

CHAPTER 1

Do we still care about inequality?

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This chapter explores attitudes towards income inequality and redistributive policies

There is high – and growing – concern about income inequality.

- 78% think the gap between those with high incomes and low incomes is too large, up from 73% in 2004.
- 73% say differences in income are too large, up from 63% in 2004.
- 60% agree that working people do not get their fair share of the nation's wealth, up from 53% in 2004.

Income inequality is seen as having negative impacts.

- 63% say large differences in people's incomes contribute to social problems like crime.
- Only 27% say large differences in people's incomes are necessary for Britain's prosperity.

The public believe the government should act to reduce income inequality.

- 57% say it is the responsibility of the government to reduce the differences in income between people with high incomes and those with low incomes (only 19% disagree).
- 36% say that government should redistribute income from the better off to the less well off; a similar proportion (34%) disagree; 27% neither agree nor disagree.

Support for how to reduce income inequality depends upon how questions are asked – there is support for redistributive policies, but less when words like 'redistribution', 'poverty' and 'poor' are used directly.

- 51% say the government should provide a decent standard of living for the unemployed.
- But only 27% say the government should spend more on welfare benefits for the poor, even if this leads to higher taxes. This has decreased over the last two decades; in 1991 well over half (58%) said the government should spend more on welfare benefits.

There are four other main ways people support reducing inequality.

- 62% say better education or training opportunities should be provided to enable people to get better jobs.
- 56% say taxes for those on low incomes should be reduced.
- 54% say the minimum wage should be increased.
- 40% say taxes for those on high incomes should be increased.

People do not believe there is equal opportunity in Britain.

- 80% say children from better-off families have many more opportunities than children from less well-off families.
- 68% say some people have higher incomes than others because they are born to rich parents and have advantages from the start.
- Only 27% say people in Britain today have similar opportunities regardless of their income.



Co-author Michael Orton comments:

“The public is deeply concerned about the level of inequality. They see government as responsible for taking action whether in shaping the opportunities available to people, raising the National Minimum Wage or even through redistribution.”

