuse, obesity and teenage pregnancy are more common, the homicide rate is higher, life expectancy is shorter, and children's educational performance and literacy scores are worse. The Scandinavian countries and Japan consistently come at the positive end of this spectrum. They have the smallest differences between higher and lower incomes, and the best record of psycho-social health. The countries with the widest gulf between rich and poor, and the highest incidence of most health and social problems, are Britain, America and Portugal.

Richard Wilkinson, a professor of medical epidemiology at Nottingham University, and Kate Pickett, a lecturer in epidemiology at York University, emphasise that it is not only the poor who suffer from the effects of inequality, but the majority of the population. For example, rates of mental illness are five times higher across the whole population in the most unequal than in the least unequal societies in their survey. One explanation, they suggest, is that inequality increases stress right across society, not just among the least advantaged. Much research has been done on the stress hormone cortisol, which can be measured in saliva or blood, and it emerges that chronic stress affects the neural system and in turn the immune system. When stressed, we are more prone to depression and anxiety, and more likely to develop a host of bodily ills including heart disease, obesity, drug addiction, liability to infection and rapid ageing.

Societies where incomes are relatively equal have low levels of stress and high levels of trust, so that people feel secure and see others as co-operative. In unequal societies, by contrast, the rich suffer from fear of the poor, while those lower down the social order experience status anxiety, looking upon those who are more successful with bitterness and upon themselves with shame. In the 1980s and 1990s, when inequality was rapidly rising in Britain and America, the rich bought homeseurity systems, and started to drive 4x4s with names such as Defender and Crossfire, reflecting a need to intimidate attackers. Meanwhile the poor grew obese on comfort foods and took more legal and illegal drugs. In 2005, doctors in England alone wrote 29m prescriptions for antidepressants, costing the NHS £400m.

Status anxiety and how we respond to it are basic, it seems, to our animal natures. In an experiment with macaque monkeys, the animals were housed in groups, and the social hierarchies that developed among them were observed. Then the monkeys were taught to administer cocaine to themselves by pressing a lever. The dominant monkeys in each group were relatively abstemious, but the subordinate monkeys took a lot of cocaine to medicate themselves against the pain of low social status. In a similar experiment, high-status monkeys from different groups were housed together, so that some of them became low status. The downwardly mobile monkeys accumulated abdominal fat and developed a rapid build-up of atherosclerosis in their arteries, just like humans.

The different social problems that stem from income inequality often, Wilkinson and Pickett show, form circuits or spirals. Babies born to teenage mothers are at greater risk, as they grow up, of educational failure, juvenile crime, and becoming teenage parents themselves. In societies with greater income inequality, more people are sent to prison, and less is spent on education and welfare. In Britain the prison population has doubled since 1990; in America it has quadrupled since the late 1970s. American states with a wide gap between rich and poor are likelier to retain the death penalty, and to hand out long sentences for minor crimes. In California in 2004, there were 360 people serving life sentences for shoplifting. California has built only one new college since 1984, but 21 new prisons. Whereas societies with high income differentials are exceptionally punitive, in Japan imprisonment rates are low and offenders who confess their crimes and express a desire to reform are generally trusted to do so by the judiciary and the public.

The authors' method is objective and scientific, so that the human distress behind their statistics mostly remains hidden. But when they quote from interviews conducted by social researchers, passion and resentment flood into their book. A working-class man in Rotherham tells of the shame he felt having to sit next to a middle-class woman ("this stuck-up cow, you know, slim, attractive"); how he felt overweight and started sweating; how he imagined her thinking, "listen, low-life, don't even come near me. We pay to get away from scum like you". In half a page it tells you more about the pain of inequality than any play or novel could.

It might be said that *The Spirit Level* merely formulates what everyone has always felt. Western European utopias have almost all been egalitarian. Polls in Britain over the past 20 years show that the proportion of the population who think income differences too big is on average 80%. But what is new about their book, the authors insist, is that it turns personal intuitions into publicly demonstrable facts. With the evidence they have supplied, politicians now have a chance to "do genuine good". By reducing income inequality, they can improve the health and wellbeing of the whole population. How this should be effected, Wilkinson and Pickett do not think it is their job to say, but increasing top tax rates or legislating to limit maximum pay are possibilities they suggest. They warn, though, that short-term remedies like this could be reversed by a change of government, and that we need to find ways of rooting greater equality more deeply in our society. This is their book's mission, and they have set up a not-for-profit trust ([equalitytrust.org](http://equalitytrust.org)) to make the evidence they set out better known. One illusion that, cheerily, they hope to dispel is that the super-rich are some kind of asset we should all cherish, rather than, from the viewpoint of social health, the equivalent of the seven plagues of Egypt.

**The Spirit Level by Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett**  
Allen Lane £20 pp416

# The damning dossier

- Editorial
- [The Guardian](#), Friday 13 March 2009
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This is not the moment to be arguing that there is more to life than money. Restoring prosperity is a pressing human need. The workforce of engineering firm Renishaw's this week became the latest to learn that hundreds among them are destined for the junk yard. The happiness and health of those laid off will suffer until the economy recovers. Yet at the same time - as the virulent virus spreads from the Square Mile to the real world - there is a keener awareness than ever before of the ruin that flows from the worship of Mammon.

The Spirit Level reconciles the contradictory impulses the financial crisis creates. Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett's new book marshals voluminous evidence, a sample of which we publish today. It shows that while money does matter, the point is not the quantum but the way it is shared out. Look across the rich world (developing countries are another matter) and there is no connection between national wealth and the things that matter most - health, leisure time and close community life. But the book's analysis, shows that all these aspects of the good life are warped by economic stratification. The income gap gets under society's skin with poisonous effect, and unequal countries such as Britain suffer on all sorts of counts - from murder to mental illness, from obesity to illiteracy.

It is not the drop of a few points off GDP which ensures the slump will soon give rise to anxiety and crime. All that means is that average incomes will return to where they were a year or two ago. The real damage is done by the pain being unfairly shared, shouldered overwhelmingly by the minority who lose their jobs, their livelihood and their status. Wilkinson and Pickett look far and wide - from the effect of the caste system on Hindu children's exams to the tendency of subordinate monkeys to self-medicate with cocaine - to elucidate why it is that lives lived at the bottom of the pile are so often brutish and short.

The novel twist, however, is the evidence that the damage reaches well beyond the poor, a conclusion necessitated by the sheer power of inequality to make societies sick. Citizens in (unequal) America live four and a half years less long than their counterparts in (equal) Japan. If this were fully explained by the poorest Americans dying sooner, then the most deprived tenth would - on average - be dropping dead in their early 30s. And that is not what happens. In stratified societies illiteracy, disease and premature death all turn out to be

more common not just among the poor but also right the way up the social ladder, albeit to a diminishing extent. Quite how inequality can hurt those with jewellery to rattle is not yet fully clear, but scientific research on the so-called stress hormone, cortisol, provides an intriguing clue. The cortisol tap turns on most reliably when people feel judged in ways that threaten their social standing. When standing is threatened in a polarised community, there is a great deal further to fall.

Keynes said paying men to dig holes and then fill them in could fix the economy. The logic of the Spirit Level suggests pouring the wealth of the super-rich into the holes before concreting them over might be one way to fix society, although there are other approaches too. Societies which now benefit from being relatively equal have taken very different routes - taxing the rich and educating the poor are two things that certainly help. But small-state Japan - where society was equalised in the aftermath of military defeat in the 1940s - shows that fairer shares can be achieved in other ways as well.

Political parties should be encouraged to come up with different prescriptions for starting to even things out. In the light of this damning new dossier on the many crimes of inequality, however, no one complaining that Britain is broken can be allowed to ignore the gaping gulf between rich and poor.

## **24 hours**

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### **The Equality Trust**

#### The Evidence

Great inequality is the scourge of modern societies. We provide the evidence on each of eleven different health and social problems: physical health, mental health, drug abuse, education, imprisonment, obesity, social mobility, trust and community life, violence, teenage births, and child well-being. For all eleven of these health and social problems, outcomes are very substantially worse in more unequal societies.

We have checked the relationships wherever possible in two independent test beds: internationally among the rich countries, and then again among the 50 states of the USA. In almost every case we find the same tendency for outcomes to be much worse in more unequal societies in both settings.

We also present evidence on four other important issues. One is how achieving greater equality within the rich countries may contribute to tackling the inequalities between rich and poor countries. Another is a discussion of both the compatibility and relative merits of greater equality and economic growth as sources of improvements in the quality of life among rich countries. There is a page discussing how greater equality may contribute to policies designed to tackle global warming, and lastly, a page ([The Remedies](#)) pointing out that there are many different ways of increasing equality in our societies.

The data we use comes from the most respected international sources including The World Bank, World Health Organisation, United Nations, UNICEF, and US Census Bureau. Much of this work has already been published in peer reviewed academic

journals, and some of the relationships have been tested many times by different research groups using data for different societies.

Details of the data and statistical techniques we use are available on the [Statistical Sources and Methods](#) page.

<http://www.equalitytrust.org.uk/>

## The Remedies

Looking at examples of more equal rich societies we can see that there are two fundamentally different paths to greater equality. One depends on redistributing income from rich to poor through taxes and benefits, while the other involves having smaller differences in incomes at source - before taxes and benefits - so there is less need for redistribution. Although the two methods could be contrasted as the big government and the small government methods of achieving greater equality, the two approaches can of course be combined.

There are examples of each approach internationally and among the different states of the USA. For example, Sweden gets its greater equality through redistribution, through taxes and benefits, and public services provided by a big state. In contrast, Japan has a greater equality of "market incomes", before redistribution. Differences in Japanese earnings are smaller even before taxes and benefits. While Sweden has a large state and well developed public services, in Japan government social expenditure makes up an unusually small part (compared to other OECD countries) of its Gross National Income. The same contrast exists among US states - even between neighbouring states like Vermont and New Hampshire. Vermont takes the big government route and New Hampshire the small. But despite the contrast in how greater equality is achieved, Sweden, Japan, Vermont and New Hampshire all enjoy good health, lower rates of most social problems - i.e. all the benefits of greater equality.

What this means is that how societies become more equal is much less important than whether or not they do so. There is no shortage of policy options for governments wanting to make a society more equal. There are hundreds of different ways of doing so: indeed, with government expenditure (central and local) averaging close to 40 percent of Gross Domestic Product in developed countries, it is impossible for governments not to affect income distribution. Preventing excessively high incomes and concentrations of wealth at the top is as important as pulling up the incomes at the bottom, and the first clearly provides the means for the second.

As well as more progressive income and property taxes and more generous benefits, we also need policies to reduce differences in incomes before taxes and benefits. That means higher minimum wages, more generous pensions, running the national economy with low levels of unemployment, better education and retraining policies, increasing the bargaining power of trade unions. Good labour law, protection of union rights and minimum wages are amongst the factors contributing to greater equality of incomes in New Hampshire. One of the factors which made a difference in Japan was how companies were owned and run. Differences in incomes of directors and employees in Japanese companies used to be smaller partly because almost all directors were people who had been promoted from among those who had worked their way up the firm. Other differences in corporate governance made unions influential stakeholders and union leaders were sometimes given seats on the board. Patterns such as these led to different ethical standards: Ron Dore describes how it was not uncommon for directors of Japanese companies to take pay cuts themselves to avoid laying off junior employees.

# Political Will

Political will is however a precondition for success for the adoption of any effective policies to reduce inequality - political will among public and politicians alike. That will only be forthcoming when people recognise how important greater equality is to the quality of social relations - and so to the real quality of life - for the vast majority of the population. We have shown (see [The Evidence](#)) that greater equality improves health and life expectancy and dramatically reduces the frequency of a wide range of social problems including violence, mental illness, obesity, drug addiction, and obesity. Many people worry about what has gone wrong with modern societies without recognising how many of the problems originate in the effects of low social status and status competition which are exacerbated by greater inequality.

A major implication of the new research findings is that reducing inequality is no longer something which depends on the well-off adopting more altruistic attitudes to those in relative poverty: instead a more equal society benefits the vast majority of the population. A wider recognition of the way we all suffer the costs of inequality will lead to a growing desire for a more equal society. Our primary task is therefore to gain a widespread understanding the way inequality makes societies socially dysfunctional - right across the board.

We hope that political parties, trade unions, policy institutes and other groups will develop their own proposals for increasing equality. The best policies will depend both on the country and the timing. While we hope to gain a wider recognition of the ways in which inequality makes societies increasingly dysfunctional, we do not suggest that there is a 'one policy fits all' solution.

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## The theory of everything

*These two British academics argue that almost every social problem, from crime to obesity, stems from one root cause: inequality. John Crace meets the authors of what might be the most important book of the year*

John Crace , The Guardian, March 12, 2009

Another day, another headline: today obesity, tomorrow teenage pregnancy, the day after crime figures. Social problems operate a revolving-door policy these days. As soon as one goes away, another turns up. For the most part, these problems are regarded as entirely separate from each other. Obesity is a health issue, crime a policing issue and so on. So the government launches new initiatives here, there and everywhere, builds new hospitals, puts more money into the police and prisons. And there's little real hope of improvement.

Until now, maybe. Quietly spoken, late middle-aged and quintessentially English, Richard Wilkinson is the last person you would expect to come up with a sweeping theory of everything. Yet that's precisely what this retired professor from Nottingham medical school, in collaboration with his partner, Kate Pickett, a lecturer at the University of York, has done.

The opening sentence of their new book, *The Spirit Level*, cautions, "People usually exaggerate the importance of their own work and we worry about claiming too much" - yet by the time you reach the end you wonder how they could have claimed any more. After all, they argue that almost every social problem common in developed

societies - reduced life expectancy, child mortality, drugs, crime, homicide rates, mental illness and obesity - has a single root cause: inequality.

And, they say, it's not just the deprived underclass that loses out in an unequal society: everyone does, even the better off. Because it's not absolute levels of poverty that create the social problems, but the differentials in income between rich and poor. Just as someone from the lowest-earning 20% of a more equal society is more likely to live longer than their counterpart from a less equal society, so too someone from the highest-earning 20% has a longer life expectancy than their alter ego in a less equal society.

Take these random headline statistics. The US is wealthier and spends more on health care than any other country, yet a baby born in Greece, where average income levels are about half that of the US, has a lower risk of infant mortality and longer life expectancy than an American baby. Obesity is twice as common in the UK as the more equal societies of Sweden and Norway, and six times more common in the US than in Japan. Teenage birth rates are six times higher in the UK than in more equal societies; mental illness is three times as common in the US as in Japan; murder rates are three times higher in more unequal countries. The examples are almost endless.

Inequality, it seems, is an equal-opportunity disease, something that has a direct impact on everyone. But doesn't that mean equality is no longer a matter of morality or altruism for the better off, but naked self-interest? There's a brief hiatus before Pickett says, "I'm not sure that's quite the message we're trying to get across." Then there's another brief pause, before Wilkinson adds, "But it is still true."

Pickett is more alert to the political implications of their findings, while Wilkinson is more happy to follow an argument to its conclusion, however uncomfortable that may be. You can understand Pickett's concern. If self-interest and greed create inequality, then you don't necessarily want to give the impression that the solution lies in more of the same. On the other hand, there's a pleasing irony to the idea that the well-off may have mistaken their self-interest for so long, and it's not often that bleeding-heart liberals get to combine their morality and self-interest. So, as Wilkinson points out, we should make the most of it.

They insist The Spirit Level is a collaborative effort, but some collaborations are more equal than others. While Pickett, in her early 40s, is a comparative newcomer, having completed her PhD in 1999, Wilkinson has been working on the social determinants of public health with varying levels of success and frustration for years. The spark for The Spirit Level came five years ago when extensive data first became available from the World Bank, and he realised that the phenomenon he had observed within his field - that health was driven by relative difference rather than absolute material standards - applied in other areas of social policy.

"It became clear," Wilkinson says, "that countries such as the US, the UK and Portugal, where the top 20% earn seven, eight or nine times more than the lowest 20%, scored noticeably higher on all social problems at every level of society than in countries such as Sweden and Japan, where the differential is only two or three times higher at the top."

The statistics came from the World Bank's list of 50 richest countries, but Wilkinson suggests their conclusions apply more broadly. To ensure their findings weren't explainable by cultural differences, they analysed the data from all 50 US states and found the same pattern. In states where income differentials were greatest, so were

the social problems and lack of cohesion.

Two things immediately became clear to Wilkinson. "While I'd always assumed that an equal society must score better on social cohesion," he says, "I'd always imagined you could only observe a noticeable effect in some kind of utopia. I never expected to find such clear differences between existing market economies."

There are anomalies. Suicide and smoking levels are both higher in more equal societies. "Violence tends to be directed towards other people or yourself," Wilkinson says, "and it is our guess that in societies with a higher sense of community responsibility, people tend to blame themselves rather than other people when things go wrong. Smoking is a little different: all countries seem to follow a similar trajectory. It starts among upper-class men, then moves to upper-class women and then down the social ladder; quitting smoking seems to follow a similar pattern."

Even so, the correlation between inequality and social problems remains startling. And it is the differential rather than any notional baseline of poverty that's critical. The US has its own benchmarked poverty line, with some 13% of the population falling below it: yet of those who come into this category, 80% have air-conditioning, 33% have a dishwasher and 50% have two or more cars. Which is not quite what some other countries might call poverty.

In Britain, the Labour government, despite its protestations to the contrary, has only maintained inequality at the level at which it inherited it. "They've taken some positive action at the bottom income levels for pensioners and young families," says Pickett. "But the damage has all been done at the other end. Peter Mandelson said early in the Labour administration, 'We are intensely relaxed about people getting filthy rich,' and he's been as good as his word."

What is it about unequal societies that causes the damage? Wilkinson believes the answer lies in the psycho-social areas of hierarchy and status. The greater the differential between the haves and have-nots, the greater importance everyone places on the material aspects of consumption; what brand of car you drive carries far more meaning in a more hierarchical society than in a flatter one. It's the knock-on effects of this status anxiety that finds socially corrosive expression in crime, ill-health and mistrust.

Wilkinson draws on some eclectic illustrations. When monkeys are kept in a hierarchical environment, those at the bottom self-medicate with more cocaine; a caste gap opens in the performance of Hindu children when they have to announce their caste before exams; the stress hormone, cortisol, rises most when people face the evaluation of others; and so on. The result is always the same: fear of falling foul of the wealth gap gets under everyone's skin by making them anxious about their status.

For a while, Wilkinson and Pickett wondered if the correlations were too good to be true. The links were so strong, they almost couldn't believe no one had spotted them before, so they asked colleagues to come up with any other explanations. They looked at the religiosity of a society, multiculturalism, anything they could think of. They even looked at the possibility they had got it the wrong way round and it was the social problems that were causing the inequality. But nothing else stood up to statistical analysis.

Wilkinson openly admits *The Spirit Level* is his swan-song. He feels that as an academic he has fulfilled his side of the bargain by identifying the problem; it's up to

activists and politicians to work out the solutions. Pickett doesn't see things quite that way, and is largely the driving force behind the creation of the Equality Trust website to campaign for change. "There must be a possibility of change," she says. "Everything stacks up. Reducing inequality fits in with the environmental agenda; it benefits the developing world, as more equal societies give more in overseas aid; and most significantly, everyone is fed up with the corporate greed and bonus culture that have caused the current financial crisis, so if ever a government had the electorate's goodwill to act, it's now."

Wilkinson is fairly blunt about where government should start. "It has got to limit pay at the top end," he says. "It's the rich that got us into this mess and the rich who should get us out of it." Whether Labour has the nerve to upset those whom it has most assiduously courted is another matter. But he can always dream, and in the meantime he is off home to watch TV.

"I've become gripped by Paris Hilton's Best Friend," he laughs. "It's the perfect example of a dysfunctional, hierarchical society."

## Kate Pickett and Richard Wilkinson: Inequality rise is to blame for 'broken society'

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By Kate Pickett and Richard Wilkinson

FOR some time now, a lot of people have been worried about our 'broken society' – worried about knife crime and youth violence, teenage births and drug use, childhood obesity and the breakdown of trust in our neighbourhoods. Why, in a world of plenty, has life become so stressful and difficult for so many?

Now we have the 'broken economy' as well. Unemployment, housing repossessions, bankruptcies and business failures are all rising. While the rich got richer, we were promised that economic growth would trickle down and benefit us all. The individualistic 1980s mantra "greed is good" morphed into the less aggressive notion of the nineties and noughties - that economic growth would be good for society.

Last month, a 32-year old investment banker talked about his work. Joining an investment bank, he said, was like "joining a gang of jewellery robbers just after they had made the heist of the century and just before they got caught by the police".

It's clear that those at the top, the bankers and trust managers, the regulators and the property barons, haven't cared much about benefiting anybody but themselves. And successive governments have not cared to rein in their pursuit of ever greater wealth or the growing gap between the rich and the poor.

As well as breaking the economy, could the rise in inequality also be the cause of our broken society?

In our book, *The Spirit Level: Why More Equal Societies Almost Always Do Better*, we describe new research which shows that more equal societies – with smaller income differences between rich and poor – are friendlier and more cohesive: community life is stronger, people trust each other more, homicide rates are lower and there is less bullying and conflict among school children.

In addition, almost all the health and social problems that we know are more common in the most deprived neighbourhoods are also very much more common in more unequal societies. More unequal societies have worse health and lower life expectancy, more people suffering from drug problems and mental illness, rates of teenage births, obesity and violence are higher, and more people are in prison.

We've examined the effects of income inequality among the rich developed societies and then, to provide a separate test, among the 50 states of the USA. Looking at a wide range of health and social problems in both settings, the evidence shows that a "broken society" results from too much inequality. More unequal societies seem to become socially dysfunctional, doing worse on almost all health and social problems.

When we write about more equal societies, we're not describing an imaginary utopia. Instead, we're analysing the effects of existing inequalities among the rich, market economies. At the more equal end of the spectrum are countries like Sweden, Norway and Japan, where the incomes of the top 20 per cent are three to four times as big as the incomes of the poorest 20 per cent. At the more unequal end of the spectrum are countries like the USA, Portugal and, of course, the UK where the richest 20 per cent are up to nine times as rich as the poorest 20 per cent.

One of the most important findings is that the benefits of greater equality are not confined to the poor and those living in deprived areas. Instead, the vast majority of the population do better in more equal societies. Even well educated, middle class people with good incomes will be likely to live longer, enjoy better health, and will be less likely to suffer violence.

Their children will do better in school, will be less likely to take drugs and less likely to become teenage parents. Although the benefits of greater equality are bigger lower down the social ladder, they are still apparent even among the well-off.

How can we explain these effects? The most important explanation involves the stresses, insecurities and anxieties caused by bigger social status differences and more status competition.

It affects how people feel in relation to one another, and how much we judge each other by status. Inequality also increases the strains on family life, especially lower down the social ladder.

It makes people more sensitive about how they are seen, to being disrespected or looked down on – which are so frequently the triggers to violence. Increased status competition also adds to the pressure to consume.

Some people have always imagined that inequality was divisive and socially corrosive.

Now the statistics show they are right – even small differences in inequality matter and make a huge difference to the quality of life for all of us.

**Kate Pickett (Senior Lecturer) and Richard Wilkinson (Visiting Professor)  
lecture at York University's health sciences department.  
They are authors of a new book *The Spirit Level: Why More Equal Societies  
Almost Always Do Better.***