

Can We Afford the Super-Rich?



Matt Wuerker, *Politico*, 7 Mar 2013.

Supporting Questions

1. What does economic inequality look like?
2. Does economic inequality adversely affect mental and physical health?
3. Does economic inequality undermine democracy?
4. Does economic inequality negatively impact climate change mitigation?

11th/12th Grade Economic Inequality Inquiry

Can we afford the super-rich?

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| C3 Framework Indicators | <p>D2.Eco.15.9-12: Explain how current globalization trends and policies affect economic growth, labor markets, rights of citizens, the environment, and resource and income distribution in different nations.</p> <p>D2.Geo.11.9-12: Evaluate how economic globalization and the expanding use of scarce resources contribute to conflict and cooperation within and among countries.</p> |
| Staging the Compelling Question | View a series of images related to the economic inequality. Conduct a classroom discussion concerning its causes and consequences |

| Supporting Question 1 | Supporting Question 2 | Supporting Question 3 | Supporting Question 4 |
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| What does economic inequality look like? | How does economic inequality affect mental and physical health?" | Does economic inequality undermine democracy? | Does economic inequality impact climate change mitigation? |
| Formative Performance Task | Formative Performance Task | Formative Performance Task | Formative Performance Task |
| Understand | Understand | Understand | Understand |
| Write a list that describes the historical trends, causes, and extent of intensifying economic inequality. | Write a summary that describes the relationship between economic inequality and mental and physical health. | Write a claim or series of claims using evidence as to whether or not (and to what extent) democracy is undermined by economic inequality. | Develop a claim supported by evidence about whether or not (and to what extent) economic inequality impacts climate change mitigation. |
| Featured Sources | Featured Sources | Featured Sources | Featured Sources |
| <p>Source A: Excerpt from Gordon, <i>Growing Apart</i> (2013)</p> <p>Source B: Gilson, "Only Little People Pay Taxes" (2011)</p> <p>Source C: Gilson, "It's the Inequality, Stupid" (2011)</p> | <p>Sources A & B: Data on economic inequality and health outcomes, <i>The Equality Trust</i> (2011, 2012)</p> <p>Source C: Hinds, "Inequality can be a good thing"(2013)</p> <p>Source D: Data from Center for Disease Control, (2013)</p> | <p>Source A: Boren, "The U.S. is an oligarchy, study concludes" (2014)</p> <p>Source B: Gilson, "Who Owns Congress? A Campaign Cash Seating Chart" and "Capitol Hill's Top 75 Corporate Sponsors" (2010)</p> <p>Source C: Freedom House report on political rights and civil liberties (2016)</p> | <p>Source A: Kenner, "Reducing inequality and carbon footprints within countries," Global Sustainability Institute (2016)</p> <p>Source B: Upton, "Let's fight the 1 percent—of power plants" (2013)</p> <p>Source C: Mankiw, "Yes, the Wealthy Can Be Deserving" (2014)</p> |

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| Summative Performance Task | ARGUMENT <i>Can we afford the super-rich?</i> Construct an argument (e.g., detailed outline, poster, essay) that discusses the compelling question using specific claims and relevant evidence from current sources while acknowledging competing views. |
| | EXTENSION Convert your argumentative essay or poster into an op-ed and submit it to the school or city newspaper. |
| Taking Informed Action | <p>ASSESS Determine the range of arguments, identifying the variance of perspectives within the class</p> <p>ACT Invite members of the community, within and outside the school, to attend a town-hall event to share the class perspectives.</p> |

Overview

Inquiry Description

This inquiry leads students through an investigation of the intensification of economic inequality. By exploring the compelling question “Can we afford the super-rich?” students evaluate the historical trends and consider the epidemiological, political, and socio-environmental consequences of escalating economic inequality. The formative performance tasks build on knowledge and skills through the course of the inquiry to help students understand the influence of the super-rich on the lives of others through a progressively expanded lens of economic inequality, mental and physical health, democratic processes, and climate change mitigation efforts. Students create an evidence-based argument about why we cannot afford the super-rich or why the super-rich do not pose a risk to society and the environment in which humanity is embedded. Though students can complete the inquiry with the provided sources, teachers are encouraged to have students research the supporting questions to supplement them.

It is important to note that this inquiry requires prerequisite knowledge of historical events and ideas. Thus, students should have already studied the Gilded Age and the myriad problems associated with it: working class exploitation resulting in the upward transfer of wealth and its concentration at the top of the socioeconomic pyramid; public health crises; political corruption; and geopolitical struggles around resource control and use.

Note: This inquiry is expected to take eight 40-minute class periods. The inquiry time frame could expand if teachers think their students need additional instructional experiences (i.e., supporting questions, formative performance tasks, and featured sources). Teachers are encouraged to adapt the inquiries in order to meet the needs and interests of their particular students. Resources can also be modified as necessary to meet individualized education programs (IEPs) or Section 504 Plans for students with disabilities.

Structure of the Inquiry

In addressing the compelling question “Can we afford the super-rich?” students work through a series of supporting questions, formative performance tasks, and featured sources in order to construct an argument supported by evidence while acknowledging competing perspectives.

Staging the Compelling Question

In staging the compelling question, “Can we afford the super-rich?” teachers show students a series of slides of figures, headlines, and images related to economic inequality, prompting a classroom discussion concerning its causes and consequences.

Supporting Question 1

The first supporting question—“What does economic inequality look like?”—has students begin to develop an understanding of how extreme inequality in the U.S. has become and by what means. The formative performance task asks students to write a list that describes the causes and extent of intensifying economic inequality. The featured sources for this question include a data-rich narrative about the dimensions of inequality and what has contributed to its escalation as well as a set of charts and figures relevant to the concentration of economic and political power. Featured Source A is the introductory chapter of historian Colin Gordon’s 2013 book, *Growing Apart: A Political History of American Inequality*. Gordon’s account is one of the most succinct and clearest descriptions of not only the severity of inequality but also the causes of the upward distribution of income and wealth, which he attributes to a set of deliberate political choices, such as undermining organized labor, cutting social spending and/or privatizing public goods, and reconfiguring the state (e.g., deregulation, regressive tax policy) to ensure that it caters primarily to corporate and financial interests. Featured Source B, “Only Little People Pay Taxes,” by Dave Gilson, a journalist at *Mother Jones*, is a collection of charts and captions that depict the U.S.’s inequitable tax system, which amounts to a mechanism for regressive transfers of wealth. Gilson is also the author of Featured Source C, “It’s the Inequality, Stupid,” which is a set of graphics, similar to the ones used to stage the Compelling Question, that represents long-term and short-term trends having to do with the increasingly skewed distribution of income, wealth, and power in the U.S.

Supporting Question 2

For the second supporting question—“Does economic inequality adversely affect mental and physical health?”—students analyze comparative data regarding the relationship between inequality and various measures of health. The formative performance task asks students to develop a claim supported by evidence about whether (and to what extent) mental and physical health is adversely affected by economic inequality. In addition to the resources from the previous supporting question, the featured sources provide students with additional materials that allow them to ascertain the relationship between economic inequality and health outcomes in both national and international contexts. Featured Source A is a figure that compares the “price of inequality” across four countries (Japan, Sweden, U.K., and U.S.) by juxtaposing each country’s level of inequality to various indicators of public health. Featured Source A also contains a number of charts and captions that illustrate the link between the degree of inequality within a territorially-defined population and health outcomes. This brief report shows a connection between greater inequality and worsened health. Both sets of graphics come from a U.K.-based organization called The Equality Trust, which interprets and disseminates research, develops evidence-based arguments about public policy, and contributes resources to social justice movements and campaigns. Featured Source B is an op-ed by Manuel Hinds, who argues that “inequality can be a good thing.” He draws on World Bank data on China to make a case that poverty reduction (a proxy for health improvement, though it is a crude measure) has accompanied increasing inequality. Hinds makes other assertions about the role of inequality in motivation, innovation, and prosperity in his piece, which provides ideas for students to critique or incorporate into their own arguments. Featured Source C is a group of graphs from the Center for Disease Control that represent decreases in mortality rates and increases in life expectancies over a roughly 100-year time period and across population categories in the U.S., though unevenly. It shows, at an abstract level, that broad improvements in public health have persisted, even in the face of escalating inequality, although this does not negate the aforementioned evidence about worsening health outcomes since both can coexist.

Supporting Question 3

The third supporting question—“Does economic inequality undermine democracy?”—asks students to consider how highly concentrated wealth may or may not affect the political system. The formative performance task asks students to develop a claim supported by evidence about whether (and to what extent) democracy is undermined by economic inequality. In addition to the previous featured sources, the sources for this task allow students to grapple with facts about the domination of the political process by big business interests as well as indicators suggesting that in general and relative to many other countries, the U.S. does a decent job of furnishing its citizenry with political rights and civil liberties. Featured Source A, “The U.S. is an oligarchy, study concludes,” provides a snapshot (of Martin Gilens and Benjamin Page’s 2014 [study](#)) pertaining to the unequal responsiveness of the U.S. government to the policy preferences of citizens in different income strata. Featured Source B—“Who Owns Congress? A Campaign Cash Seating Chart” and “Capitol Hill’s Top 75 Corporate Sponsors,” both assembled in 2010 by Dave Gilson of *Mother Jones*—symbolizes Congressional seating charts according to major business sponsors rather than political parties and highlights the amount of corporate money, especially from the finance, insurance, and real estate industry (FIRE) sector, in political campaigns. Featured Source C comes from Freedom House, a self-described “independent watchdog organization.” Every year, they assign each country a so-called Freedom Status (Not Free, Partly Free, or Free) and a Freedom Rating (based on a combined Political Rights and Civil Liberties score), as well as an Aggregate Score and potentially a downward trending arrow if conditions have deteriorated. They also write a brief report on each country; the report on the U.S.—which received an aggregate score of 90, good for 46th in the world along with a downward trending arrow—is included. It is both complimentary and critical of the quality of democracy in the U.S.

Supporting Question 4

For the fourth supporting question—“Does economic inequality negatively impact climate change mitigation?”—students contemplate the impact that economic inequality has on environmental degradation as well as on efforts to mitigate climate change. The formative performance task asks students to develop a claim supported by evidence about whether (and to what extent) climate change mitigation is negatively impacted by economic inequality. In addition to the resources from the previous supporting question, the featured sources provide students with additional materials that allow them to examine who makes the largest contribution to greenhouse gas emissions and to weigh the complacency and intransigence of the super-rich—whose material interests are bound up with the status quo and the drive for endless compound growth—against the possibility that their pursuit of profits and the investments they are making in the context of market competition will promote widespread socio-environmental welfare. Featured Source A, “Reducing inequality and carbon footprints within countries,” a 2016 working paper written by Darrio Kenner, moves beyond national scale per capita carbon footprints to analyze the unequal contributions to CO₂ emissions across different income groups in the U.S., focusing especially on the richest 1% (i.e., ‘carbon inequality’). As Kenner writes, “Whilst it is crucial to compare the total carbon footprints of each nation, to identify where unsustainable production and consumption patterns are concentrated globally, for too long debates have revolved around these national level statistics which hide the inequality of consumption of fossil fuels within countries” (p. 1). Featured Source B, “Let’s fight the 1 percent—of power plants,” by John Upton in *Grist*, highlights the disproportionate amount of pollution generated by the dirtiest power plants in the U.S. (by drawing on this 2013 [report](#) by Environment America Research & Policy Center). Featured Source C is an op-ed by N. Gregory Mankiw titled “Yes, the Wealthy Can Be Deserving,” published in *The*

New York Times in February 2014. Mankiw argues that even in the absence of “an altruistic desire to advance the public good,” that is “precisely” what the richest 1 percent do when, for example, extremely well-compensated members of the finance industry are left to “allocate[e] the economy’s investment resources” by “decid[ing], in a decentralized and competitive way, which companies and industries will shrink and which will grow.” Clearly, these sources provide contrasting interpretations of the causes of and potential solutions to climate change, which allows students to determine whether they think the role played by the super-rich in these dynamics is harmful, helpful, or both.

Summative Performance Task

At this point in the inquiry, students have examined the historical trends considering the epidemiological, political, and socio-environmental consequences of escalating economic inequality.

Students should be expected to demonstrate the breadth of their understandings and their abilities to use evidence from multiple sources to support their claims. In this task, students construct an evidence-based argument using multiple sources to answer the compelling question “Can we afford the super-rich?” It is important to note that students’ arguments could take a variety of forms, including a detailed outline, poster, or essay.

Students’ arguments will likely vary, but could include any of the following:

- We cannot afford the super-rich. First, escalating economic inequality leads to bad mental and physical health outcomes. Second, the maldistribution of wealth weakens democracy insofar as unequal money power corresponds with an unequal amount of political power and degree of government responsiveness to policy preferences. Third, the material interests of the 1% impede climate change mitigation.
- The super-rich do not pose a problem. First, economic inequality motivates people to achieve, and mental and physical health outcomes—reflected in life expectancy—in the U.S. are not only globally competitive but also have actually been improving despite income/wealth having become more concentrated at the top. Second, despite rising economic inequality, the U.S. still has a strong democracy insofar as it ensures relatively good access to civil liberties and civil rights when viewed in an international perspective. Third, the 1%’s pursuit of wealth and their competitive investments spur the development of technologies that can mollify environmental degradation.
- We cannot afford the super-rich given their outsized impact on the quality of U.S. democracy and the likelihood that intensifying economic inequality will exacerbate environmental injustice; nevertheless, the upward redistribution and concentration of income/wealth does not pose a problem with respect to mental and physical health because inequality is a great source of motivation and does not prevent poverty alleviation and improvements in life expectancy.
- We cannot afford the super-rich when it comes to the unfavorable manner in which escalating inequality undermines public health and democratic processes, but it would be mistaken to assume that wealthy individuals pose a problem with respect to climate change mitigation because competition among financial elites can lead to sensible investments and allocations of resources.

To extend their arguments, teachers may have students convert their argumentative essay or poster into an op-ed and submit it to the school newspaper.

Students have the opportunity to *Take Informed Action* by drawing on their understandings of how economic trends have a multifaceted impact on their lives. The *understand* component is embedded in the inquiry. To *assess*, students will compare and discuss their claims, then determine the range of arguments in order to identify the variance of perspectives within the class. To *act*, students will invite members of the community, within and outside the school, to attend a town hall event to share the class perspectives. Students are encouraged to invite friends and family members, but also consider other stakeholders in their community. To further extend the taking informed action piece, have a student document the event to share with the school or town newspaper.

Staging the Compelling Question

Featured Sources

A series of images containing the figures, headlines, and pictures related to the causes and consequences of economic inequality.

- Bivens, J. and Mishel, L. (2015). Figure A: Disconnect between productivity and a typical worker’s compensation, 1948-2014, from Understanding the historic divergence between productivity and a typical worker’s pay. Economic Policy Institute report, epi.org. Retrieved from <http://www.epi.org/publication/understanding-the-historic-divergence-between-productivity-and-a-typical-workers-pay-why-it-matters-and-why-its-real/>
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Supporting Question 1

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| Featured Source | Source A: Gordon, C. (2013). <i>Growing Apart: A Political History of American Inequality</i> . Inequality.org. Web article. |
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Retrieved from <http://scalar.usc.edu/works/growing-apart-a-political-history-of-american-inequality/index>

Supporting Question 1

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| Featured Source | Source B: Gilson, D. (2011, April 11). Only Little People Pay Taxes. <i>Mother Jones</i> . Article. |
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Retrieved from <http://www.motherjones.com/politics/2011/04/taxes-richest-americans-charts-graph>

Supporting Question 1

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| Featured Source | Source C: Gilson, D. (2011, February 7). It's the Inequality, Stupid. <i>Mother Jones</i> . Article. |
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Retrieved from <http://www.motherjones.com/politics/2011/02/income-inequality-in-america-chart-graph>

Supporting Question 2

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| Featured Source | Source A: The Equality Trust (2012). The price of inequality, four countries, 2012. Data visualization. |
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Retrieved from http://www.dannydorling.org/books/onepercent/Material_files/Media/Figure6-6/Figure6-6.jpg?disposition=download

Supporting Question 2

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| Featured Source | Source B: The Equality Trust (2011). Inequality and health. <i>Inequality.org</i> . Article. |
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Supporting Question 2

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| Featured Source | Source C: Hinds, M. (2013, June 24). Inequality can be a good thing. <i>Quartz</i> . Article. |
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Supporting Question 2

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| Featured Source | Source D: Center for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Health Statistics (2015, June 1). Deaths in the United States, 1900-2013. Data Visualization. |
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Supporting Question 3

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| Featured Source | Source A: Boren, Z.D. (2014, April 16). The U.S. is an oligarchy, study concludes. <i>Telegraph</i> . Article. |
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Retrieved from <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/northamerica/usa/10769041/The-US-is-an-oligarchy-study-concludes.html>

Supporting Question 3

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| Featured Source | Source B: Gilson, D. (2010, October 4). Who Owns Congress? A Campaign Cash Seating Chart. <i>Mother Jones</i> . Article. |
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Retrieved from <http://www.motherjones.com/politics/2010/09/congress-corporate-sponsors>

Also see: Gilson, D. (2010, October 4). Capitol Hill's Top 75 Corporate Sponsors. *Mother Jones*. Retrieved from <http://www.motherjones.com/politics/2010/09/capitol-hill-top-corporate-sponsors>

Supporting Question 3

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| Featured Source | Source C: Freedom House (2016). Freedom in the World 2016 Report, United States and Table of Country Scores. Report. |
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Supporting Question 4

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| Featured Source | Source A: Kenner, D. (2016). Reducing inequality and carbon footprints within countries. Global Sustainability Institute, Anglia Ruskin University. Article. |
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Supporting Question 4

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Supporting Question 4

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| Featured Source | Source C: Mankiw, N. G. (2014, February 16). Yes, the Wealthy Can Be Deserving. <i>The New York Times</i> . Article. |
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