

Reminders of inequality for poor people prod them to be more likely to want to tax the rich

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A pair of political science researchers at the University of California, has found that showing people a symbol of inequality can push them to demand that rich people be taxed more. In their paper published in the

journal *Nature*, Melissa Sands and Daniel de Kadt outline an experiment they conducted with poor people living in South Africa and an expensive car. Colin Tredoux and John Dixon with the University of Cape Town and the Open University, respectively, have published a [News & Views piece](#) in the same journal issue outlining the work by the team in South Africa and issues with their findings.

Prior research has shown that financial inequality can have a detrimental impact on people who live on the lower end of the economic spectrum, including a shorter lifespan and a lower quality of life. Prior research has also looked into the [psychological impact](#) of living as a poor person in a society where there is abundance, such as the U.S. In this new effort, the researchers wanted to better understand the factors that motivate people living in poverty to demand changes that might improve their lot. To learn more, they devised an experiment to gauge whether [poor people](#) are more likely to demand change (in the form of voting to increase taxes on the rich) if they were reminded of the income disparity that exists around them.

The experiment consisted of parking an expensive car on different streets in Soweto—a very poor town in South Africa—and then asking people who passed by to sign a [petition](#). One of the petitions asked whether the government should increase taxes on the rich, while the other petition asked if nuclear power plants should be shut down in the country. In some scenarios, the expensive car was present nearby; in others it was not.

The researchers found that the presence of the car had an immediate impact: 9% fewer people agreed to stop and sign either petition. They also found that 11% more people were willing to sign the petition advocating increasing taxes on the rich when the expensive car was present.

More information: Melissa L. Sands et al. Local exposure to inequality raises support of people of low wealth for taxing the wealthy, *Nature* (2020). [DOI: 10.1038/s41586-020-2763-1](https://doi.org/10.1038/s41586-020-2763-1)

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