



The
Crime and Deviance Channel
Updates: The Spirit Level

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The Spirit Level: Wilkinson and Pickett

Introduction

Although **Wilkinson and Pickett** are epidemiologists rather than sociologists, "The Spirit Level" draws on a range of sociological concepts and insights in such a way as to make their underlying argument of interest to sociology teachers and students. This argument, in a nutshell, is that where societies are "**more unequal**" in terms of the distribution of income they also suffer from a much greater range of social problems than their "**less unequal**" counterparts. **Wilkinson and Pickett** argue, in this respect, that we can demonstrate empirically that "more equal" societies perform better across a range of social indicators (such as education, health and, most significantly for our purposes here, crime) than their "less equal" counterparts.

Inequality

Although the concept of "inequality" is the underlying motor of differences in the way a society performs in terms of things like how many people it imprisons or the average life expectancy of its citizens, we need to note three things:

1. **Wilkinson and Pickett** measure "Inequality" in two ways, the first of which (economic inequality) is seen to determine the second (social inequality). Thus, economic inequality, measured in terms of differences in average incomes across a society is, they argue, a *predictor* of social inequalities (such as differences in levels of education).

2. "Inequality" in itself is not the crucial factor in determining how a society performs against a wide range of empirical indicators (things like the aforementioned levels of imprisonment and life expectancy) since all contemporary societies – developed and non-developed alike – display varying levels of social and economic inequality (they are all, in this respect, hierarchical societies to greater or lesser extents).

3. **Wilkinson and Pickett** refine the concept of economic inequality into one of **relative economic deprivation** in their study in order to make their observations comparable across different societies (some of which are very rich and others which are, in comparison, relatively poor). However, this usage has a clever twist in that just as the fact of economic inequality cannot be used uncritically to explain social inequality (rich societies are not automatically more or less socially unequal),

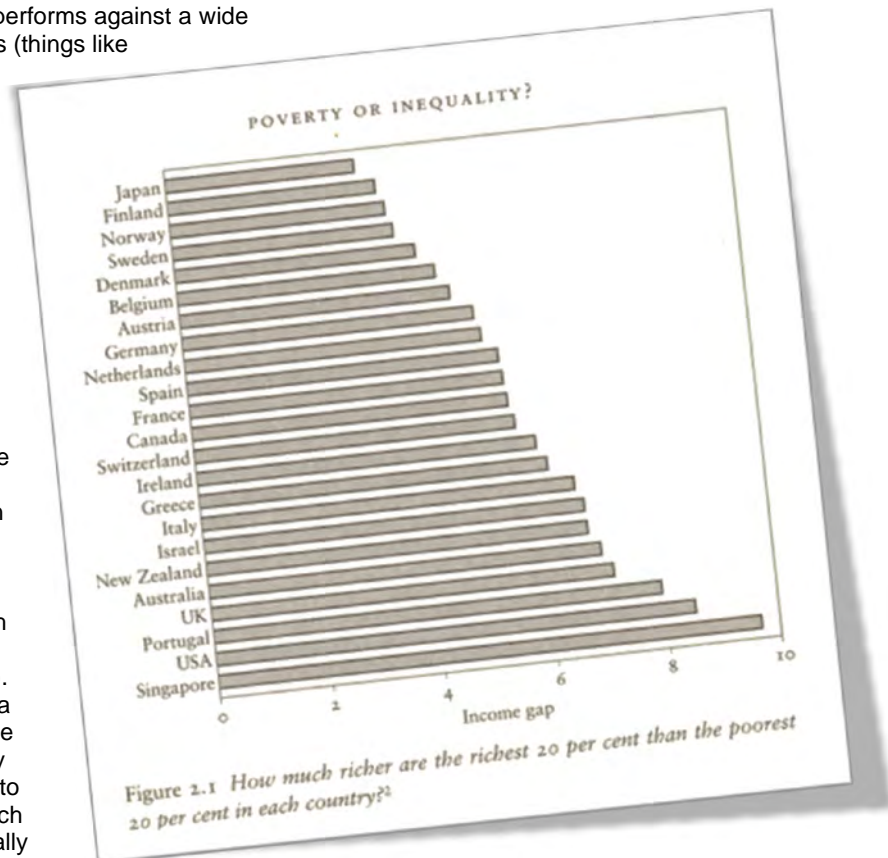
relative deprivation alone is not an explanation (although it is a necessary precondition it is not a sufficient condition in itself since all societies have differing levels of relative deprivation).

The crucial aspect of economic inequality, for **Wilkinson and Pickett**, is not whether a society is "rich" or "poor", developed or non-developed, nor is it that some people within a given society are rich and others poor (since this is going to be a feature of all contemporary societies); rather, it is the *difference in income* (what we might call the "**income gap**") between those at "the top" of society (the highest income groups) and those at "the bottom" (the lowest income groups) that is of explanatory significance. In general terms, therefore,

- "**More unequal**" societies are those that have a **wider** income gap between top and bottom.

- "**Less unequal**" societies are those where the income gap between top and bottom is much smaller.

Measuring different levels of economic inequality depends, to some extent, on how the "highest" and "lowest" income groups in any society are defined (that is, the percentage of the population used). **Wilkinson and Pickett**, for example, chose to measure income inequality across a range of societies using a comparison between the richest 20% and the poorest 20% - a range that, by and large, is acceptable for comparative purposes.



A common alternative way of measuring income inequality is the **Gini Coefficient**. Although it involves a complex mathematical calculation, all we need to know here is that it reflects the idea that the most economically unequal society would be one in which a single individual received all (100%) of a society's total income (G=1) whereas the most economically equal society would be one where every member of that society received the same percentage of total income (G=0).

For our current purpose either of these scales can be used as evidence to broadly demonstrate the way different societies can be ranked in terms of income inequality.

Crime and Deviance

Although, as we've suggested,

a relative income gap can be correlated to a wide range of behaviours, our interest here is in crime and deviance and to this end we can note four examples of the way **Wilkinson and Pickett** argue that "less unequal" and "more unequal" societies differ:

1. Murder rates: These are **higher** in **more unequal** societies (such as the USA, Portugal and Israel) than **less unequal** societies (such as Japan, Denmark and Austria).

Income inequality Gini coefficient score

Mexico	0.474
Turkey	0.430
Portugal	0.385
US	0.381
Poland	0.372
Italy	0.352
UK	0.335
NZ	0.335
Ireland	0.328
Greece	0.321
Japan	0.321
Spain	0.319
Canada	0.317
Korea	0.312
Australia	0.301
Germany	0.298
Hungary	0.291
France	0.281
Iceland	0.280
Norway	0.276
Switz.	0.276
N'lands	0.271
Belgium	0.271
Finland	0.269
Slovakia	0.268
Czech Rep	0.265
Austria	0.265
Lux.	0.258
Sweden	0.234
Denmark	0.232

The "fit" is not perfect (Singapore, for example, has high income inequality and a low murder rate while Finland has the reverse) but this anomaly can be explained by a significant **intervening variable**, namely levels of private gun ownership (which are low in Singapore and high in Finland). This intervening variable can also be used to explain why the UK, for example, has high income inequality but a relatively average murder rate.

Wilkinson and Pickett's explanation for the relationship between high murder rates and high income equality is based on the concept of:

Status. Economically unequal societies are more hierarchical than more equal societies and in this situation social status takes on greater importance in the former than the latter. In highly unequal societies those at the top of the hierarchy seek ways of demonstrating their social

superiority (through conspicuous status symbols, the values they perpetuate, the behaviours they display and so forth) while those at the bottom are more concerned with trying to achieve status. Obvious ways this occurs are through involvement in serious criminal behaviour or through demonstrations of physical superiority – both of which carry risks of physical danger to victims (the more so, of course, where

people have relatively easy access

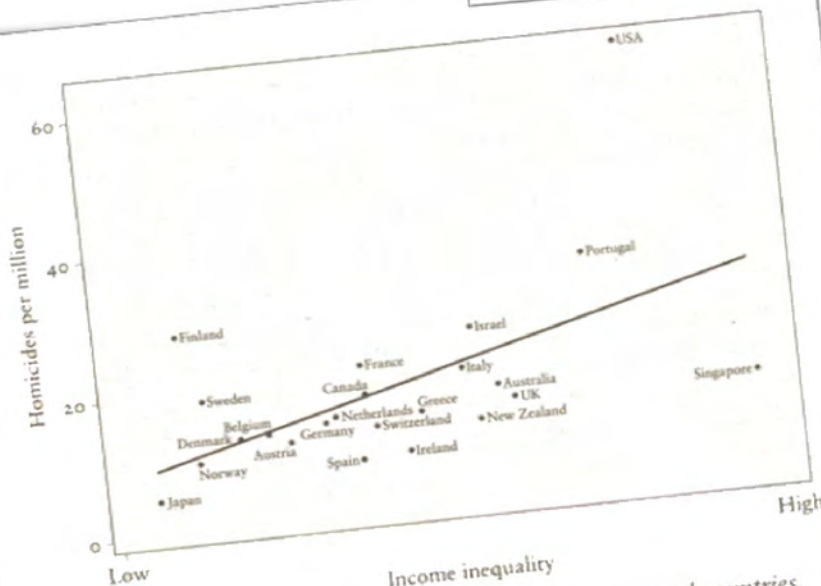


Figure 10.2 Homicides are more common in more unequal countries.

to firearms).

High levels of income inequality, **Wilkinson and Pickett** argue, “Ups the stakes in the competition for status; status matters even more in higher unequal societies”. As an aside we can note this explanation is a variant of **Strain Theory**.

2. Higher levels of violence occur in more unequal societies and, as inequality increases, so too does violent crime. Aside from the general explanation we’ve just noted for higher murder rates, **Wilkinson and Pickett** suggest two further related explanations:

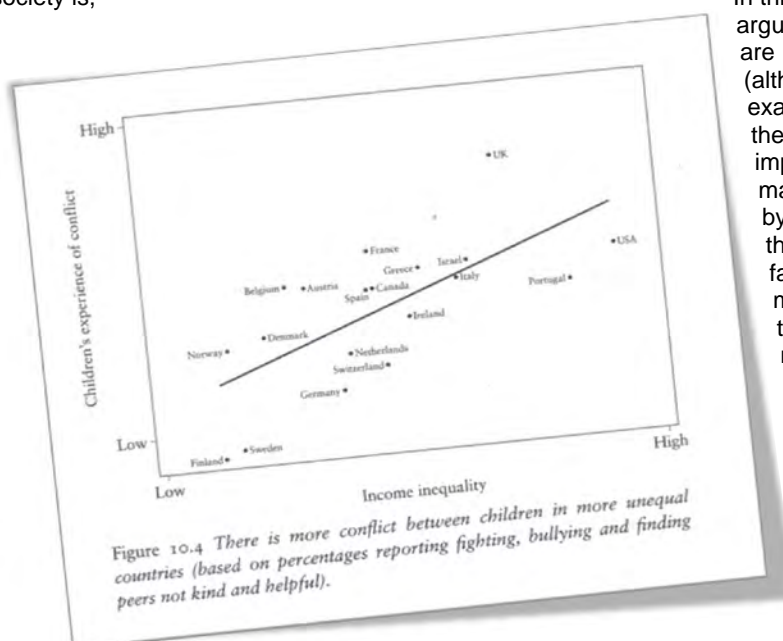
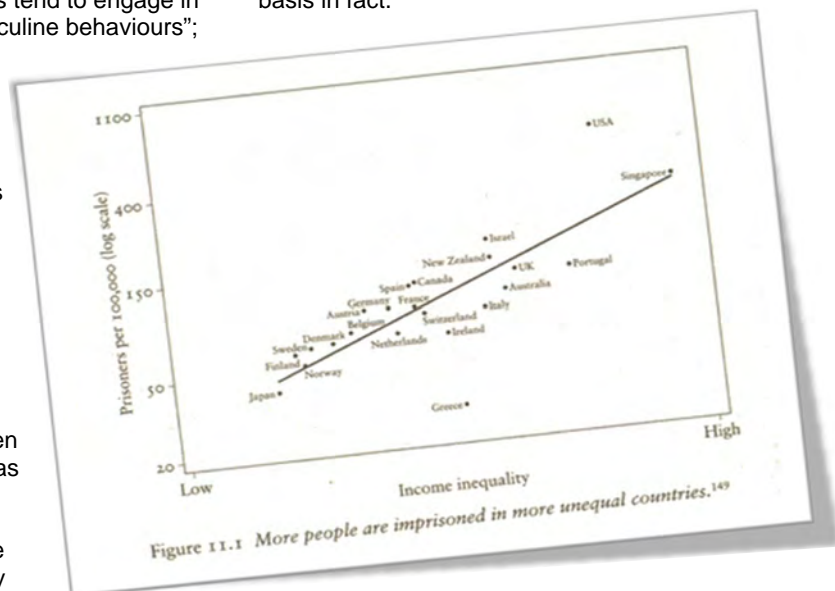
a. More unequal societies experience higher levels of **family breakdown**, which means adolescent behaviour (those most likely in unequal societies to be involved in violent behaviour) is not held so easily in check by family members and structures.

b. **Hypermasculinity** among boys growing up without fathers. The argument here is that boys growing up in families with no male role models tend to engage in “rigidly overcompensatingly masculine behaviours”; that is, they participate in a variety of risky behaviours (such as “crimes against property and people, aggression and exploitation and short-term sexual conquests”) as a way of demonstrating and asserting a sense of masculine identity (one that is highly exaggerated) in situations where there are few, if any, adult masculine identities available.

3. Bullying, fights and conflict: In more unequal societies children experience more conflict (partly as a result of the status differences and deprivations that arise from high income inequalities) and the level of childhood violence in any society is,

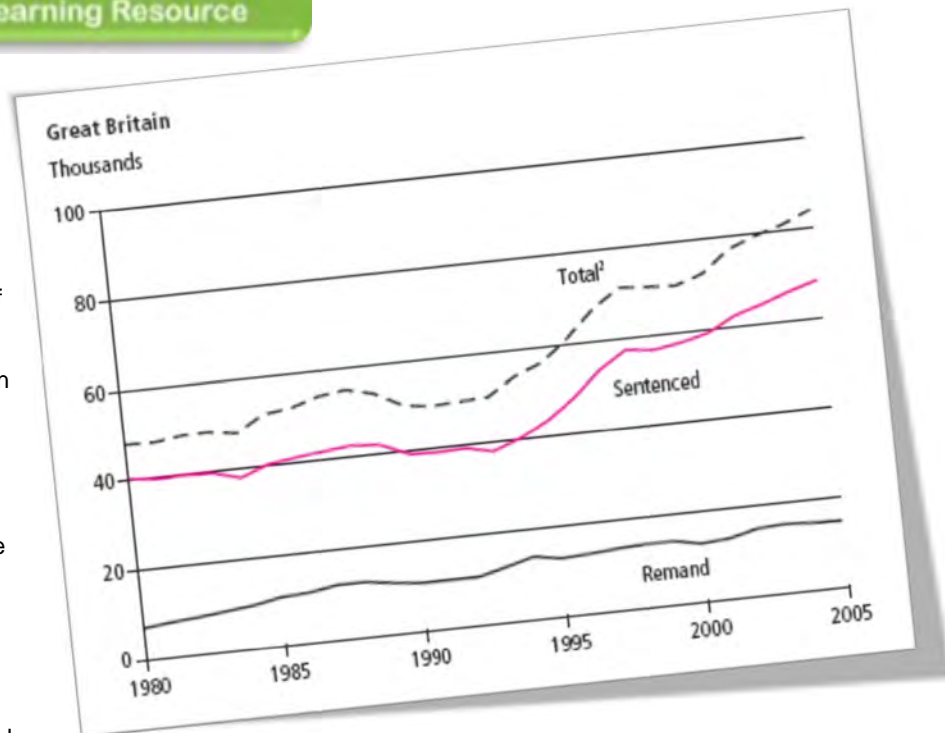
Wilkinson and Pickett argue, a good predictor of adult violence.

4. Higher rates of imprisonment: More unequal societies imprison more of their members – and for longer – than less unequal societies. The former, in this respect, are generally more punitive - with those of lower class, income and education more likely to be imprisoned than any other social groups. **Wilkinson and Pickett** explain these higher rates of imprisonment in terms of a range of related ideas. In more unequal societies “attitudes of ‘us’ and ‘them’ are far more entrenched” in the collective consciousness; such societies also show measurable differences in both the levels of trust individual citizens have in other members of society and the fear of crime – two ideas that go hand-in-hand. Where individual members of society have lower levels of trust in their fellow citizens they also have a greater fear of being a victim of crime – even where that fear has no real demonstrable basis in fact.



In this respect **Wilkinson and Pickett** argue imprisonment rates in any society are *not* determined by crime rates (although crime rates in the UK, for example, have fallen significantly over the past 15 years the number of people imprisoned each year has grown markedly); rather, they are determined by “official attitudes to punishment” (in the sense highly unequal societies are far more-likely to adopt punitive measures (such as imprisonment and the death penalty) rather than measures that emphasise rehabilitation and reform). Lower inequality societies such as Japan and the Netherlands, for example, have far lower rates of imprisonment – and far higher rates of rehabilitation and reform – than higher inequality societies such as the USA and UK.

According to the **Ministry of Justice** (2009) "Between 1995 and 2009, the prison population in England and Wales grew by 32,500 or 66% (from 49,500 to 82,100)...Almost all of this increase took place within two segments of the prison population – those sentenced to immediate custody (78% of the increase) and those recalled to prison for breaking the conditions of their release (16%)...The immediate custodial sentenced population increased after 1995 because the courts sentenced more offenders to prison each year between 1995 and 2002, and because offenders have been staying in prison for longer.



Not only are more unequal societies "harsher, tougher, places" in which to live, they are more-likely to be governed by attitudes of suspicion and mistrust of those at the top of the social hierarchy (who make and administer the law) for those at the bottom. This mistrust, according to writers such as **Downes and Hansen** (2008) is reflected in "penal expansion and welfare contraction...societies that imprison the most people spend less on the welfare of their citizens"

A further explanation for the relationship between falling crime rates and rising levels of imprisonment in more unequal societies is, **Wilkinson and Pickett** suggest, associated with the way penal systems are designed and influenced. "In more equal societies legal and judicial systems, prosecution procedures and sentencing as well as penal systems are developed in consultation with experts – criminologists, lawyers, prison psychiatrists and psychologists" and are consequently based on "theoretical and evidence-based considerations of what works to deter crime and rehabilitate". More unequal societies, on the other hand, tend to "develop legal frameworks and penal systems in response to media and political pressure, a desire to get tough on crime and to be seen to be doing so - rather than reflecting on what works and what doesn't". As **Silverman** (2006) puts it: "So, does prison work? Only, it seems, as a means of answering a sustained media battering with an apparent show of force."

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