Child Health & Wellbeing in Rich Nations: The Role of Income Inequality

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


www.equalitytrust.org.uk
Health is related to income differences *within* rich societies but not to those *between* them.

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**Between (rich) societies**

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**Within societies**

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**Source:** Wilkinson & Pickett, *The Spirit Level* (2009)

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Electoral wards in England & Wales ranked by deprivation score
## The UNICEF Index of Child Well-being, 2007

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimensions of child well-being</th>
<th>Dimension 1</th>
<th>Dimension 2</th>
<th>Dimension 3</th>
<th>Dimension 4</th>
<th>Dimension 5</th>
<th>Dimension 6</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Average ranking position (for all 6 dimensions)</td>
<td>Material well-being</td>
<td>Health and safety</td>
<td>Educational well-being</td>
<td>Family and peer relationships</td>
<td>Behaviours and risks</td>
<td>Subjective well-being</td>
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</table>
Child-Wellbeing is Unrelated to Average Incomes in Rich Countries

Child Well-being is Better in More Equal Rich Countries


www.equalitytrust.org.uk
How much richer are the richest 20% than the poorest 20%?

Child wellbeing and income inequality in US States

Correlations and p-values

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Income inequality</th>
<th>Average income</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Foundation for Child Development 25-item index</td>
<td>0.43 (0.002)</td>
<td>-0.61 (&lt;0.001)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kids Count 10-item index (shown in graph)</td>
<td>0.51 (&lt;0.001)</td>
<td>-0.53 (&lt;0.001)</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Infant Mortality Rates are Higher in More Unequal Countries

More children are overweight in more unequal countries

More children are overweight in more unequal US states

Educational Scores are Higher in More Equal Rich Countries

More Children Drop Out of High School in More Unequal US States


www.equalitytrust.org.uk
Teenage Birth Rates are Higher in More Unequal Rich Countries

Teen Pregnancy Rates are Higher in More Unequal US States


www.equalitytrust.org.uk
Children experience more conflict in more unequal societies.

11, 13 & 15 yr olds fighting, bullying, and finding peers not kind & helpful


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


www.equalitytrust.org.uk
Income inequality and school bullying by 11-year-olds in 37 countries ($r = .62$)

Source: Frank Elgar, *in press*
Child outcomes related to income inequality

• In rich countries
  – Infant mortality
  – Low birth weight
  – Overweight
  – Educational achievement
  – Peer relations
  – Bullying
  – Teenage births
  – Social mobility

• In US states
  – Infant mortality
  – Low birth weight
  – Overweight
  – Educational achievement
  – Mental health problems
  – Teenage pregnancy
  – Juvenile homicides
Surprises

• “Low aspirations” are more common in more equal societies
  – But educational achievement is higher….

• “Feeling lonely” is more common in more equal societies
  – But child conflict and peer relationships are better….
Literacy Scores of 16-25 year olds by Parents' Education

Infant mortality rates by social class

Inequalities become entrenched early in life

- Cognitive scores at 3 years of age (MCS)

- Children with the most educated parents 12 months ahead of those with the least educated parents

- Children in families with incomes below our poverty line had scores about 8 months behind those with incomes above it

- White children about half a month ahead of the all-UK average, followed by children from a mixed ethnic background, about half a month behind

- Bangladeshi and Pakistani children lowest vocabulary scores, with averages around 35, characteristic of the lowest tenth in the population at large
Why are children so sensitive to inequality?

• Effects of relative poverty on material resources?
• Impact on family life and relationships?
• Direct awareness of increased status differentiation?
Figure 1  Public spending on family benefits in cash, services and tax measures *Percentage of GDP, in 2003. Average OECD 24 2.3%*

Source: OECD.
Inequality affects family life & relationships

- Income inequality is associated with:
  - Longer working hours
  - Divorce rates (US counties)
  - Shorter parental leave
  - Adult mental health & drug use

A two stage process: parental experiences of inequality shape child development

Parenting styles prepare children for the kind of social relations they may have to deal with in adulthood

Preparation for a society dependent on:-
- trust, cooperation, reciprocity, empathy?
  or:
- fending for yourself, not trusting others?
Status differentiation has a direct effect on cognitive performance.

The Effect of Caste Identity on Children's Performance

What can be done? …cont

At the local level it is about people feeling valued – in all contexts:

- school,
- work,
- family,
- among friends

Early childhood: support for least well-off families

The social environment in schools
Outcomes of a home-visiting intervention

Fig 3. Probabilities ± standard errors that correspond to estimates for dichotomous outcomes presented in Tables 3 and 4 where there were significant effects or trends for any treatment contrast. Child outcomes are shown for children born to women with low psychological resources. C indicates control; P, paraprofessional; and N, nurse.

Olds et al. *Pediatrics* 2002;110;486-496
Single parents and child wellbeing

UNICEF index of child well-being

Lone parents as % of all households with dependent children
Trends in UK income inequality 1979-2005/6

The Equality Trust
http://www.equalitytrust.org.uk
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


www.equalitytrust.org.uk
Living in social groups increased “happy” brain chemicals in dominant monkeys but produced no change in subordinate monkeys.

These neurobiological changes had an important behavioural influence.

When given access to cocaine, dominant monkeys took less than subordinates.

Smoking in pregnancy in the Millennium Cohort

- Lived away from home before age 17
- Family breakdown
- Never sees mother
- Never sees father
- No time with friends
- No one to share feelings
- No other parents to talk to
- Neighbours unfriendly
- Difficult relationship with partner
- Difficult relationship with baby
- Partner-perpetrated violence
- Co-habited with more than one person
