

Attitudes to inequality (2009-2011)

Overview

Income inequality in the UK rose dramatically after 1979 and now stands at historically high levels. But what does the British public think about inequality and redistribution? This ESRC-funded study (RES-062-23-1671), analysed data from the 2009 British Social Attitudes survey and found that the majority of the public are concerned about income inequality with 78% thinking that the gap between those with high and low incomes is too large, up from 73% in 2004. People generally think that income inequality has negative impacts, with 63% saying that it contributes to social problems like crime. The majority of the public believe the government should act to reduce income inequality but only 36% say that government should redistribute income from the better off to the less well off. The research set out to explore why people generally do not support policies to directly reduce inequality?

Part of the issue seems to be with the term 'redistribution', as more people answer favourably about redistribution when the general principle is put forward without the explicit term. Another part of the explanation for lower levels of public support for redistribution is self-interest. Those on higher incomes, who might lose out from redistribution, are less likely to support redistribution than those on lower incomes. But self-interest cannot explain views about redistribution entirely, given that a quarter of those on higher incomes, who say when asked that they put themselves first over others, still support redistribution. Another part of the explanation is people's underlying beliefs about inequality. Those who see inequality as caused by factors outside people's control (e.g. social injustice or bad luck) are much more likely to support redistribution than those who see it as due to laziness on the part of 'the poor' and hard work on the part of 'the rich'. The third explanation is that people support other kinds of government intervention aimed at reducing income inequalities such as equal opportunities.

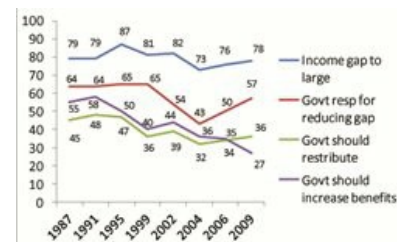
At a time when the recession and resulting cuts in public expenditure look set to impact most on those at the bottom, it seems that the British public will be concerned about consequential increases in income inequality

Trends over time

The research compared the answers to various questions in 2009 with answers in previous surveys and Figure 1 summarises some key findings here. It gives the answers to the following four questions:

- Thinking of income levels generally in Britain today, would you say that the gap between those with high incomes and those with low incomes is - too large? about right? or, too small?
- It is the responsibility of the government to reduce the differences in income between people with high incomes and those with low incomes.
- Government should redistribute income from the better off to those who are less well off?
- The government should spend more on welfare benefits for the poor, even if it leads to higher taxes?

Figure 1: Trends over time in attitudes to inequality (Source: British Social Attitudes Survey) shows that the proportion of people agreeing that the income gap was too large was at its highest in 1995 and then fell until 2004 but has since then increased to 78 per cent in 2009. The proportion of people who agreed that government is responsible for reducing the income gap was also at its highest in 1995 but then fell until 2004 since when it has increased to 57 per cent in 2009. The other two question areas show a slightly different pattern, with the view that government should increase benefit levels having fallen fairly consistently from 1987 to 2009. Support for redistribution have also generally declined but there was some increase in support between 2004 and 2009.



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Publications, presentations and press coverage

Four page summary of the research: Do we still care about inequality? (PDF) ([/Documents/college-social-sciences/social-policy/CHASM/do-we-still-care-about-inequality.pdf](#))

The research was published in:

Rowlingson, K, Orton, M and Taylor, E (2010) Do we still care about inequality? in Park, A, Curtice, J, Clery, E and Bryson, D (eds), **British Social Attitudes: the 27th report: exploring Labour's legacy**, London: Sage. (<http://www.sagepub.com/books/Book235675/toc>)

You can see the **powerpoint presentation** ([/Documents/college-social-sciences/social-policy/CHASM/presentations/looking-up-to-the-rich.pdf](#)) when the research was presented at the Social Policy Association conference in Lincoln in July 2011. You can also view the **full presentation from the Social Policy Association conference in Lincoln by Karen Rowlingson** (<http://as-coursecast-1.adf.bham.ac.uk/Panopto/Pages/Viewer/Default.aspx?id=e4157339-d073-497d-83f8-0cfe59ae7e6b>).

The research was also presented at a number of events such as the *Discourses of Dissent* event organised by the British Sociological Association's Theory study group in Birmingham in February 2011. The presentation was entitled: **Why doesn't the British public seem to care about inequality or the cuts in public spending?** (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aD6zmM1PzcY>)

Some of the findings were also presented at a TUC conference fringe event on **What is fair pay and how to achieve it** (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d_qiMXwDINI&feature=related) organised by Unions 21 in October 2010.

Some of the findings were also presented at a seminar on October 10th 2009, at Chequers on new thinking around the equality agenda. There were around 50 people in the audience - cabinet members, academics and 'opinion formers' including Gordon Brown, Ed Milliband and various other ministers (John Denham, Andrew Adonis, Harriet Harman and so on). The title of the presentation was *'What's fair? The public's view'*.

The research also gained a great deal of media attention with many newspapers claiming that it, alongside the other findings from the 2009 British Social Attitudes Survey, signalled a return to Thatcherism in terms of people's values. **For example, the Guardian headline on 13 December 2010 was 'Britain 'more Thatcherite now than in the 80s' says survey'**. (<http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/2010/dec/13/social-survey-thatcherite-britain>)

And The Telegraph's headline was: **Thatcher's Britain returns 20 years after she fell** (<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/politics/conservative/8198031/Thatchers-Britain-returns-20-years-after-she-fell.html>)

The Daily Mail opined: **After 13 years of Labour, public mood shifts right as most voters back Thatcherite values** (<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1338086/After-13-years-Labour-public-mood-shifts-right-voters-Thatcherite-values.html#ixzz1ifwhTE3n>)

We did not think that these headlines really reflected our findings. Attitudes to inequality and redistribution had actually become more progressive between 2004-2009 (see **figure 1**) though it is true that the long-term trend (ie since the mid 1980s) had not been progressive.

Staffing

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Methods and data

The study, Income inequality - making sense of British social attitudes was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (RES-062-23-1671) and involved placing a module of questions on the 2009 British Social Attitudes Survey (BSA). The BSA has been conducted annually since 1983 and is the country's leading social research survey. The survey is based on representative samples of around 3,500 adults, with findings published each year in an edited book. The datasets are also deposited at the Data Archive at the University of Essex. Each annual survey contains a number of core questions designed to measure people's underlying values and background characteristics. In addition, each year the questionnaire contains special modules designed to focus on particular topic areas.

The project involved putting a module of 40 question items onto the British Social Attitudes Survey. The module of questions covered attitudes to income inequality. It followed on from a literature review carried out for the [Joseph Rowntree Foundation \(http://www.jrf.org.uk/publications/public-attitudes-economic-inequality\)](http://www.jrf.org.uk/publications/public-attitudes-economic-inequality) by Karen Rowlingson and Michael Orton which identified that the majority of the public see the gap between rich and poor as too great but are less than enthusiastic about state intervention to reduce the gap. The proposed research aims explored the apparent contradictions and ambivalences in public attitudes.

The British Social Attitudes Survey is a rigorous and highly-regarded annual survey of the general public carried out by the National Centre for Social Research (Natcen) (see www.natcen.ac.uk). The report from this survey is published every year and, to date, has received considerable media attention.

The survey received full ethical review by Natcen's own ethical review committee, which conforms to ESRC's Research Governance Framework (see attached paperwork). However, it was also submitted to the University of Birmingham's Ethics Committee and received approval from this committee also.

Further information

If you would like any further information concerning this project, please contact Karen Rowlingson, [k.rowlingson@bham.ac.uk \(mailto:k.rowlingson@bham.ac.uk\)](mailto:k.rowlingson@bham.ac.uk).

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