

Material success and social failure?

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It is common knowledge that in rich societies the poor have shorter lives and suffer more from almost every social problem. Likewise, large inequalities of income are often regarded as divisive and corrosive.

In a groundbreaking book, based on 30 years' research, Richard Wilkinson, Emeritus Professor at The University of Nottingham together with co-author Kate Pickett from the University of York, go an important stage beyond either of these ideas to demonstrate that more unequal societies are bad for almost everyone within them — the well-off as well as the poor.

Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett forcefully demonstrate that nearly every modern social and environmental problem — ill-health, lack of community, life, violence, drugs, obesity, mental illness, long working hours, big prison populations — is more likely to occur in a less equal society, and adversely affects all of those within it.

The remarkable data the book presents and the measures it uses are like a spirit level which we can hold up to compare the conditions of different societies. It reveals that if Britain became as equal as the average for the four most equal of the rich countries (Japan, Norway, Sweden and Finland), levels of trust might be expected to increase by two-thirds, homicide rates could fall by 75 per cent, everyone could get the equivalent of almost seven weeks extra holiday a year, and governments could be closing prisons all over the country.

The Spirit Level: Why More Equal Societies Almost Always Do Better,

shows us how, after a point, additional income buys less and less additional health, happiness and wellbeing. The issue is now community and how we relate to each other. This important book explains how it is now possible to piece together a new, compelling and coherent picture of how we can release societies from the grip of pervasive and schismatic dysfunctional behaviour, a picture which will revitalise politics and provide a new way of thinking about how we organise human communities. It is a major new approach to how we can improve the real quality of life, not just for the poor, but for everyone.

Richard Wilkinson has played a formative role in international research and his work has been published in 10 languages. He studied economic history at the London School of Economics before training in epidemiology and is Professor Emeritus at The University of Nottingham Medical School and Honorary Professor at University College London.

Kate Pickett is a Senior Lecturer at the University of York and a National Institute for Health Research Career Scientist. She studied physical anthropology at Cambridge, nutritional sciences at Cornell and epidemiology at Berkeley before spending four years as an Assistant Professor at the University of Chicago.

They have founded The Equality Trust, a charitable trust which seeks to explain the benefits of a more equal society, for more information visit: <http://www.equalitytrust.org.uk/>.

Source: University of Nottingham

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