

# Dysfunctional Societies: Why Inequality Matters

[Transcript]

## Introduction

**News Montage:** America is far more violent than most of the other large nations, all of the other large nations in the world. Why is that?

Gun homicides in the United States: 11,030. In Japan: 11. And I didn't read that wrong: 11.

We've averaged almost one mass shooting every month in this country.

The United States has the highest documented incarceration rate of any country in the world.

The United States right now incarcerates more African Americans, as a percentage, than apartheid South Africa did.

I think people might be shocked to hear that the United States has the highest teen pregnancy rate in the developed world. And not just by a little bit, by a lot.

So it turns out that most of the world's extra body fat is attached to bodies living right here in the United States.

In a quarter of the counties in the United States, female life expectancy is dropping.

Life expectancy for men in the United States ranked lowest among the 17 countries reviewed.

The latest portrait of need shows 14.7 million children, 1 child out every 5, is poor.

Infant mortality in the United States is the worst of any developed nation in the world. The world.

[Title Screen]

**Richard Wilkinson:** I'm Richard Wilkinson. I'm an emeritus professor of social epidemiology with appointments at University College of London, University of York, and the University of Nottingham Medical School. I'm also author of a book called *The Spirit Level: Why More Equal Societies Are Stronger*.

Epidemiology is the field that looks at the causes of health and disease in populations. So for instance it's about finding out whether people who get some disease, some cancer, are more likely to have worked with a particular chemical. The link between lung cancer and smoking was discovered by epidemiologists.

My field of social epidemiology is concerned with the wider social, economic and psychological causes of health and illness. It tries to understand what's behind differences in health, what leads some societies to do much worse than others.

So for example, compared to other developed countries, the U.S. has one of the highest rates of violence, of teenage births, of obesity. It has low life expectancy compared to other rich developed countries, high rates of imprisonment, low levels of child well-being, and so on. Why is that?

One of the important clues to what's going on comes from looking at rich and poor countries together. You find that there's a very rapid rise in life expectancy in the early stages of economic growth. But then, amongst the richer developed countries, it starts to level out and further increases in GNP per head make less and less difference.

So for example, life expectancy in Japan is higher than in the U.S. despite the average national income being less. In fact, life expectancy in the U.S. is amongst the lowest in the developed world, despite it being the richest country.

One of the driving ideas of social and economic policy is that economic growth is supposed to make societies healthier and happier. The richer a society is, the better. And while that's true in the early stages of economic development, beyond a certain point, increases in the average income of societies seems to make almost no difference at all.

But when you look within any of the rich developed countries, it looks as if income is extraordinarily important. There is a regular gradient right across society. The better off people are, the longer they live. In any given year, a greater proportion of the poor die than the rich.

And it's not just the differences between the poor and the rest of society. Even well-off people just below the richest are less healthy than the rich. We are all part of this pattern that people commonly refer to as "health inequalities," that is the big differences in health and life expectancy between people in different social classes or with different levels of income or education.

Commonly, you find anything between five and sometimes fifteen-year differences in life expectancy between the poorest areas and the richest areas in the developed countries. This is a real paradox. The differences between countries don't seem to matter, but income differences within these same countries seem to matter very much. How can we make sense of that?

What it suggests is that it may not be the level of your income that's important, not how much wealth you have, but how much you have compared to others in your society. So what we may be seeing are the effects of social position, social status, and relative income.

It seems to be about the relation between people within a society, not about the absolute material standards. How can we check this out?

One way might be to see what happens if we make the status differences between people bigger or smaller. If you increase or decrease the income differences between us, what happens to life expectancy?

One way of measuring how unequal a society is by seeing how much richer the top 20% of the population are than the bottom 20%. In more equal countries, like Japan and Sweden, the top 20% is perhaps 3 or 4 times as rich as the bottom 20%, while in more unequal countries, like Portugal, Singapore, United States, and Britain the gaps are twice as big: the top 20% are seven, eight, or even nine times as rich as the bottom 20%.

We think of all the rich developed countries as fairly similar, but these are important differences and they have effects on the societies we live in.

So if you look at life expectancy from this perspective something very interesting happens. While there is little relationship between life expectancy and the overall wealth of the society, when we look at its relationship to inequality we find that the more equal a society is the longer people's average life expectancy.

And this connection to inequality is not just true of life expectancy. It's also true of a wide range of health and social problems - including infant mortality, mental illness, obesity, educational performance, homicide rates, imprisonment rates, etc.

We put these different outcomes together to form an index of health and social problems. The higher the score the worse the problems are. So countries can be ranked on this index from the lowest, which do better, to the highest, doing worst.

If you plot them against GNP per head there is very little relationship - it doesn't seem to matter among the developed countries if a country is a bit richer or poorer. But as soon as you look at these problems against income inequality, you see a remarkable correlation. The more equal a society is the better it does.

This holds true across all types of issues. The United Nations produced something called The Index of Child Well-Being for measuring child well-being among the rich developed countries. It combines 40 different indicators related to well-being of children. So it contains whether kids can talk to their parents, whether there is bullying in schools, whether they have books at home, how well they do on immunization rates, etc. The higher this score the better a country's child well-being is. Again, shown against GNP per head there's very little relationship, but there is a strong relationship as soon as you look at it in relation to income inequality.

Now, some people could look at all these findings and say that because these societies are so different from each other culturally, it's impossible to say that whether it's income inequality

that's the key factor in explaining things like child well-being or health and social problems or whether there's something quite different involved. But when we look at income inequality within a country the same relationship seems to hold.

So for example, if we compare American states in relation to the index of health and well being we find that when they are mapped against overall income in a state there is a very weak relationship, but as soon as you map it against the level of income inequality, they line up remarkable well. So even within the same country, where the culture is very similar, the more unequal parts do worse than the more equal ones on a range of these problems.

The conclusions from this data are pretty clear. The problems in rich countries, like the United States, are not caused by countries not being rich enough, but by the scale of material differences within each society being so big. What matters is where we stand in relation to others in our own society.

### **How Is Inequality Bad for Society?**

**Richard Wilkinson:** If that's the case, then we have to ask the next question, which is: how does inequality lead to these different effects?

One of the answers is quite intuitive - that is, high levels of inequality damage the quality of social relations and it's damaging to social cohesion, to what binds a society together.

For example, we know that how much people trust others in society is related to the level of inequality. So answers to the question "do you agree that most people can be trusted" can be used to give countries a trust score. The highest number is in Sweden where 66% of the population feel they can trust others, to a low of 10% of people in Portugal who feel the same.

The same relation between trust and inequality holds even when we look at American states. In more unequal states fewer people agree that most people can be trusted. Imagine living in a place, for instance like Mississippi, where the vast majority of the population feel they cannot trust other people, and what that must mean for the quality of everyday life - the interactions between people at work, on the street, in shops, in schools - what that means for the quality of community life and friendships for instance.

And this has real effects on society - things such as babies being born with low birth weight, mothers receiving prenatal care, how much was being spent on health, the number of people with AIDS and cancer, immunization rates. It's connected to social stress and how strong community relations are. The weaker the sense of community, the worse off people are in those societies.

In general, as income differences have increased, people are more separate from each other, and as those at the higher end of the income scale are seen as superior and more highly valued,

social status becomes more important to how people think of themselves and how they think of each other.

In a society where some people are respected and admired at the top, and other people are looked down on, regarded as failures at the bottom, what we call the social evaluative threat increases. Status anxiety increases.

We become more worried about how we're seen and judged. If some people count for everything and others for nothing, where do you stand?

All the emotions to do with social comparisons become more important, and stress increases. If you measure levels of cortisol - a central stress hormone - what really pushes them up are the situations where we feel that our self-esteem, our social status and how others judge us, are at stake. That makes us feel very tense, ill at ease, and self-conscious. And I think that in the modern world with more inequality, in the individualistic mass societies, those kinds of pressures are extremely powerful.

Stressors to do with those kinds of social comparisons are damaging to health because they trigger the flight or fight response. Basically, if you are threatened, you mobilize energy for muscular activity. You become very alert and your reaction time speeds up. But, at the same time, all sorts of things that are not essential in the brief moment when you are trying to escape from this threat are put on hold. So things like tissue repair, reproductive functions, digestion and growth, are down regulated because they are not important when you are dealing with a brief emergency.

But if this "emergency" situation, the stress and anxiety, becomes a more or less permanent state of being, if the stressors go on for weeks and months and years as we go on worrying about how others see us and judge us, we become vulnerable to a whole range of health problems.

We now understand how stress affects the immune system, the cardiovascular system, laying you open to all sorts of health risks over time. Indeed, it looks a bit like more rapid aging.

Social status differentiation is also bad for friendship. That matters not only because friendship is crucial to happiness, but also because friendship is highly protective of health. The combined results from over a hundred studies have shown that whether or not you have friends is as important as whether or not you smoke to your health.

Conversely, social status differences, and particularly low social status, are bad for health. To the extent that inequality increases social differentiation it puts up boundaries between people and limits who we might feel connected to.

Our social networks are much weaker than they used to be and our chances of establishing meaningful friendships are really more limited.

This is the way inequality gets under the skin. It's in the air we breathe and impacts on a whole range of social problems. Living with too much inequality affects us almost like an environmental pollutant and it's up to us to decide how much to tolerate.

### **Inequality & Health**

**Richard Wilkinson:** Clearly, living in an unequal society doesn't affect everyone the same way. Those on the lower end of the income scale are much more affected by social evaluative threat because they are so often looked down on and devalued.

There is a famous set of studies, the Whitehall Studies, which look at civil servants - their health and their death rates. At the start, researchers thought that the highest levels of stress and disease would be found amongst the senior staff, executive ranks, those who had the highest status and more demanding jobs. But they found instead that it was people in the lowest grades that had death rates three times higher than those in the top grades, and what the researchers concluded was that it was stress and people's sense of a lack of control over their work that made the most difference - that secretaries and clerical staff are more stressed than their bosses.

The Whitehall studies found that as well as a higher risk of heart disease, low job status was related to some cancers, to lung disease, to gastrointestinal disease, to depression, suicide, sickness absence, and back pain.

Lots of studies have now shown essentially the same thing - that lower social status has a powerful impact on physical health. And this isn't just a matter of the top and bottom, there's a clear gradient in health running right across society. Where we are in relation to other people matters - those above us have better health and those below us have worse health. So, the more you can reduce those social distances between people, the healthier the society is.

The cases of Japan and the U.S. are fairly dramatic illustrations of how equality and health go hand in hand. In the middle of the 20th century, the U.S. was a much more equal country and Japan was a much more unequal country. And Americans had much better health than Japan at that time, ranking very high in the international league table for life expectancy and infant mortality. But since then they have swapped places so that Japan has become more equal and the U.S. one of the most unequal. Although health has improved everywhere, Americans have slipped down the international league table for health, and the Japanese have moved up, so Japan now has the longest life expectancy in the world and one of the smallest gaps between rich and poor.

The same pattern holds if you look at Russia, which has experienced dramatic decreases in life expectancy since the 1990s when inequality started to increase and it moved from a centrally planned to a market economy.

It's not only physical health that's affected by inequality - there are very dramatic differences in rates of mental illness in different societies.

For instance, the World Health Organization has measured mental illness in exactly the same way in a wide variety of countries, so we can make really good comparisons of levels of mental illness, and when you look at those results in relation to inequality, again, you see close relationships.

Amongst the more equal countries, you get perhaps eight or ten percent of population that had any mental illness in the year preceding the survey. But in more unequal countries it rises to twenty or twenty-five percent. Britain had 23% of the population with some kind of mental illness in the preceding year. The U.S. had 26%.

Of course, anxiety and depression are quite strongly affected by social status, because where you stand in relation to other people actually affects the chemical behavior of our brains. For example, serotonin and dopamine play an important role in mood regulation and an imbalance of these chemicals in our brains has been linked to depression and other mental disorders.

Illegal drug use is also correlated with inequality. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime has released data on illegal use of opiates like heroine, cocaine, cannabis, ecstasy and amphetamines. And they correlate with inequality again.

There was a clever experiment conducted by researchers at Wake Forest University. They took twenty macaque monkeys and housed them for a while in individual cages, and then they put them together in groups of four and observed the social hierarchies and how they ranked each other. They also did PET scans to see what was happening to their brains, and what they discovered was that the dominant monkeys, those on the upper end of the social scale, had higher dopamine levels than the subordinates. That is, they felt good about themselves in relation to others.

The monkeys were also taught to self-administer cocaine to themselves by pushing a lever. The dominant monkeys took much less cocaine than the subordinate ones, who were in effect medicating themselves against the pain of their low social status. This might be a clue to the relation in humans between illegal drug use and inequality - people are partly medicating themselves against the effects of inequality.

Similarly, the increasingly large number of prescriptions written by doctors for mood-altering drugs in the most unequal societies indicates how the relationship between depression and inequality might work.

## Inequality & Social Problems

**Richard Wilkinson:** We can also trace the effects of inequality on social problems.

For example, if we look at the issue of violence, measured by homicide rates, we see it has almost no relation to GNP per head among the rich countries, but a strong relationship to inequality. Homicides are more common in more unequal societies. The U.S. is at the extreme end of the homicide spectrum, largely because of the scale of inequality.

The relation between violence and inequality also holds when comparing states within the U.S. There are of course lots of factors that affect violence - for instance, because the vast amount of violence is committed by men, we know that there's an important gender aspect to it. But even taking this into consideration, inequality seems to play an important independent role because in more unequal societies we know the social evaluative threat increases.

We worry more about how we're seen and judged, more people are denied access to the markers of status and respect like good housing, cars, a good job and so on, so people feel more sensitive to being disrespected, looked down on, and so on.

And, as many people have noticed, the most common triggers to violence are people feeling humiliated, loss of face, disrespect, and so on. There is one way I can make you respect me if I can't any other way, and that's physical force.

Interestingly, almost all of the boys who committed school shootings in the U.S. fit this pattern. They were disrespected by classmates and bullies, and responded by trying to reclaim some of that respect - at least in their own eyes. And it's not just murderers that seem to be affected. It's all kinds of aggression or violence.

If you look at children's experience of conflict internationally, the percentage of kids who said they had been bullied or bullied others. The more unequal the country, the more conflict even between children. The more equal, the less conflict.

In his book *Bowling Alone*, Robert Putnam talked about the relationship between how well people felt they would do in a fist fight, which he calls a measure of "pugnacity," and how strongly they were embedded in a supporting community. People who lived in the unequal states were more likely to say they would do better in a fist fight than an opponent.

We know that people at the low end of the social status scale are kind of hyper vigilant to being disrespected, being looked down on, and are more likely to respond aggressively. This hyper vigilance will also lead to more chronic stress, and will affect your responses to other people, to particular situations. If you're constantly monitoring your social status relative to others and feeling that it's threatened, then you're much more likely to over-react, or respond to situations with aggression and violence.

The same holds true when we look at issues of imprisonment. More unequal societies lock more people up. Sometimes the more unequal countries tend to imprison ten times the proportion of the population as the more equal countries. The reason for that is partly that there is more crime in more unequal countries, but most of it is driven by harsher sentencing, more punitive sentencing. People get longer sentences for lesser offences.

You can see that prison regimes are harsher in more unequal countries. So part of this picture of the breakdown of social relations, the weakening of community life, is the sheer brutality and loss of humanity in the penal system. So the United States is among the most unequal countries and it imprisons by far the highest percentage of its population in the developed world. It has also been condemned by international human rights groups for the harshness of its policies - such as locking up children in adult prisons, shackling women during childbirth, the prevalence of solitary confinement.

In some states, like California, there are so many people locked up that overcrowding is extreme, with very little access to recreational facilities or education, training or substance-abuse programs. The development of the "supermax" prisons, which have been designed to keep people in a permanent state of solitary confinement have been condemned by the United Nations Committee on Torture. The American prison system is very cruel and shows what can happen when the social differences between people become greater, where there is a lack of trust, a lack of empathy, an exaggerated fear of crime.

Policy makers and the public are much more likely to imprison people in very harsh circumstances. If the aim is to make sure people don't reoffend, it's pretty ineffective. The recidivism rate is over 60%.

More equal countries, where there's less social distance between people show that there are other, very different ways of dealing with criminal offenders. For example, in the Netherlands, one of the most equal countries, their approach emphasizes treatment and rehabilitation. It allows home leave and interruptions to sentences, as well as extensive use of parole and pardons. Prisoners are housed in single cells. Relations between prisoners and staff are often good. There are programs for educating and training prisoners. The Dutch system is universally recognized as a model of humaneness and decency.

Japan, another country on the more equal end of the scale, also has an approach to imprisonment that is marked by a calm disciplinary code that is characterized by building community between prisoners and where prison staff are considered moral educators and lay counselors. Both countries, Japan and Holland, also imprison very few people and the recidivism rate is much lower.

Unequal societies also do worse when compared to more equal ones on a whole host of other issues. For example, the status of women - women's political participation, their employment and earnings, women's social and economic autonomy. The more unequal a country, the worse it is for women.

Or if you look at data on teenage births, you find almost tenfold differences in the proportion of teenage women having babies, comparing more and less equal societies, that a much smaller proportion in the more equal countries. Teenage births create many problems, particularly in societies where you don't have good support for single parents. That then leads to all the problems of poverty and child development.

The same is true of obesity - levels of obesity tend to be lower in more equal societies. If we look at levels of obesity in adults the trends couldn't be clearer. Of course there are many complex variables at play that explain why obesity has risen so much in recent years. The availability of processed fast food is perhaps one of the most important. But the relationship between inequality and obesity across a range of populations is not just chance. We know that how much people eat is effected by stress and so it's no surprise that in those countries where the social evaluative threat is higher, where people on the lower end of the status spectrum feel much more judged, that food consumption would be effected by that.

Or look at one of the issues that everyone is concerned about - a country's level of educational performance. This affects huge numbers of things, not least how well the economy will do. And there is always a concern that your country might be falling behind. And again, international educational scores are closely related to inequality. If we examine math and literacy scores of 15 year olds we see the averages tend to be higher in the more equal countries. Within the U.S. more equal states tend to have higher average scores and more equal states also have a lower percentage of kids dropping out of high school. Some of these differences of course are connected to factors such as funding for education, but there is still strong evidence that levels of inequality, and especially the social evaluative threat and stress levels, are closely connected to how well kids do in school.

You can see it in what are called "stereotype threat" experiments. In one reported by the World Bank, they asked kids from different Indian castes to do pen and paper tests. When they don't think it's a test of ability, or where they don't know each other's social status, they do almost equally as well. But as soon as the kids know who is high caste and who is low caste, huge differences in performance open up and how well they do the tests.

At the simplest level, what we are saying, or the data is telling us, is that problems which we know are related to status within our societies get worse when you increase the social status differences and better when you decrease them. So whether it's physical or mental health, levels of anxiety, child well-being, infant mortality, rates of violence, imprisonment, educational performance, there is one thing that effects them all, the level of income inequality in a country.

In a sense, we are taking about whether the social class pyramid in our society is a very steep one, or a much shallower one. When it's shallower, the nature of social relations improves, we feel connected to other people, to the community and we think much more about the common good. When it's steep, our social relationships are less rich, we are not connected to the community, we think much more about our own individual needs and well-being. And that

atmosphere of either conviviality or competition infects everything around us and effects us in very deep ways.

### **Growing Up in an Unequal Society**

**Richard Wilkinson:** One of the questions, I think, we have to ask ourselves, beyond looking at the effects of inequality on specific issues, is: what does it mean to be born into and grow up in different types of societies?

In our research we kept coming across a sort of opposition between competition for status and sharing and friendship. Why you see this is because they are the opposite ways we can come together. Either we fight about access to everything, and because we have the same needs, as Hobbes said life can be nasty, brutish and short. But human beings also have the opposite potential - to be each other's best source of assistance, cooperation, learning, love and so on. So other people can be the best or the worst.

And which they are is triggered substantially by whether we think of ourselves as part of the sharing group, or whether through this inequality, we live totally different lives, almost a different universe, locked away in gated communities. When we see people starving on the street, do we see them as part of our community that needs our assistance, or do we ignore, step over them, because we are not connected to them.

A lot of how we respond is connected to the sensitive period in early childhood, which affects the developing personality in ways that psychologists have always told us about. That sensitivity early in life is about allowing the young to adapt to the kind of world they are going to have to deal with as they grow up.

It's about adapting to the kind of social environment you are going to deal with. Am I living in a world where I have to watch my back, fight for what I can get, and not trust others because we're all rivals? Am I in that sort of dog-eat-dog society? Or am I in a society where I will depend on reciprocity, on cooperation, on mutuality, where empathy is important?

Those two need a completely different emotional and cognitive development. So when thinking about the effects of inequality, we have to think about how adults recognize their social status, the kind of society they are in, how cooperative people are, whether people help each other, what social relations are like. But we also have to think about how that gets into childhood.

The kind of society a child is growing up in has a really fundamental effect on its development. So whether a child gets a lot of nurturing, handling, eye contact and interaction, which it needs to develop the kind of empathy and social abilities, or whether parents are too tired, depressed or bad tempered at the end of the day, and the child gets much less attention, that effects development. It's family relationships that are crucial, and they become more stressed with inequality, particularly if you're near the bottom of the social pile.

These effects are so important that it now looks as if they are underpinned by what are called epigenetic processes. That is to say changes in gene expression. Not that your genetic code changes, but what the genes do is changed by the kind of circumstances in which you find yourself, by experience and so on. So in one set of circumstances, your genetic make-up will allow you to develop in this sort of way. In another set of circumstances, that same genetic make-up will make you develop in a different way, because some of the genes have been switched on and others switched off, in order to make your development sensitive to the circumstances in which you find yourself.

This is the way that the effects of inequality are not just seen in things like physical or mental health, or social problems, but just in the quality of what we could call our civilization - the basic structure that overlays everything. So our environment can effect whether we are kind people or mean people. And inequality not only effects the kinds of people we find within a society, it also effects how rigid and stratified a society is, or how flexible and fluid it is. As an individual, will my own abilities be recognized and rewarded so I can live a rich and fulfilling life, or will my life chances be determined by where the class structure I was born into, by what my gender is, by what my race is?

People sometimes suggest that large inequalities in incomes are fair if people can find their appropriate level in society. If they are able to move up and down the social ladder then maybe inequality is all right. They imagine that you get high levels of social mobility in unequal societies, but actually the reverse is true. The most common measure of social mobility that people use is whether rich fathers have rich sons and poor fathers have poor sons. Or whether father's income isn't particularly important for how children do. And what you see is a very strong relationship between the scale of mobility and inequality.

The more inequality there is in a society, the less social mobility. So, not surprisingly, the U.S. being the least equal society has the least amount of social mobility, and the Scandinavian countries the most. When you look at the data we sometimes say that if Americans really want to live the American Dream, they should move to Sweden or Denmark, where social mobility is much higher. What the data shows is that if you really want to give children more equal opportunities, if you're serious about increasing social mobility, not just paying lip service to it, you must reduce the scale of inequality within a society.

### **Getting to a Fairer Society**

**Richard Wilkinson:** One of the interesting things we see is that there are quite different ways in which countries become more equal. Some did it through re-distribution. So Sweden starts off with very large differences in earnings and it reduces the gap by having much higher taxation and a generous welfare spending. Japan on the other hand starts off with smaller differences in incomes before tax. So it doesn't matter how you become more equal as long as you get there somehow. But it's more important to get greater equality more deeply imbedded in our society.

What has driven inequality up are the runaway incomes at the top, much more than the poor falling further behind the middle. The bonus culture that's a part of the business culture in the U.K. and U.S.A, and the take off of top incomes and the huge amounts given as bonuses to CEOs and the like, have made our societies much less equal than they used to be. That's an indication of the extraordinary lack of any democratic constraint at the top. These people were not accountable to anyone and could do just what they liked.

One of the things you notice in more democratic structures, in cooperatives and employee-owned companies, is that they have smaller income ratios between the top and bottom. So I think one way of responding to the scale of income differences is to advance forms of greater economic democracy, whether it's having employee representatives on company boards, having more cooperatives, employee owned companies, as well as making management answerable to the body of employees within a firm. And this has lots of other benefits. There is a lot of research now showing that if you combine employee ownership and participative management you get improvements in productivity.

In the modern world, more democratic business models work better. I think it also has benefits in terms of trying to reduce carbon emissions and reach sustainability. The greatest threat to reducing carbon emissions is consumerism and consumerism is substantially driven by status competition, which is intensified by greater inequality. So what you have to do if you're going to reduce consumerism is reduce the inequality that intensifies it.

In fact, there seem to be almost no benefits to greater inequality, while almost everyone benefits from the effects of greater equality. While the greatest beneficial effects will be felt by people at the lowest end of the income scale, even the middle class and the better off reap benefits.

For example, there was a study that compared infant mortality rates by occupational class in Sweden and the United Kingdom, and Sweden, the more equal of the two countries, does better right across the social hierarchy. The differences are biggest at the bottom, but even among the professional classes, Sweden does a bit better.

The pattern nearly always seems to be the same. That inequality makes most difference at the bottom of society, but that greater equality is good for most of the top five or ten percent of the population as well.

The inequality that is making our society so dysfunctional is damaging us as individuals as well. All those problems of self-esteem and social anxiety, worries about confidence and so on. We can reduce those worries about how we're seen and judged. We can improve the quality of social relations in our societies, regain a sense of community, transform the experience of work, maximize leisure rather than consumption, and really move towards sustainability in the way we know we have to if humanity is going to survive. The exciting thing is that greater equality is such a powerful policy lever on all these aspects of our lives.

So the question I'm always left with after you looked at all this evidence is, why don't we improve the quality of social relations and direction our societies are moving in by such a remarkably simple policy measure as reducing the divisive effects of inequality between us?

[End]