**Inequality is Killing Us**

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While public campaigns lecture us to eat right, stop smoking, exercise more, etc., in fact, our well-being has very little to do with our individual choices and everything to do with how society is structured. Put simply, inequality is extremely bad for our health.

The United States ranks as the world’s most unequal nation, far outstripping all other nations. The top one percent of Americans have a combined net worth that is more than triple the net worth of the other 99 percent combined. And the bottom 40 percent of Americans own less than nothing, because they are sinking in debt.(1) (See the two charts below)

**The high cost of inequality**

Wilkinson and Pickett compare income inequality within 23 of the world’s richest nations and all fifty US states. They found that, at every income level, people living in more unequal nations and states suffer:

And the extent to which people at every income level suffer these problems is directly related to how unequal is the society in which they live.

In contrast, people living in more equal societies and states enjoy better mental, physical and social health – at every income level. And the more equal their societies, the more they enjoy these benefits.

Once everyone has the basic necessities of life, your health and social well-being is determined less by how rich you are than how unequal is the society in which you live. In other words, poorer people in more equal societies are healthier and happier than richer people in more unequal societies.

The difference is significant. A 1990s study of 282 metropolitan areas in the United States found that the greater the difference in income, the more the death rate rose for all income levels, not just for the poor.(2)

Researchers calculated that reducing income inequality to the lowest level found in those areas would save as many lives as would be saved by eradicating heart disease or by preventing all deaths from lung cancer, diabetes, motor vehicle crashes, HIV infection, suicide and homicide combined.

**Inequality divides us**

Why would inequality, in and of itself, have such a profound impact? The answer lies in our mammalian biology. As the most social animals on the planet, we are hard-wired to function best in an embracing community.

More than 95 percent of human existence has been spent in egalitarian societies. Because the survival of the group depends on collaboration, all primitive societies developed rules and customs to prevent anyone from rising too high or sinking too low.

However, for the past 10,000 years, most people have lived in class-divided, hierarchical societies. We have adapted to social inequality, but we pay a terrible price.

Consider this statement, “Most people can be trusted.” Would you agree or disagree?

The probability that you would disagree is directly related to the level of income inequality in your society. Wilkinson and Pickett show that people in the most equal nations, Scandinavia and the Netherlands, are six times more likely to trust each other than those in the most unequal nations – Portugal, Singapore and the United States. In short, inequality makes people distrustful.

When society does not take care of us, when we are abandoned to struggle individually, then we distrust others and fear for our safety. As a result, more unequal societies are characterized by more inter-personal competition, more emphasis on individual status and success, less social security, more envy of those above and more disdain for those below.

Fearful distrust compelled George Zimmerman to kill Trayvon Martin. Fearful distrust prompts us to warn our children about strangers, suspect those who are different, install security systems, view the poor and unemployed as ‘cheaters,’ applaud more spending on police and prisons, and support harsher penalties.

Fearful distrust provides a mass audience for TV shows and movies about traitors, torturers, rapists, sadists, and serial killers. When I asked one person why she followed a particularly gruesome TV serial about psychopathic murderers, she replied, “I want to know what’s out there.” Fearful distrust keeps us isolated and unable to recognize our common interests.