
Update No. 5 – October 6, 2000

Health and Social Cohesion

Résumés

Richard G. Wilkinson. 1996. *Unhealthy Societies: The Afflictions of Inequality*. London: Routledge.

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Among the developed countries, it is not the richest societies that have the best health outcomes, but those that have the smallest income differences between rich and poor. Inequality and relative poverty have absolute effects: they increase death rates. But why? How can smaller income differences raise average life expectancy? Using examples from the USA, Britain, Japan and Eastern Europe, and bringing together empirical evidence from the social and medical sciences, Wilkinson answers these questions by showing that healthy, egalitarian societies are more socially cohesive. They have a stronger community life and suffer fewer of the corrosive effects of inequality. The public arena becomes a source of supportive social networks, rather than of stress and potential conflict. As well as weakening the social fabric and damaging health, inequality increases crime rates and violence. "Unhealthy Societies" shows that social cohesion is crucial to the quality of life. Increased inequality imposes a psychological burden, which reduces the well-being of the whole society. The pattern of modern disease indicates that the material standard of living in developed countries is no longer the main issue. The problem is now the psycho-social quality of life, which must be supported by greater material equality. Without it, important social needs will go unmet and health will suffer. But this does not mean choosing between greater equity and economic growth. By lubricating the economy and society, investment in social cohesion increases efficiency.

Ichiro Kawachi, and Bruce P. Kennedy. 1997. "Health and Social Cohesion: Why Care About Income Inequality?" *British Medical Journal*, vol.314, pp.1037-1040.

Kawachi and Kennedy are professors at the Harvard School of Public Health.

Throughout the world, wealth and income are becoming more concentrated. Growing evidence suggests that the distribution of income - in addition to the absolute standard of living enjoyed by the poor - is a key determinant of population health. A large gap between rich and poor leads to higher mortality through the breakdown of social cohesion. The recent surge in income inequality in many countries has been accompanied by a marked increase in the residential concentration of poverty and affluence. Residential segregation diminishes opportunities for social cohesion. Income inequalities have spillover effects on society at large, including increased rates of crime and violence, impeded productivity and economic growth, and the impaired functioning of representative democracy. The extent of inequality in society is often a consequence of explicit policies and public choice. Reducing income inequality offers the prospect of greater social cohesion and better population health.

C. Muntaner, and J. Lynch. 1999. "Income Inequality, Social Cohesion and Class Relations: A Critique of Wilkinson's neo-Durkheimian Research Program." International Journal of Health Services, 29 (1), pp.59-81.

This article is a critique of the work of Richard G. Wilkinson, summarized earlier in this issue of Nexus. The two authors argue that Wilkinson's "income inequality and social cohesion" model has emerged as a leading approach in social epidemiology. Public health scholars and activists working toward the elimination of social inequalities in health can find several appealing features in Wilkinson's research. In particular, it provides a sociological alternative to former models that emphasize poverty, health behaviors, or the cultural aspects of social relations as determinants of population health. Wilkinson's model calls for social explanations, avoids the subjectivist legacy of US functionalist sociology that is evident in "status" approaches to understanding social inequalities in health, and calls for broad policies of income redistribution. Nevertheless, Wilkinson's research program has characteristics that limit its explanatory power and its ability to inform social policies directed toward reducing social inequalities in health. The model ignores class relations, an approach that might explain how income inequalities are generated and account for both relative and absolute deprivation. Further, Wilkinson's model implies that social cohesion, rather than political change, is the major determinant of population health. Historical evidence suggests that class formation could determine both reductions in social inequalities and increases social cohesion. Drawing on recent examples, the authors argue that an emphasis on social cohesion can be used to render communities responsible for their mortality and morbidity rates: a community-level version of "blaming the victim." Such use of social cohesion is related to current policy initiatives in the United States and Great Britain under the Clinton Democrats and the New Labor governments.

To find more relating health and social cohesion, consult the "The Society and Population Health Reader: Income Inequality and Health," volume 1, edited a few months ago by leading scholars in the field of social epidemiology and published by The New Press. Check out the website at: http://www.ahsr.org/rwjf/author2_1.htm

The Center for Health Economics and Policy Analysis (CHEPA), located in the Faculty of Health Sciences at McMaster University, is also conducting research on social cohesion and health. See, for example, the paper by J. Lavis and G. Stoddart on "Social Cohesion and Health" at: <http://www.socsci.mcmaster.ca/econ/rsrch/papers/archive/99-10.html>

What's New?

The National Bureau of Asian Research, a US based think tank, recently launched a new research project on "Social Cohesion in Russia." The project is the responsibility of the Social Cohesion Study Group, a team of researchers who are part of the Russia Initiative at the Carnegie Corporation of New York. To know more, see:
http://www.nbr.org/regional_studies/social_cohesion.html

The Cultural Information and Research Centres Liaison in Europe (CIRCLE) is announcing its forthcoming seminar, "New Alliances: Civil Society, Social Cohesion and Cultural Policy," which will take place in Vienna, Austria on November 24-25, 2000. For more information, contact Diane Dodd at: diane.dodd@retemail.es

Professor Isidro Morales, a political economist at the Universidad de la Américas-Puebla in Mexico, has recently written a paper on NAFTA and its impact on the governance of social cohesion. The paper is available at:
<http://webserver.pue.udlap.mx/~imorales/articulos/nafta2.html>