



# The Spirit Level: Why More Equal Societies Almost Always Do Better

First published by Allen Lane 2009; published by Penguin Books 2010; 347 pages, £9.99  
ISBN 978-0-141-03236-8

by Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett  
reviewed by Christopher Stephens

**V**ery occasionally, a book is published which you feel everyone you care about should read. *The Spirit Level* is one of these. If in addition, you have a Christian faith and slight sense of unease that all is not as well with the world as it ought to be and you want a better understanding of why this might be, then this book is for you.

*The Spirit Level* is a little oddly named. It is actually about the human condition and is written by two extraordinarily practical epidemiologists. I rather wonder whether they realised when they wrote it that it would quickly gain substantial levels of street credibility, being referenced by politicians of all sides of the political spectrum as well as academics and leaders in religious thinking.

Although *The Spirit Level* contains the results of many years of academic research, it is simply and accessibly written for the general reader and scattered with easy-to-follow graphs supporting the main contention. There is even a guide on how to read the graphs! The underlying contention is simple but far-reaching: those societies where there is greater inequality of income also suffer greater social dislocation. The writers are therefore boldly making the separation between rising gross national production, increasing income per head on the one hand and human flourishing on the other. Increasing wealth and increasing human flourishing only go together if incomes in society are relatively equal. If it is not, then society is more fractured and the human cost is vast.

The writers compare the nations which are most equal in terms of per capita income (Japan, Finland, Norway, Sweden) with the least equal (UK, Portugal, USA, Singapore).

They also run the same model for domestic US states. In each case, comparison is made between the circumstances of the richest 20 per cent with those of the poorest 20 per cent. Where the differences are greatest, the social problems are also greatest. Social issues considered include drug and alcohol addiction, life expectancy and infant mortality, as well as obesity, children’s educational performance, teenage pregnancies, murders and imprisonment rates.

The link is then made with “affluenza virus”, “status anxiety” and “luxury fever”, all meat and drink to the advertisers who need to fuel our addiction to spending. As inequality grows, the rich spend more and more on luxury goods while the desire for these items cascades down the income scale resulting in the less well off struggling to compete and keep up.

There is a profound challenge here to Christians too. If Jesus had a bias to the poor, and God cares equally for the rich as for the poor, then we should pay attention to the increasing inequalities in our society, both domestically within the UK and across the globe. There are still a billion people living in the most extreme poverty while those of us in the rich nations become ever more prosperous. *The Spirit Level* produces serious data to inform and unsettle us on how we have created the society in which we live. It deserves to be taken seriously.

Finally I am attracted by the writers’ modesty. They say, rather self-deprecatingly, that their research simply tells a truth that people know anyway so they are merely confirming a widespread intuition. But like many truths, it is one that badly needs to be told. ■

Christopher Stephens

Christopher Stephens was Chairman of Traidcraft and a member of the Senior Salaries Review Board until his appointment as Chairman of the Judicial Appointments Commission in February 2011. He gave the 2010 Hugh Kay lecture, published in FiBQ 13:4.

