Dysfunctional Societies: Why Even Small Differences In Inequality Matter

Richard Wilkinson

If you look at rich countries and compare life expectancy, levels of violence, teenage birth rates, levels of trust, the educational performance of school children, the size of prison populations, obesity rates, or the strength of community life, you find that countries which tend to do well on one of these measures tend to do well on all of them, and the ones which do badly, do badly on all of them. What accounts for the difference?

The key seems to be the amount of inequality in each society. The picture is consistent whether we compare rich countries or the 50 states of the USA. It seems likely that the extent of income inequality in each society serves as a determinant and expression of the scale and importance of social class stratification. The greater the inequality, the greater the status competition and the more prevalent are all the problems of relative deprivation. However, the amount of inequality does not just affect the poor: instead it seems to affect performance of the vast majority of society across most income levels.

Inequality has always been regarded as socially corrosive, and now the data shows that even the small differences in how unequal different market democracies are matters. But why are we so sensitive to it? Health research provides some pointers. Inequality affects the quality of social relations which, in turn, have a powerful influence on stress and health. Inequality increases the “social evaluative threat”. Particularly important are the effects of low social status, poor friendship networks and difficult early childhood experience. These reflect forms of psychosocial insecurity, anxiety and people’s sense of whether they are valued and appreciated. They are major sources of stress and may contribute to pathways which link a variety of social problems to relative deprivation.

Biographical Note
Richard Wilkinson is Professor of Social Epidemiology at The University of Nottingham and visiting professor at UCL. For 30 years his research has focused on health inequalities and the social determinants of health, on income inequality, and on the psychosocial influences on population health. His most recent book is The Impact of Inequality: how to make sick societies healthier. Routledge, 2005.