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# Growing injustice: six myths about inequality

We need to see things as they are, not as a few with great wealth would have the rest of us believe.

BY **DANNY DORLING** PUBLISHED 1 JUNE, 2015 - 12:34

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The Falinge estate in Rochdale, often cited as one of the most deprived areas of the UK. Photo: Christopher Furlong/Getty

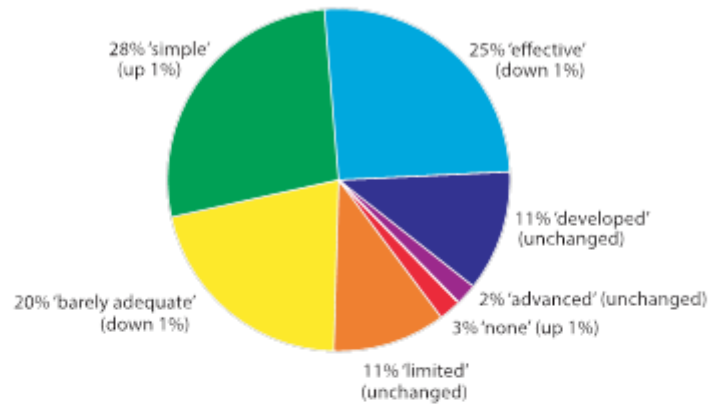
We used to say that most people don't know how the other half lives; in the UK that has changed. Our society can no longer be meaningfully divided into two halves. Most of us have little understanding of the lives in the tranche just above or below us, and those people have little understanding of the tranches above and below them and so on. We live in different worlds. Most people find it difficult to believe that some people who

have an income ten times higher than theirs, when asked, say that they are finding it difficult to manage financially.

We live in an increasingly hierarchical society. We talk about some people being way above and others way below other people. And yet we are not that different from each other. This sham hierarchy has been created by elitism, exclusion, prejudice, and greed. The end result is increasing amounts of despair, not only among the poor, but also among groups like the children of aspirational parents. If we want a content and happy society, we are currently going in the wrong direction.

Direction is crucial. It is not what they have at the moment that makes people most happy, it is whether they feel they are in a situation that is getting better or getting worse. Moreover this need not be a question of getting better for some, but consequently worse for others. Many changes can be better for almost everyone, others disastrous for society as a whole.

**Figure 1: Children in the Netherlands ranked by ability (%) according to the OECD, 2012 (showing changes since 2006)**



Notes: 'None' implies none as can be measured. 'Limited' implies possessing very limited knowledge. 'Barely adequate' stands for barely adequate knowledge in the view of the assessors. 'Simple' means understanding only simple concepts. 'Effective' is a little less damning. 'Developed' is better again; but only those rated as 'Advanced' are said to be capable of the kind of thinking that might include 'critical insight'. Note that in the PISA 2012 update these words are no longer used and three scores have to be summed. The OECD PISA assessments put children in 7 levels by ability. The adjectives used here are extracted from PISA's own 2006 descriptions of what these bands represented as published in OECD (2007) *The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), OECD's latest PISA study of learning skills among 15-year-olds*, Paris: OECD, derived from figures in table 1, p 20. Updated using data from 2012 that is available here: [http://nces.ed.gov/pubns2014/2014024\\_tables.pdf](http://nces.ed.gov/pubns2014/2014024_tables.pdf) for "mathematics literacy scale" descriptions Exhibit M1, figures Table M1 for "science literacy scale" descriptions Exhibit S1, figures Table S1 for "reading literacy scale" descriptions Exhibit R1, figures Table R1

Source: (OECD 2012) (derived from figures in table below)

Label	Netherlands 2012	Mathematics	Science	Literacy	Netherlands 2006	Change
3% 'none'	3.2	3.8	3.1	2.8	2.3	0.9
11% 'limited'	10.5	11	10.1	10.3	10.7	-0.2
20% 'barely adequate'	19.7	17.9	20.1	21	21.1	-1.4
28% 'simple'	27.6	24.2	29.1	29.2	26.9	0.7
25% 'effective'	25.3	23.8	25.8	26.1	25.8	-0.5
11% 'developed'	11.5	14.9	10.5	9	11.5	0.0
2% 'advanced'	2.2	4.4	1.3	0.8	1.7	0.5
	100.0	100.0	100.0	99.2	100.0	0.0

## Myth 1: Elitism is efficient

In the richest, most unequal of countries in the world, pretense is most often made that only the most able, on merit, have got to the top. However, most of those who do make it up there come from affluent backgrounds.

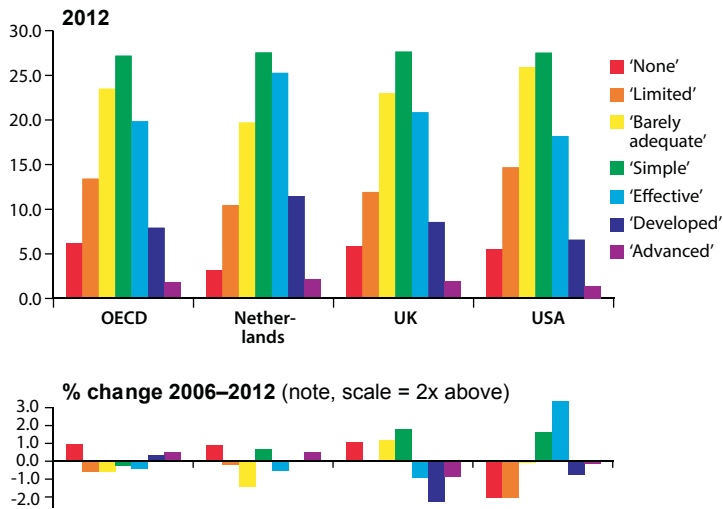
In contrast, people in poorer parts of the world today may

easily be the first in their family to have graduated from a secondary school. At the same time in the very poorest of countries, many children still are not getting a full primary school education, let alone persevere through what is considered in rich countries to be a basic education.

University education in poor countries is only for the very rich. In contrast, the affluent world is characterized by long-standing and ever-improving compulsory primary and secondary education for all children, with rates of university access rising almost continuously. Despite this, many young people are not presented as well educated in most affluent nations, but as failing to reach official targets.

Until very recently, too few children even in affluent countries were educated for any length of time. All children are still at risk of being labelled as 'inadequate' despite the fact that the resources are there to teach them. They are at risk of being told that they are simply not up to learning what the world now demands of them. Almost all will fail at some hurdle, at some point, in an education system where examination has become so dominant.

**Figure 2:** Distribution of children by ability, according to the OECD, 2012 (%)



Source: Data originally given in OECD (2007) *The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA)*, OECD's latest PISA study of learning skills among 15-year-olds, Paris: OECD, derived from figures in table 1, p20. Updated using [http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2014/2014024\\_tables.pdf](http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2014/2014024_tables.pdf) (see Figure 1 notes)

Label	OECD	Netherlands	UK	USA
'None'	1.0	0.9	1.1	-2.1
'Limited'	-0.6	-0.2	0.1	-2.1
'Barely adequate'	-0.6	-1.4	1.2	-0.1
'Simple'	-0.2	0.7	1.8	1.7
'Effective'	-0.4	-0.5	-0.9	3.4
'Developed'	0.2	0.0	-2.3	-0.9
'Advanced'	0.5	0.5	-0.9	-0.1
	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00

People are remarkably similar in ability. However, you can find a few people, especially in politics, celebrity (now a field of work) or business, who appear to truly believe they are especially gifted, that they are a gift to others who should be grateful for their talents and that those others should reward them 'appropriately'. These people are just as much victims of elitism as those who are told they are, in effect, congenitally stupid, fit for little but taking orders and performing menial toil, despite having been required to spend over a decade in school. Under elitism education is less about learning and

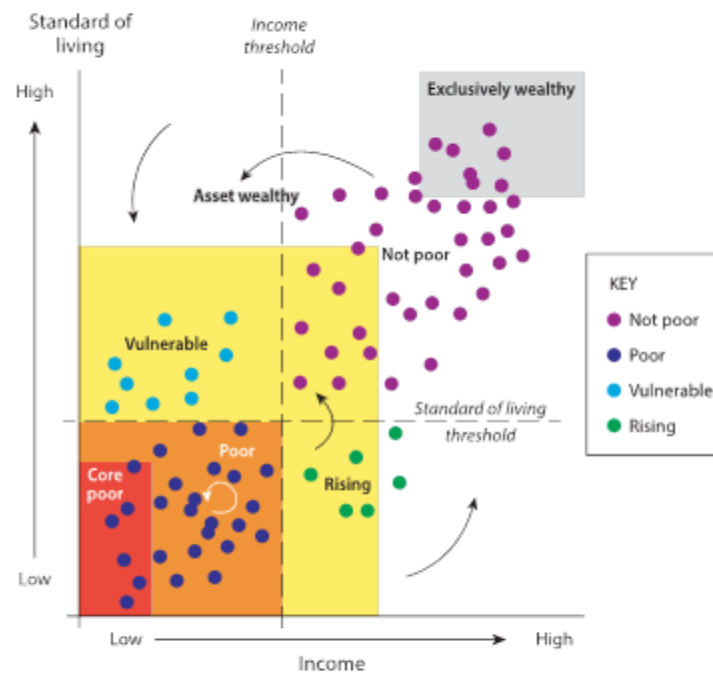
more about dividing people, sorting out the supposed wheat from the chaff, and conferring high status upon a minority. It is the poorest who are still most clearly damaged by elitism, by the shame that comes with being told that their ability borders on inadequacy, that there is something wrong with them because of who they are, that they are poor because they lack the ability to be anything else.

Those that are elevated by elitism often lack respect for the people that the system tells them are inferior, even to the point of thinking that many individuals in full employment do not deserve a living wage, one high enough to maintain a normal standard of living. Increasing incomes to the living wage enhances the quality of the work of employees, reduces absenteeism and improves recruitment and retention of staff. How much better would the lives of the children of the poorest be if their parents were not constantly stressed?

In contrast to the poor, the elevated feel they deserve huge salaries enabling them to afford things that most people consider unnecessary, even silly, which deprives others of basic comforts and such things as free education beyond secondary level. These gross disparities in income result in many jobs amounting to little more than acting as servants to the better off, labour which could be employed much more profitably in other more equitable ways. Furthermore there is a backlash to lack of respect. Many of the very well paid are

not respected nowadays precisely because people are realizing that those above them don't deserve so much.

**Figure 8:** Circling from exclusion to inclusion and back again (model)



Note: It is because a change in income usually precedes changes in standard of living, that we tend to spiral anti-clockwise within this figure, sometimes just in small eddies.

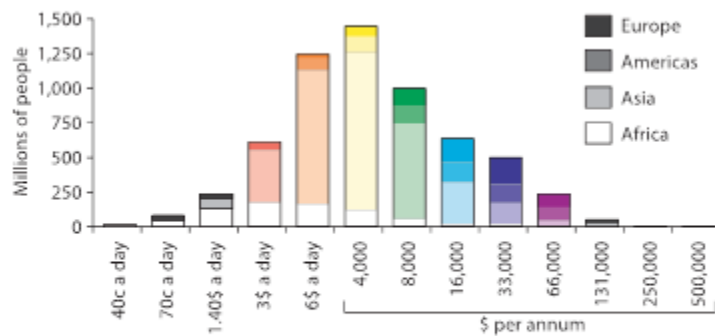
Source: Adapted from David Gordon's original and much replicated drawing. See publication details of various of the works (where earlier versions appear) at the Townsend Centre for International Poverty Research, University of Bristol ([www.bris.ac.uk/poverty/](http://www.bris.ac.uk/poverty/)).

## Myth 2: Exclusion is necessary

It has been estimated that in the UK, as 2015 draws to a close, almost 7.1 million of the nation's 13 million youngsters will be in homes with incomes judged to be less than the minimum necessary for a decent standard of living. In contrast, relatively few people would describe themselves as poor and needing to take out loans "just to get by" in countries as diverse as Japan

and the Netherlands, whereas in Britain and the US, relative and now absolute rates of poverty have grown greatly in recent decades, simply because inequality has grown.

Figure 9: Distribution of income inequality, worldwide, 2000



Note: X-axis shows a continuous log scale of annual income in comparable dollars, Y-axis shows millions of people living in families supported by such incomes.

Source: Figures (in purchase power parity, US\$) derived from estimates by Angus Maddison, from version produced in spreadsheets given in [www.worldmapper.org](http://www.worldmapper.org), based in turn on UNDP income inequality estimates for each country; derivation shown below.

Millions of people living in households by minimum annual income (US\$ppp) by Worldmapper Region ([www.worldmapper.org](http://www.worldmapper.org))

GDP /capita	Central Africa	South-eastern Africa	North-eastern Africa	South-eastern Asia	Asia Pacific	Middle East	Eastern Asia	South America	Eastern Europe	North America	Western Europe	Japan	Total
32	0.2	0.2	0.6	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	1.0
64	0.9	1.1	2.6	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.3	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	4.9
128	4.2	5.9	9.9	0.0	0.5	0.1	0.3	1.4	0.0	0.1	0.0	0.0	22.4
256	12.8	22.6	27.3	1.3	4.1	1.6	3.6	5.9	0.1	0.4	0.0	0.0	79.6
512	23.3	59.2	54.1	23.0	18.9	8.8	26.7	18.3	0.7	1.8	0.0	0.0	234.7
1024	27.0	80.3	80.9	173.7	61.8	28.8	112.9	42.9	3.4	5.9	0.0	0.0	617.5
2048	19.3	51.5	98.5	496.3	138.9	61.6	274.9	74.2	16.6	14.0	0.2	0.0	1246.1
4096	8.0	25.2	91.9	502.8	167.8	85.9	385.6	94.4	58.0	25.8	3.3	0.0	1448.7
8192	2.6	15.3	53.2	172.1	102.4	90.3	317.1	87.6	87.3	46.8	25.4	0.4	1000.6
16384	0.8	9.9	16.8	19.1	42.7	61.9	163.5	59.3	62.1	86.8	99.4	18.6	641.1
32768	0.3	5.5	2.9	0.7	19.3	26.9	55.2	29.4	20.9	115.4	160.7	76.7	513.8
65536	0.1	2.3	0.3	0.0	7.7	7.2	10.8	10.7	2.3	86.0	85.8	30.7	243.9
131072	0.0	0.7	0.0	0.0	1.8	1.1	1.2	2.9	0.1	33.9	15.4	1.1	58.2
262144	0.0	0.2	0.0	0.0	0.2	0.1	0.1	0.6	0.0	7.1	1.2	0.0	9.5
524288	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.1	0.0	0.8	0.0	0.0	1.0
1048576	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.1
Total	99.4	280.1	439.0	1389.2	566.3	374.3	1351.9	427.9	251.4	424.6	391.5	127.5	6123.1

Today, one in six of all households in the UK are excluded from social norms due to poverty, and are poor in at least two out of three ways of assessing poverty. What now makes those households poor are the effects of the riches of others. In the UK more people are imprisoned, when measured both



absolutely and relatively, than in any other country in Europe. In Sweden they have had to close jails because of a lack of prisoners. However you need to look to the US to see how far a rich country can go in excluding people totally. In 1940 ten times fewer people were locked up in jail in the US as now, and 70 per cent of the two million now imprisoned there are black. What is now seen as necessary in one country is viewed as incomprehensible in another.

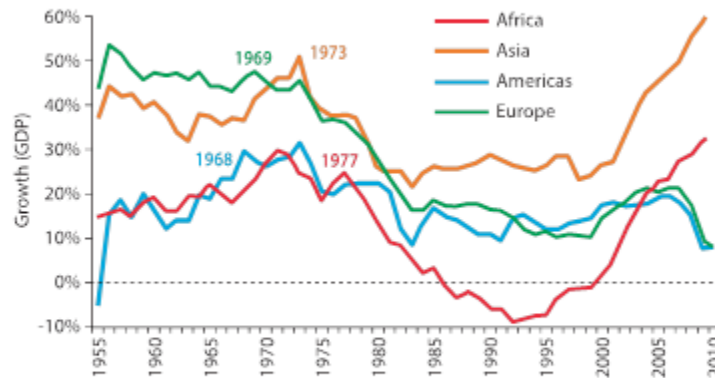
### Myth 3: Prejudice is natural

Prejudice grows like mold, based on elitist myths in times of exclusion when some people preach that inequalities are simply reflections of individual differences in ability. Racism, as it is applied to people of different skin colours, or different nationalities or different religions, is easily recognized, can easily be inflamed by stoking up fear and is often hard to quell because of segregation and a lack of social mixing.

In the UK, just as in the US, there is a sense of prejudice about the value of those 'beneath' that is wider than racism. Those both at the top and at the bottom are less likely to trust others, and more likely to become fearful in a society that so clearly values many people so little. Racism rises in just these kinds of circumstances, and a wider form of racism – a new social Darwinism – quietly spreads. Lack of respect for people seen as beneath you and as above you is widespread, and the

banker with his high salary and the cleaner with her low one are both despised.

**Figure 10:** Real growth per decade in GDP (%), per person, by continent, 1955–2010



Source: Figures (growth in the decade to year shown) derived from estimates by Angus Maddison. Updated using figures provided by the Maddison Project: <http://www.ggdc.net/maddison/maddison-project/home.htm>

**Change in GDP (US\$ppp) per person over the decade to the year shown 1991-2010**

	Africa	Asia	Americas	Europe
1991	-6%	28%	9%	16%
1992	-9%	26%	15%	15%
1993	-8%	26%	15%	12%
1994	-8%	25%	14%	11%
1995	-7%	26%	12%	11%
1996	-4%	29%	12%	10%
1997	-2%	28%	13%	11%
1998	-2%	23%	14%	11%
1999	-1%	24%	14%	10%
2000	1%	26%	18%	14%
2001	5%	27%	18%	17%
2002	11%	32%	17%	18%
2003	16%	39%	18%	20%
2004	20%	43%	18%	21%
2005	23%	45%	19%	20%
2006	24%	48%	20%	21%
2007	27%	50%	18%	21%
2008	29%	55%	15%	17%
2009	32%	59%	8%	10%
2010	34%	64%	8%	8%

Note: These figures are 10 times larger than annual changes.

It is the very fact that human societies can change in collective behaviour over extremely short periods of time that suggests that our destinies are not in our genes. We can move in just a few generations from being feudal or cooperative, to being competitive or totalitarian. We move within lifetimes from

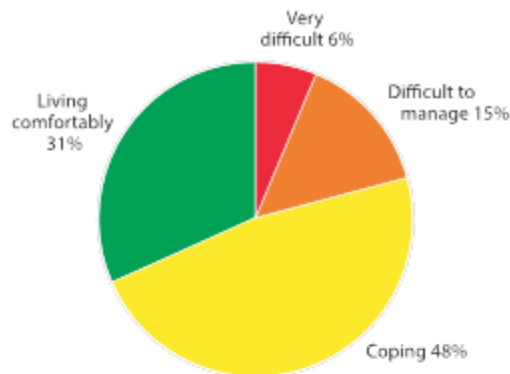
seeing large groups of people persuaded to take part in wars and not resisting conscription, to marching and singing for others' rights. Prejudices rise and fall as people promote them or teach against them. Prejudice is nurtured it does not rise unaided.

One manifestation of prejudice is that when great numbers are seen as less deserving, whether as slaves, paupers, or just 'average', a minority can describe their own behaviour not as greed, but as receiving higher rewards because there are simply different kinds of human beings, and they themselves truly deserve to be put on a pedestal above those whom they view with prejudice and look down on.

## Myth 4: Greed is Good

By late 2014, chief executives of UK FTSE 100 firms were paid, on average, 342 times more than their minimum wage employees. Their pay had risen by 243 per cent since the minimum wage was introduced in 1999, three times faster than the percentage rise in the minimum wage, and by many times more in just one year than many others can expect to receive in a lifetime of work.

**Figure 11: Households' ability to get by on their income in Britain, two decades before the crash, 1984–2004**



Note: Respondents were asked 'Which of the (above) phrases comes closest to your feelings about your household's income these days?'. Excludes those who did not answer.

Source: Derived from ONS (2006) *Social Trends (No 36)*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, table 5.15, p 78, mean of 1984, 1994 and 2004 surveys.

**Perceptions of the economic climate after the crash, in 2009, by income, UK (%)**

	Less than £20,000	£20k-£40k	£40k-£60k	£60k-£100k	£100k+	All individuals
<b>The economic situation in the world:</b>						
Good or very good	6	3	2	1	0	4
Neither good or bad	17	18	12	8	8	16
Bad or very bad	77	79	85	91	92	80
<b>The economic situation in the UK:</b>						
Good or very good	8	5	4	4	0	6
Neither good or bad	17	15	13	4	11	15
Bad or very bad	76	80	83	92	89	80
<b>The financial situation in your household:</b>						
Good or very good	28	44	54	64	63	40
Neither good or bad	47	42	35	36	34	43
Bad or very bad	25	14	11	1	3	18

Source: 2009 Survey of Public Attitudes and Behaviours towards the Environment, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs – collected February–March, ONS 2012, *Social Trends 41, Income and Wealth*, Table 1.

Squalor in the 1940s was life in crowded damp accommodation with inadequate hygiene, no hot running water, and often no inside toilet. By the late 1970s, in most rich countries, most of the least hygienic dwellings had been converted or demolished, but a new form of squalor then arose. The rich began to take a greater and greater share of living space, of land, 'spare' houses and anything else not actually needed by them, but seen as a good investment. Local

life in poor areas became downgraded despite the renewal of the worst housing.

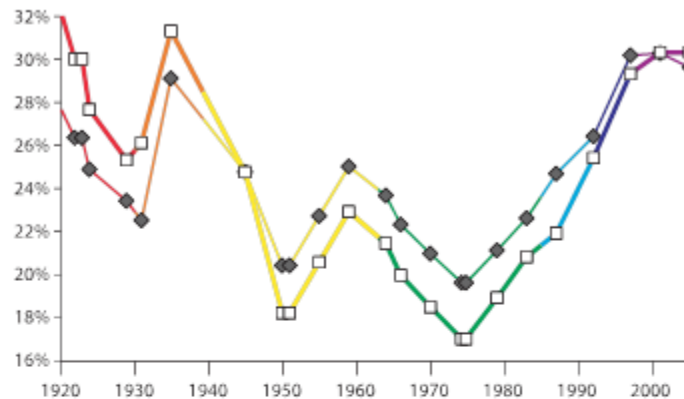
‘The great and the good’ know that suggesting in public that greed is good is seen as immoral, and do not openly say it. However the current extraordinarily high cost of housing, whether through attempted home ownership or renting, is due to greed. What do the extremely wealthy do with spare money? One thing they almost all do is invest in property, houses they do not actually need, but out of which they hope to make yet more money. They do, and that money comes from all those new massively indebted mortgagees and all those who are privately renting (with a big chunk being from that special landlord benefit – housing benefit).

Another way for the rich to get their hands on other people's money is to fabricate need and to encourage what is termed credit but is actually debts. Advertising is an industry that frequently aims to make people feel unhappy or jealous until they possess the advertised products. Products are frequently 'upgraded' so that what you bought last year can be presented as second-rate. Credit is a way of extracting money from those that have less, not so much a trickle up effect, but a gushing up, especially from the poorest of all when they have to resort to pay-day lending and similar schemes.

## Myth 5: Despair is inevitable

Human beings are not mentally immune to the effects of rising elitism, exclusion, prejudice and greed. They react like rats in cages to having their social environments made progressively more unpleasant. Part of the mechanism behind the worldwide rise in diseases of despair – depression and anxiety – is the insecurity caused when particular forms of competition are enhanced. This is happening to children in school as well as from the effects of the advertising industry in making both adults, and especially children, feel inadequate. The powerful also have little immunity from the effects of despair if they live in more unequal countries. The most detrimental damage to ill health is found near the geographical hearts of the problem. However, the widest physical health inequalities in rich countries are to be seen within the very centres of London and New York.

**Figure 12: Inequalities in chances of living to age 65 by geographical area in Britain, 1920–2006**



Note: The line marked by white squares shows how much lower the age-sex standardised under-age-65 mortality rate in the 10% of geographical areas (wards) with the lowest mortality is compared to the average. The line marked by dark diamonds shows how much higher that of the worst 30% is than the average.

Source: Dorling, D. and Thomas, B. (2009) 'Geographical inequalities in health over the last century', in H. Graham (ed) *Understanding Health Inequalities*: Oxford University Press, pp 66-83, derived from Table 4.3, with interpolation between five-year rates in some circumstances.

**Standardised Mortality Ratio 0-64 (1921–2006) Decile 1 (D1) is the area of the country containing the 10% of the population with the worst health outcomes at each time**

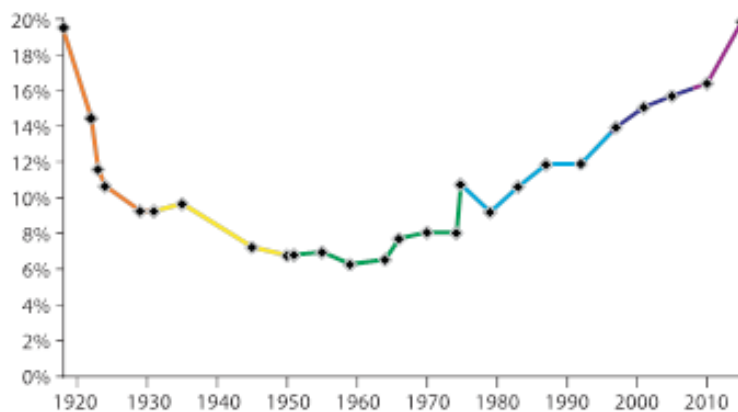
RII	Ratio	Years	D1	D10	Worst off 30%	Best off 10%
2.64	2.02	1921-25	141	70	0.263	0.300
2.41	1.83	1926-30	137	75	0.234	0.253
2.35	1.83	1931-35	136	74	0.225	0.261
2.89	2.25	1936-39	155	69	0.291	0.313
1.96	1.6	1950-53	131	82	0.204	0.182
2.25	1.76	1959-63	136	77	0.250	0.229
1.92	1.58	1969-73	131	83	0.196	0.170
2.12	1.7	1981-85	135	79	0.226	0.208
2.22	1.78	1986-89	139	78	0.247	0.219
2.49	1.93	1990-92	144	75	0.264	0.254
2.64	2.06	1993-95	149	72	0.280	0.277
2.8	2.16	1996-97	153	71	0.302	0.293
2.85	2.17	1999-2001	151	70	0.303	0.303
2.83	2.14	2002-04	150	70	0.299	0.298
2.84	2.14	2004-06	149	70	0.296	0.303

Note: RII is the Relative Index of Inequality, a measure of the overall level of inequality.

The human condition, our drive, our questioning, our angst and our concern, means that we cannot always be happy, but learning to live better with each other is beginning to be seen as the key to learning to live better within our own minds, to be happier or at least more at ease with ourselves. Not making children and adults anxious, tearful, fearful and stressed in the first place is the best place to start. By looking at different

places and at different countries, and by noting the extraordinarily rapid increase in despair in the UK and the US, it is apparent that the proportion of desperately unhappy people is not currently so very high by some law of nature, but the result of policies and attitudes that can be changed.

**Figure 13: Concentration of Conservative votes, British general elections, 1918–2015**



Note: The statistic being measured is the segregation index of Conservative votes across all British seats at each general election. The proportion is the minimum number of voters who would have to be moved across constituency boundaries to ensure that within each parliamentary constituency the Conservatives received exactly the same share of the vote.

Source: Drawn initially in Dorling, D. (2006) 'Class alignment renewal': *The Journal of Labour Politics*, vol 41, no 1, p 849, showing the spatial segregation index. Updated in Dorling, D. (2013) *Crises and turning points: the pivots of history*, *Renewal*, 21, 4, pp11-20.

**The Segregation Index of Conservative voters in Britain\*, 1885–2015**

Election	Concentration	Election	Concentration
1885	7.11%	1951	6.77%
1886	5.53%	1955	6.93%
1892	5.81%	1959	6.24%
1895	4.70%	1964	6.51%
1900	4.39%	1966	7.69%
1906	6.67%	1970	8.04%
1910 Dec	6.24%	1974 Feb	8.01%
1910 Jan	7.91%	1974 Oct	10.72%
1918	19.30%	1979	9.17%
1922	14.44%	1983	10.59%
1923	11.57%	1987	11.84%
1924	10.62%	1992	11.88%
1929	9.24%	1997	13.94%
1931	9.23%	2001	15.05%
1935	9.65%	2005	15.69%
1945	7.21%	2010	16.40%
1950	6.74%	2015	19.89%

\*Northern Irish seats are not included.



## Conclusion

Look at those attitudes and beliefs that increase inequality, at how people supported those beliefs and their validity.

Do not think what is happening now is normal. Beware people who say it is just human nature, that situations are inevitable, that you just have to face up to reality, that there is no such thing as society. Social attitudes are created by us and can change remarkably quickly. How many people we lock up in prison and for how long is dependent on us, not on some preordained level of wickedness in the world. We are surprised when a victim asks for any punishment to be lenient, being magnanimous is currently the exception in the UK, we can more easily sympathize with the victim who feels the punishment is not sufficiently harsh.

People say that the poor will always be with us, and claim that without the threat of poverty, large numbers of people would be idle. They do not see unemployment as being due to, for many people, a lack of worthwhile jobs, or that we no longer need everyone to work long hours. We do not see those who insist they couldn't or won't do their jobs unless paid millions as the most reluctant to work, as potential shirkers and the most successful scroungers.

Propaganda from the richest in society frequently results in us not recognizing when policies increase inequality. Tax cuts are

seen as something that can only be beneficial. Shrinking the state will reduce dependency, the most affluent and actually dependent on others claim. When we clamor for a 2% pay rise, the better-off do not recognize this as a vote for increased inequality. A £500 a year (or should I say 30p an hour) increase across the board is never even suggested, despite the cost to the institution being similar, and anyone who is paid less than you is still paid less. But attitudes can change and have done so dramatically, for better and for worse, in the recent past.

Many wait for a great leader, failing to realize that past great leaders were never more than the product of their times; ordinary people pushed forward by the people around them and the society in which they lived. My view is that no one can truly know what will be sufficient to change deeply held and institutionally transmitted beliefs. Slowly, collectively, with one step back for every two taken forward, we can inch onwards to progress; often having to gradually undo the largely unintended consequences of the solutions to the injustices of the past.

Our current great injustices have in many ways arisen from the solutions to the great injustices of the past, in the UK from the solutions to ignorance, want, idleness, squalor and disease in the 1940s. Those solutions, right for their times, resulted in several decades of progress and a narrowing of the divides. It

can be done again. Everything it takes to defeat injustice lies in the mind. First we need to see things as they are, not as a few with great wealth would have the rest of us believe. Then what matters most is how we think, and how we think is metamorphosing because – everywhere – there are signs (only signs) of hope.

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*Injustice, why social inequality persists* by Daniel Dorling was first published in 2010. It was republished as a paperback in 2011 with the addition of a foreword by Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett and an Afterword and reprinted in 2013. It was fully revised and the figures and data updated in 2015 and published on 3 June as *Injustice, why social inequality still persists* and is available from *Policy Press*.

*Full version of the figures shown and all the original and updated figures are available [here](#).*