

Inequality: the obstacle between us
or
Dysfunctional Societies: why inequality matters (e)

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If you look at rich countries and compare life expectancy, mental health, homicide rates, conflict between school children, teenage birth rates, drug abuse, obesity rates, levels of trust, the educational performance of school children, or the strength of community life, you find that countries which tend to do well on one of these measures tend to do well on all of them, and the ones which do badly, do badly on all of them. What accounts for the difference?

The key seems to be the amount of inequality in each society. The picture is consistent whether we compare rich countries or the 50 states of the USA. The more unequal a society is, the more ill health and social problems it has. It seems likely that the extent of income inequality in each society serves as a determinant and expression of the scale and importance of social class stratification. The greater the inequality, the greater the status competition and the more prevalent are all the problems associated with relative deprivation. However, although the amount of inequality has its greatest effect on rates of problems among the poor, its effects extend to almost all income groups reducing levels of well-being among the vast majority of the population.

Inequality has always been regarded as socially corrosive. Now comparisons between rich market democracies show that even small differences in inequality affect the quality of social relations in society at large. Research on the social determinants of health provides some pointers to why we are so sensitive to inequality: it increases status insecurity, raises the "social evaluative threat" and heightens issues of respect and disrespect. Particularly important are the effects of low social status, poor friendship networks and early childhood experience. These affect forms of psychosocial insecurity, anxiety and people's sense of whether they are valued and appreciated. Through these pathways inequality not only affects social relation within a society, but also leads to differences in international relations.

A full explanation of the theory and evidence of how inequality affects societies will be published in a book by Wilkinson RG, Pickett KE, *The Spirit Level: why more equal societies almost always do better*. (Penguin, London March 2009)