

Upfront

Is This the Silver Bullet?: Why narrowing the gap between the rich and poor could alleviate many social problems

By Alana Conner

Stanford Social Innovation Review
Winter 2008

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Is This the Silver Bullet?

Why narrowing the gap between rich and poor could alleviate many social problems

What do teenage births, early deaths, homicide, mental illness, underperforming students, packed prisons, and drug abuse have in common? All of them thrive in countries with large gaps between the rich and the poor, report two researchers in the November 2007 *Social Science & Medicine*. “Rather than providing ever more prisons, doctors, health promoters, social workers, educational psychologists, and drug rehabilitation units,” they write, “it may be cheaper and more rewarding to tackle the underlying inequalities themselves.”

Over the past few decades, researchers have conducted hundreds of studies linking a variety of maladies and misfortunes to income inequality – which they often express as how many times more the richest people in a community earn than the poorest people in the community. For example, the richest 20 percent of Americans earn roughly nine times more than the poorest 20 percent of Americans, whereas the richest 20 percent of Japanese earn only three times more than the poorest 20 percent of Japanese.

“The differences between these societies are much too large to be explained by what’s happening to a poor minority,” says Richard G. Wilkinson, a social epi-

demologist at the University of Nottingham in Nottingham, England, and the article’s lead author. Indeed, although the researchers limited their analyses to wealthy countries, they still found big effects of income inequality – and not just for the poor. “Inequality has a pollution effect,” he notes. “It affects everyone’s health.”

Inequality exacts its costs by causing people to feel less socially secure and more physiologically stressed. “It’s about feeling valued,” says Wilkinson. “Having second-class goods suggests you are a second-class person. You’re looked down on.”

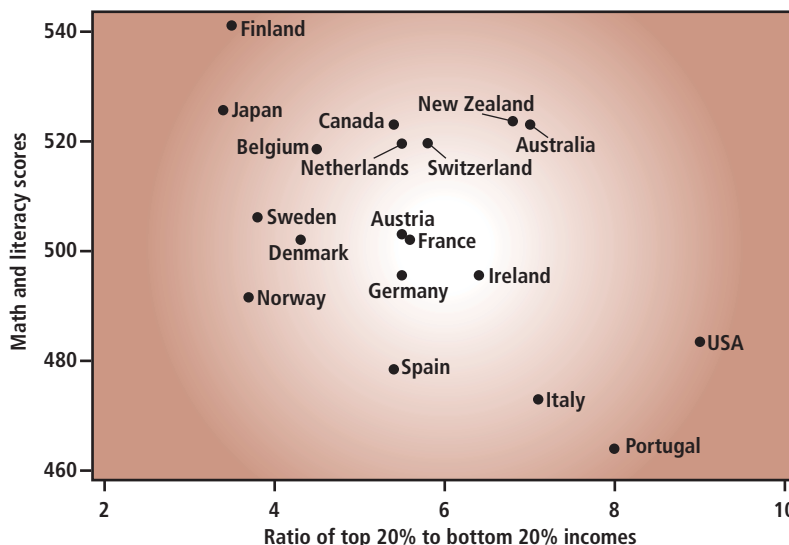
Moreover, the authors find, more unequal societies also have less social mobility. As a result, even though poor people in rich, unequal countries have more absolute wealth than their counterparts in poorer, more egalitar-

ian nations, the former are likely to feel more deprived. Their life spans show it. For example, in 1996, an African-American man earning \$26,522 was likely to live only to the age of 66, whereas a Costa Rican man earning only \$6,410 was likely to live to the age of 75.

The authors’ cross-national methods eliminate a few other explanations for why some societies are healthier and happier than others. Sickly Portugal is as ethnically homogeneous as hale and hearty Finland and Japan, suggesting that ethnic diversity does not drive social problems. And the socially utopian Scandinavian countries have high rates of single parenthood and divorce, suggesting that the marriage cure will not solve the United States’ social woes.

“We really haven’t known what to do about the deterioration of the quality of our lives. But this suggests that there are policy handles on the psychosocial well-being of whole societies,” says Wilkinson. He notes that just a little more equality helps a lot, and that societies reduce inequality in a

More Equality, Smarter Kids



variety of ways. For example, Sweden promotes equality through taxation, and Japan pays people more evenly on the front end. Employee-ownership programs in the United States also help.

“If we get the underlying equalities a bit smaller, we can make a difference not just to health, but to all these social problems,” says Wilkinson. “That’s a benefit to all of us – not just the poor.” –Alana Conner