

RECOGNISING STRUCTURAL INEQUALITY

A photograph of a protest. In the foreground, a person's hand holds up a white sign with black text that reads "PARLIAMENT! ADDRESS SYSTEMIC RACISM!". The background shows a large, ornate building with multiple spires, likely a parliament building, under a hazy, orange-tinted sky. The overall mood is one of social activism and demand for change.

**STRUCTURAL
INEQUALITIES
ALLIANCE**

WHY THIS GUIDE?

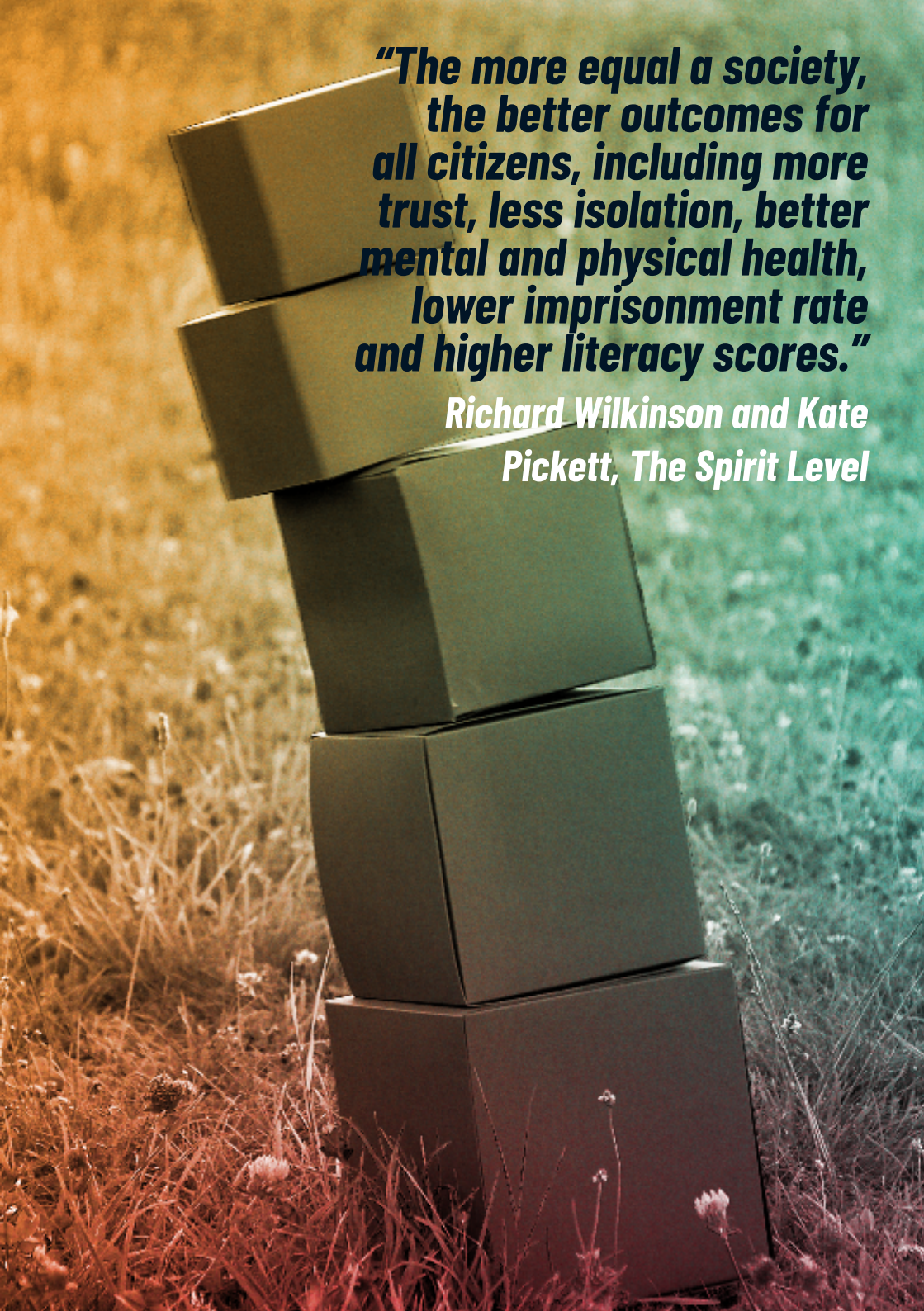
To eradicate structural inequality we must become comfortable in naming and describing it. This short read will help you to recognise structural inequality, some causes and effects, and principles to mitigate impacts. Structural inequalities have been designed into our economic, cultural, social, and political systems and so can be designed out.

WHAT IS STRUCTURAL INEQUALITY?

- Structural inequalities are deeply entrenched disparities in our socioeconomic and political systems that help some people to thrive in health, wealth, and power, while disadvantaging others.
- Policies and working practices can perpetuate inequality, meaning some of us must work much, much harder than others to get to the same place and some will never get there, however hard we try.¹
- This results in access to resources, opportunities, and rights becoming unequal, due to factors that include race, gender, and socioeconomic status.
- Most people face multiple and interacting forms of disadvantage.
- If we only mitigate the consequences of inequality and don't deal with underlying structural causes, policy measures will still lead to unequal outcomes and limit the potential of individuals and groups.

A widespread failure to address inequality adequately has led to soaring income and wealth inequality, unequal access to education and healthcare, deeply felt discrimination based on race and gender, and a decrease in social mobility.

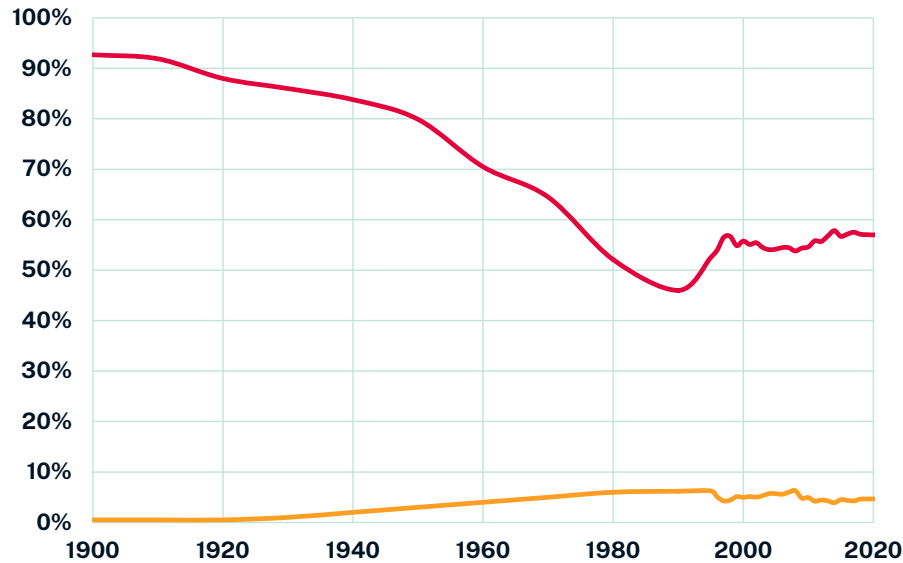
¹ Alice Jenkins and Kathryn Quinton, How to Shift Public Attitudes on Equality (Equally Ours 2019)



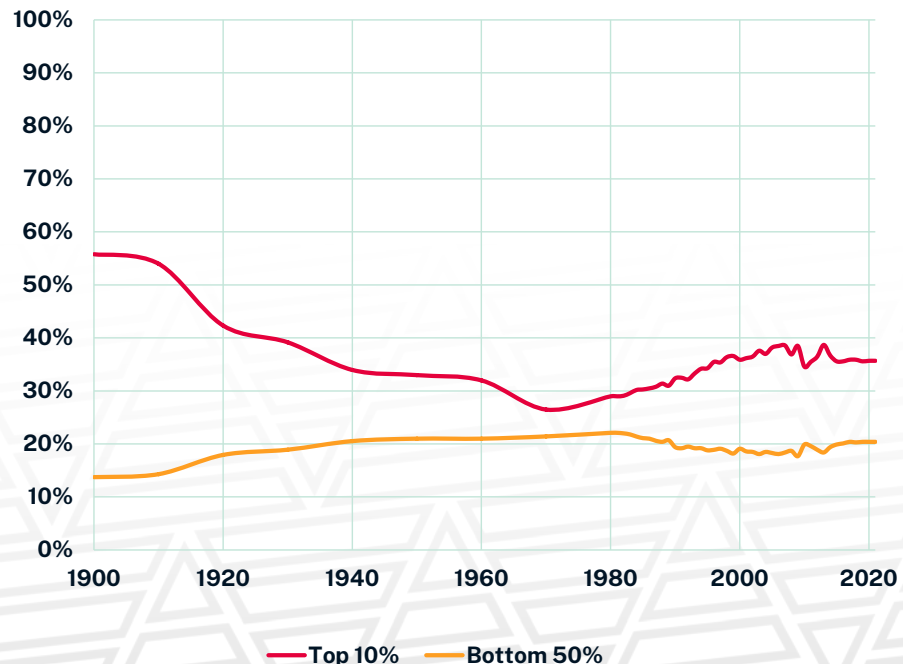
“The more equal a society, the better outcomes for all citizens, including more trust, less isolation, better mental and physical health, lower imprisonment rate and higher literacy scores.”

Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett, The Spirit Level

Top 10% and bottom 50% wealth shares in the UK, 1900-2020



Top 10% and bottom 50% income shares in the UK, 1900-2020



Addressing structural inequalities requires comprehensive and sustained efforts to reshape institutions, policies, and attitudes, aiming for a more equitable and just society.

HOW DOES STRUCTURAL INEQUALITY MANIFEST?

Some people's lives are filled with only up-escalators. Without thinking too much about it, they climb up them to more resources, opportunities, and rights. Other people aren't quite so lucky. They mainly encounter down-escalators. They still try to walk up them, but unsurprisingly, they don't get very far.

These escalators, better known as our civil, financial, and social institutions², should give everyone the same opportunities to thrive in health, wealth, and power so that no one is left behind. We know this isn't the case.

Taking health as an example, some people can expect to live 19 years less than others depending on their economic status and geography.³

² Examples of civil institutions: charities, museums, schools, faith groups

Examples of financial institutions: banks, credit unions, insurance companies

Examples of social institutions: government, education, religion

³ Office for National Statistics, Health state life expectancies by national deprivation deciles, England: 2018 to 2020, Released April 2022



We can see it when applicants from minority ethnic backgrounds have to send 60% more applications to get a positive response from an employer than white British candidates; a level of race discrimination which has remained unchanged since the 1960s.⁴

Our socio-economic policies created by an unrepresentative dominant narrative has over the years contributed to deep othering of marginalised communities.⁵

This can impact people's life chances, opportunities, and motivation to participate in many aspects of our social norms and institutions.

The roles with the most power and influence over people's lives are still dominated by those who had the privilege to attend a fee-paying school. For instance, 33% of media producers and 39% of Whitehall and public bodies' leadership exclusively attended a fee-paying school and Oxbridge.⁶

Senior judges are most likely to be from an independent school, whilst a 2012 study of prisoners found that 63% had been excluded from school.⁷ As with all of these statistics, the reasons for such stark differences and inequalities are complex.

Reasons for school exclusions are dependent on a range of determinants. These wider determinants compound over a lifetime. The area our parents can afford to live in will determine the school we go to, which influences our grades,

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⁴ Nuffield College Blog, New CCSI Report on Ethnic Minority Job Discrimination, last modified Jan 2019

⁵ Liz Frost, Making Sense of Shame Theory: A psychosocial construct, ed Frost et al, (Bristol University Press, 2021) p.26

⁶ Sutton Trust and Mobility Commission, Elitist Britain 2019

⁷ Gill K (2017) Making The Difference: Breaking the link between school exclusion and social exclusion, IPPR.





which influences our job and income, which influences where we can afford to live, which determines where our children go to school.⁸

Money and connections, and sometimes luck, can interrupt this cycle, for instance paying for extra tuition or a contact setting up employment opportunities. But, overwhelmingly, within our current system, economic outcomes are predicted by parental attainment — not the talent, skills, or work ethic of individuals.⁹

People often face a combination of barriers and multiple layers of inequality due to inherent bias in our systems and society. “The inequalities faced by women of colour are not simply those faced by white women with a racial element ‘added on’: they are fundamentally different. Too often that distinction remains under-appreciated.”¹⁰

These examples are based on measurable outcomes which matter to the economy or have legislation attached to them: for

⁸ Farquharson, C., McNally, S. and Tahir, I. (2022), ‘Education inequalities’, IFS Deaton Review of Inequalities

⁹ Laura Van Der Erve et al. (2023) Social Mobility Continues to fall...

¹⁰ UCL Public Policy, UCL Grand Challenge of Justice & Equality, Resolution Foundation, Structurally Unsound, 2019

“Focusing on the ‘choices’ of individuals obscures structural restrictions on the ability for people to make real choices.”

UCL Public Policy, UCL Grand Challenge of Justice & Equality, Resolution Foundation, Structurally Unsound

example employment rates or educational attainment targets. But what about the impact on people? People everywhere on the financial spectrum fare worse in more unequal societies. Individuals are more likely to doubt their self worth, have higher rates of depression, increased substance abuse, higher infant mortality.¹¹ People can not simply choose to be happier, healthier, or wealthier.

Take pension gender disparity as an example. “Among the population as a whole, women’s median pension wealth is £6,000, barely a quarter of the £22,600 held by men.”¹² The reasons for this disparity are complex. The pensions system was designed to fit a traditionally masculine life course, and caring breaks, pay scales, job stability, all have an impact. However, the figures begin to look very different when taking into account ethnicity, (dis)ability, and geography. Individual choice can never mitigate all the structural barriers at play. The system is rigged. Policy interventions across sectors from the labour market, education, childcare, as well as pension saving, are what is needed.

The building blocks of our society such as stable jobs, good education, or quality housing are crumbling or just missing for so many of our communities.¹³

“People can not simply choose to be happier, healthier, or wealthier.”

¹¹ Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett, The Inner Level: How More Equal Societies Reduce Stress, Restore Sanity and Improve Everyone’s Well-being (London: AllenLane 2018)

¹² Dr Jay Ginn and Jonquil Lowe, Autumn Budget 2021 Pre-budget Briefing, Pensions and Gender,

¹³ How to talk about the building blocks of health. The Health Foundation; 2022

RECOMMENDATIONS

Structural inequalities can be addressed through a comprehensive and systemic approach, challenging unjust power dynamics and promoting equality in all aspects of society to redistribute wealth and power. By examining how decisions are made, who by, and how they affect people over our life course we can transform institutions and social structures by redesigning them to remove the multiple forms of inequalities we experience based on and beyond our identities.

Through the Structural Inequalities Alliance (SIA), leaders from academia, the third sector, business and beyond have worked together to share knowledge and deepen their understanding of the issues and potential solutions. After much research and deliberation, SIA members propose that these inequalities can be designed out through fundamental local, national, and institutional policy design based on the following three principles:

1. Fairness & equality

For all citizens to reach their full potential and have a good quality of life, policy must shift focus toward equality of outcome.

2. Intersectionality & evidence

We must better understand the challenges, intersectional nature of inequality, and what works in dismantling structural inequalities. Expertise can be found in empirical data and from people's lived experiences.

3. Participation

To change the structure of society we must change who gets to design it. Therefore, people directly affected by policy should be partners in all aspects of policy development, including planning, decision making, and accountability.

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Further Reading

- *The Spirit Level* (2009) and *The Inner Level* (2018), Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett
- World Inequality Database – the most extensive available database on the historical evolution of the world distribution of income and wealth, both within countries and between countries
- *Structurally Unsound – Exploring Inequalities: Igniting research to better inform UK policy*
- *How To Shift Public Attitudes On Equality – a communications toolkit* by Equally Ours
- Annual World Happiness Report – Happiness as an operational objective for governments based on UN Sustainable Development Goals