

Society

Interview

'Inequality strikes at our health and happiness'

Kate Pickett and Richard Wilkinson, authors of *The Spirit Level*, on the effects of social injustice

Dawn Foster

New analysis this week showing that 14 million people live in poverty highlights just how unequal a society the UK has become. Poverty is particularly prevalent among disabled people, single parents, unemployed people or those working irregular or zero-hours jobs.

It follows recent research by the OECD showing that social mobility has stagnated, with a child from a poor family in the UK taking five generations on average to earn the average wage, compared to two generations in Denmark, and three in Finland, Norway and Sweden.

It's hardly surprising, according to Kate Pickett and Richard Wilkinson. The married academics' 2009 book, *The Spirit Level*, on the effects of inequality on societies across the world, sold over 150,000 copies in English alone, and was lauded across the political spectrum.

Nine years on, things have not improved. 'The Inner Level', their long-awaited follow up published earlier this year, looks at the more personal, individual effects of inequality: how the social effects of the gap between rich and poor impact on people. 'We're talking about how inequality affects our intimate lives, our inner lives, our mental wellbeing, our relationships with friends and family,' Pickett says.

The Inner Level examines a society that has dealt with 10 years of austerity, and seen almost every family impacted by stagnant

wages, increased job insecurity, swingeing cuts and changes to the benefits system and public services nationally and locally, as well as a surge in problems with mental health across society. 'It takes a whole argument and evidence about the effects of inequality to a deeper and more intimate level. In *The Spirit Level* we were dealing with things about society 'out there' - the size of the prison population, homicide rates, obesity rates and so on. But this takes it into the sphere of our social fears and anxieties,' Wilkinson says.

'Inequality causes real suffering, regardless of how we choose to label such distress. Greater inequality heightens social threat and status anxiety, evoking feelings of shame which feed into our instincts for withdrawal and subordination.'

The stress of poverty also influences the cognitive development of babies and children. Pickett and Wilkinson find that 'family income is a more powerful determinant of cognitive development than being brought up by single parents, or maternal depression', and that if children are enrolled in support services like Sure Start and their equivalents in other countries, some of the effects of poverty are offset, and children's educational and psychological performance improves.

In more unequal societies, the book finds, fewer people marry someone of a different class background, the number of visits to art galleries and museums is lower, the prison population is higher and the age of criminal responsibility for children is lower.

Wilkinson and Pickett cite extensive statistical evidence that unequal societies are responsible for less fulfilling personal lives, and in turn harm public health, scupper educational progress, increase crime and lower life expectancy.

'Inequality itself creates these differences,' Pickett says, while Wilkinson warns that inequality 'diminishes social life. What we value most is laughing, joking, relaxing and spending time with friends and family. That is essential to health and happiness - and yet it's there that inequality strikes.'

If the pair were given power tomorrow, they already have a few policy priorities. 'I'd ban private education to put a brake on intergenerational unfairness, in line with Finland. But I'd also institute an exceptionally large inheritance tax,' Pickett says.

Wilkinson concurs, but adds: 'I think we have to extend democracy into the economy, and hugely inflated salaries have to be stopped. We should have employee representation on company boards, and incentives to grow cooperatives and employee-owned companies. That whole sector has to grow.'



Child protection

Why does Northern Ireland have fewer children in care?

New research shows that England could save £1.5bn by supporting families to stay together

Louise Trickle

Iocal authorities across the country are reeling at the cost of child protection, as care numbers soar to record levels: the Institute for Fiscal Studies recently found that half the entire children's services budget is spent on the 73,000 children who are now looked after

by the state. So when new academic research shows up very large differences between England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland in the proportion of children removed from their families, it's time for policymakers to take note.

A study, carried out by seven higher education institutions and led by Paul Bywaters, Huddersfield University's professor of social work, has just released findings that show that far fewer children, proportionately, are in foster or residential care in Northern Ireland than in England, Wales or Scotland. The research finds that if the latter three nations could reduce their care numbers to the same rate as Northern Ireland, there would be 40% fewer children in care in

England, 50% fewer in Wales and 60% fewer in Scotland. On 2015 figures, Bywaters calculates that would mean 25,000 fewer children in residential or foster care in England, 4,500 in Scotland and 2,000 in Wales.

Given that Northern Ireland has a higher percentage of children living in deprived neighbourhoods - and poverty can exacerbate difficulties faced by struggling parents - the expectation would be that the country would have the highest rate of children in care. But the opposite is true - it has 35 children in foster or residential care for every 10,000 children, compared to 82 per 10,000 in Scotland, 62 per 10,000 in Wales and 52 per 10,000 in England. The cost to families and the



▲ Husband and wife team Kate Pickett and Richard Wilkinson