

*The Spirit Level: Why Equality is Better for Everyone*  
Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett,  
2nd edition, Penguin Books, 2010.

Summary by David James

The authors of **The Spirit Level**, Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett, are epidemiologists by training, and hold senior university posts in both Britain and the USA. Their book has been hailed as being hugely important. It investigates the incidence of health and social problems *between* different countries, and the relationship between those problems and income inequalities *within* each country. The range of problems covers many issues including imprisonment, mental health, violence, education, the status of women, and sustainability.

They have focused in particular on the 23 richest countries of the world which have populations over three million and which can provide adequate data for comparison. **“The big idea is that what matters in determining mortality and health in a society is less the overall wealth of that society and more how evenly that wealth is distributed. The more equally wealth is distributed the better the health of that society.”** Babies born in the USA (the least equal developed nation apart from Singapore) are twice as likely to die in their first year than babies in Japan (the most equal developed nation), and life expectancy in Sweden (fourth most equal) is three years greater than in the USA. And these figures are *averages* across all classes in a society. “Health disparities are not simply a contrast between the ill-health of the poor and the better health of everyone else. Instead, they run right across society so that even the reasonably well-off have shorter lives than the very rich.” Although the benefits of greater equality are biggest for the lower classes, “greater equality brings substantial gains even in the top occupational class and among the richest or best-educated quarter or third of the population”.

Chapter by chapter, graph by graph, the authors demonstrate that the more unequal a rich country is, the worse its performance is likely to be in a whole range of variables including:

- life expectancy
- infant mortality
- obesity
- child wellbeing
- amount of mental illness
- use of illegal drugs
- teenage pregnancy rates
- homicide
- fighting and bullying among children
- imprisonment rates
- levels of mutual trust between citizens
- maths and literacy attainment
- social mobility (children rising in social scale compared with their parents)
- the status of women
- inventiveness and innovation
- waste recycling
- spending on foreign aid

Some of these look unlikely companions of inequality, but the statistical relationships are too strong to be due to chance. That doesn't in itself prove that inequality itself *causes* these other disparities, but the authors consider and eliminate other possibilities, and conclude **“It is very difficult to see how the enormous variations which exist from one society to another in the level of problems associated with low social status can be explained without accepting that inequality is the common denominator, and a hugely damaging force.”** Inequalities erode “social capital”, that is, the cohesion of a society, the degree to which individual citizens are involved in their society, the

strength of the social networks within it, and the degree of trust and empathy between citizens.

The mechanisms by which inequality impacts on societies, it is suggested, is that individuals internalise inequality, that their psyches are profoundly affected by it, and that that in turn affects physical as well as mental health, and leads to attitudes and behaviours which appear as a variety of social and health problems.

How does that work? This is probably the most speculative part of the book, and I can imagine a range of alternative or supplementary explanations. In a way it doesn't affect the main thesis. Wilkinson and Pickett's take is that in a developed modern urban society, we regularly interact with people we know only superficially. We are constantly called on to evaluate their status and are being evaluated by them in terms of such things as jobs, income, education, housing, car, or clothes. And in a society driven by advertising and consumption, there are many more gradations of these things on which we may be judged. Being regularly judged by others is a major source of psychological stress leading to physiological effects, involving for example the cortisol hormone that prepares us to deal with threats and emergencies, but also the immune system and the cardiovascular system.

When a society is more unequal, the status differentials are sharper and more threatening to those who feel at a disadvantage (that is, to anyone at all except the tiny handful of the most seriously rich and powerful), but the disparities weigh heavier the lower in the social scale one is. Health and life expectancy are powerfully affected by such stresses, most significantly by “low social status, lack of friends, and stress in early life”.

The authors are not proposing an imposed total levelling or the end of present social and economic systems. The more equal nations still have differentials, but they are less steep. As a result they maintain their 'social capital', including citizens' involvement in community life, their trust in one another, their capacity for friendship and cooperation. “America in the 1950s and 1960s was more egalitarian than it had been in more than a century... Record highs in equality and social capital coincided... Conversely, the last third of the twentieth century was a time of growing inequality *and* eroding social capital.” Here in Aotearoa New Zealand we can recognise the same pattern.

“Social status stratifications... are fundamentally orderings based on power and coercion, on privileged access to resources, regardless of others' needs... Friendship is almost exactly the opposite kind of relationship. It is about reciprocity, mutuality, sharing, social obligations, cooperation and recognition of each other's needs.”

The nations which appear in the main comparisons are hugely varied. They are rated for inequality according to how much better off financially the wealthiest 20% within them are than the poorest 20%. The most equal is Japan. Then come Finland and the three Scandinavian countries, then a group of other European countries (in order, Belgium, Austria, Germany, Netherlands, Spain, France). Canada comes next, about halfway down the table. More Europeans follow: Switzerland, Ireland, Greece, Italy. Next are Israel, New Zealand and Australia. The tail comprises UK, Portugal, USA and finally Singapore. Among the most equal, the rich have less than four times as much as the poor; at the bottom of the table the difference is about nine times. There is no consistency about the ways in which the disparities come about. Some of the more equal have strongly progressive tax systems and generous benefits, but Japan's equality is based on narrower differences in before-tax income. It has not joined in the race for top salaries to balloon out of proportion to others.

New Zealand sits well down the list, with a difference of 6 to 7 times between rich and poor. And our experience that the gaps have opened up substantially and relatively recently, particularly during the 1980s, is shared with certain other countries. “With the exception of Canada, they widened most rapidly in English speaking countries – in Britain, the USA, New Zealand and Australia – accompanied in each case by a free-market ideology and by policies designed to create a more 'flexible' labour force. Stronger linguistic and ideological connections meant that English speaking countries caught the disease quickly from each other and caught it badly.” It may be especially

important for New Zealanders to give up comparing ourselves with Australia, the UK and USA, as we normally do. All of them are in this respect rogue states among other developed nations, all sitting at one end of the spectrum. The more useful comparisons would be with European nations, especially with the Scandinavians.

There is an important chapter on equality and sustainability. “It is fortunate that just when the human species discovers that the environment cannot absorb further increases in emissions, we also learn that further economic growth in the developed world no longer improves health, happiness or measures of wellbeing.” The authors demonstrate that there are countries with high life expectancies but with a fraction of the CO<sub>2</sub> emissions of others. And the demand for economic growth also locks us into a society in which consumerism is a way of asserting and maintaining social status in competition with others, where people save less and borrow more, and where working hours are longer.

A steady-state economy would better serve both human happiness and sustainability. Moreover, more equal societies appear to be more innovative than others (measured by the number of new patents registered per head of population); and sustainability will require all our capacity for innovation. More equal societies recycle more of their waste, their business leaders are more supportive of their governments complying with international environmental agreements, and the more equal European nations (but not Japan) are more generous in providing foreign aid: these are all indicators of being good world citizens.

How can nations change towards more equality? The book makes suggestions. There is a need for greater public awareness of the effects of inequality, and for a popular movement for change. Public opinion polls in UK and USA already show large majorities in favour of more even distribution of income, and focus groups show significant increases in those majorities when people understand how great the disparities are and the effects of them. A vision of what is possible is also needed. Such education would help to generate the political will needed for real change. Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett have established the Equality Trust to spread such information, with a well-organised website at [www.equalitytrust.org.uk](http://www.equalitytrust.org.uk).

At government level, change would include tax and benefit alterations, and more equal salaries in the public service, along with investment and incentives in desirable directions. In the workplace, the authors emphasise the non-profit and public sectors, including education and health, as potential role models to balance the publicity given to the corporate business sector. They also favour 'economic democracy' – businesses which combine worker ownership and participative management, without outside shareholders but recognising customers as stakeholders,. (Classic cases are the Mondragon cooperatives in Spain, and the Co-op movement of Britain.)

Above all, this book should help us to overcome the tendency to diffuse our efforts by tackling social problems one at a time and by-passing the root cause. Not that we should abandon the causes to which we are drawn, but that we should be aware that the major social problems can be sharply reduced *only* if inequality is also reduced.