OPEN ACCESS

A Good Society (and how we make it)

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Received 4 November 2025
Accepted 28 November 2025

ABSTRACT

What is a good society and how might we build one? This essay, an edited version of the Cochrane lecture delivered at the Society for Social Medicine and Population Health in Bradford 2025, sets out my personal vision of what we should be aspiring to and how we might achieve it. I open with evidence connecting socioeconomic inequalities to well-being and highlight that component parts of a utopian place exist, but not all in the same place. Building upon public health lessons around prevention and upstream intervention, I then introduce what I believe are the two most promising policies we can implement: a universal basic income and a wealth tax, underpinned by citizen's assemblies, participatory budgeting and institutional structures to support evidence-based social policymaking. I make the case that we have the evidence and tools needed to collectively create a good society and that it is possible to change course and bequeath a better world on future generations. A good society is one where everyone's physical and mental health is as good as it could be, because prevention is prioritised, and health inequalities are levelled out by addressing the wider determinants of health. It is one where those who need care—whether children, those with disabilities or the elderly—are looked after without incurring financial stress, in settings where their emotional and social well-being are as important as their physical needs. Our children and young people should flourish in an education system that engages their imaginations, inspires their creativity, equips them with skills for life and leaves no one behind.

WHAT IS A GOOD SOCIETY?

Public health should foster a good society. But what does that mean? In this essay, I explain my vision for a good society: what we should aspire to and how we can reach it. This Cochrane Lecture is adapted from Pickett (2026).[1]

A good society is one where everyone's physical and mental health is as good as it could be, because prevention is prioritised by the public health system and the health service, and health inequalities are levelled out by addressing the wider determinants of health.

It is one where those who need care—whether children, those with disabilities or the elderly—are looked after without incurring financial stress, in settings where their emotional and social well-being are as important as their physical needs.

Our children and young people should flourish in an education system that engages their imaginations, inspires their creativity, equips them with skills for life and leaves no one behind.

In a good society, the focus is on preventing crime and rehabilitating those who commit crimes so that they contribute to society rather than weighing it down.

A good society would adopt new economic thinking and make serious strides towards tackling the climate emergency and protecting the environment, always keeping in mind the well-being of future generations.

Based on my experience, expertise and knowledge,[1] I believe that this is what is needed to close the gap between where we are and where we'd like to be.

There has always been theory and ideology underpinning any number of versions of what we might be aiming for in a good society. But I rest my case for a good society on evidence as much as on values and vision, and now we have a wealth of evidence too.

If we can tackle and improve health, social care, education and the criminal justice system and protect our environment within a sustainable economy then, I believe, our quality of life will be improved immeasurably—for young and old, all genders and identities, in all regions and at all social classes and income levels. This is 'big society' and 'levelling up', but without a left/right ideological stance or a party-political affiliation. This is the opposite of what we were promised by the 'trickle down' of neoliberal economics: instead of a misplaced belief in society improving because of (or in spite of) a few people becoming fabulously rich, the evidence tells us that tackling poverty and inequality is advantageous for our society as a whole.

THE IMPACT OF INCOME INEQUALITY

This builds on my research with Richard Wilkinson on the impacts of inequality. We have drawn together a large body of evidence linking income inequality—the gap between rich and poor in a society—to social cohesion and children's life chances, as well as health and well-being.[2]

In addition to seemingly causing a wide range of problems, the differences between societies are large. For example, in more equal Scandinavian countries, over 60% of people think other people can be trusted, with less than 20% in the more unequal Greece and Portugal. The homicide rate in the very unequal USA is 34 times higher than the rate in Japan, which at that time was the most equal nation, and the US rate of imprisonment is 10 times higher than Finland or Norway. In Italy, Greece and Israel, more than 40% of young people lack basic skills in maths and reading, but it's only 22% in the more equal Ireland. And although the poor are affected most deeply, even affluent

To cite: Pickett KE. *J Epidemiol Community Health* Epub ahead of print: [*please include* Day Month Year]. doi:10.1136/jech-2025-225408

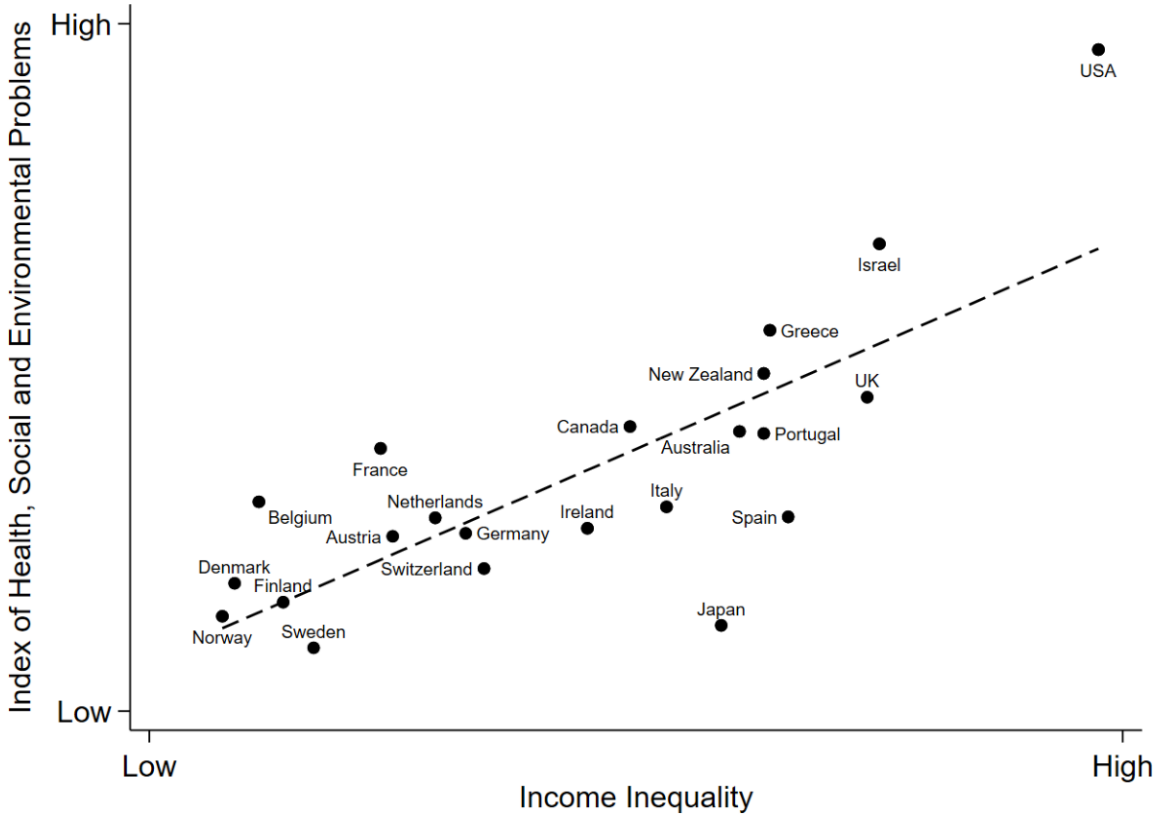

Figure 1 The association between income inequality (Gini coefficient) and an index of health, social and environmental problems.[11]

and well-educated people have better outcomes in more equal societies.

The basic mechanism that links inequality to these myriad outcomes is chronic social stress. Evidence shows that inequality increases the grip of class and status, making social comparisons more insidious and increasing the social and psychological distances between people.[3] Inequalities of wealth, income and power strengthen the tendency to believe that those at the top are hugely important and those at the bottom are almost worthless.

Although it appears that the vast majority of the population are affected by inequality, we do not all respond in the same way. One common response to inequality is to feel oppressed by a lack of confidence and low self-esteem, leading to withdrawal from social life, which in turn leads to higher levels of depression and anxiety.[4 5] A second is to try to flaunt or exaggerate your own worth and achievements, to 'self-enhance' and become narcissistic.[6 7] Part of this process of self-aggrandisement is through conspicuous consumerism.[8] And a third response to the anxieties, caused by what psychologists call the 'social evaluative threat' of living in a more unequal society, is to try and tamp down the stress with drugs, alcohol or gambling, or to seek solace in comfort eating.[9]

We have also come to realise that inequality is a major roadblock, not only to health and well-being but also to creating sustainable economies that protect the planet.[10 11] More unequal societies are struggling with poor population health, social dysfunction, restricted life chances for children and young people and environmental degradation (figure 1). There are countries with greater equality and fewer problems—places that can teach us how to do things differently.

GOODLAND

In 2013, I came across a Guardian article by political economist Andrew Simms, where he described the fantasy country of Goodland (described in box 1).

It sounds good, although fantastic and utopian. But the point about Goodland, Simms says, is that 'it exists. It is just a little, well, spread out'.

Every aspect of Goodland was already happening somewhere in the world. In Goodland, the president is actually the

Box 1 Goodland

Its president refuses the state mansion. He gives away 90% of his pay, living on the national average wage to share in the struggles of his people. Goodland has a new constitution, written by citizens. When its financial sector fell apart, speculators had to take their losses and the guilty were taken to court, not given a public bailout. The country has a dynamic, largely mutually owned, local banking system. It avoids bad risk and bends over backwards to help small businesses. In Goodland, human well-being is more important than economic growth. There is a national plan for good living, free health and education services, subsidised childcare, allowing for a more equal workplace and support for the elderly. It has a law enshrining the protection of its life-supporting ecosystems that stands above all other laws. Goodland's cities are green and grow healthy, organic food for the inhabitants. A phase-out of most fossil fuels is planned by 2017, and its business sector has large, intelligently connected and productive cooperatives. A shorter working week is available by choice.[25]

Box 2 A UBI scheme for the UK

Modelling work carried out in the UK[26] indicates that a starter-level UBI, giving just £75 per week to all adults under 65, £50 to every child, and £205 to all those over the age of 65, would more than halve child poverty in the UK—bringing it to the lowest level since we began keeping records in 1961—alongside precipitating falls in pensioner poverty of around 60% and working age poverty by around 30%.

Such a scheme could be fiscally neutral if funded through an abolition of personal allowances for income tax and National Insurance, equalisation of National Insurance for the employed and self-employed, and a 3% increase in the rates of personal income tax; only those in the top 20% of earners would be paying (slightly) more tax than now.

If we implemented the Minimum Income Standard for everyone, we'd cut working age poverty by 75% and our income inequality would be the lowest in the world. In addition, we would save all of the costs of implementing our current complicated system of means-testing, managing people's applications for benefits, monitoring their ongoing eligibility and compliance with rules and, most importantly, all of the costs of the problems we will have prevented. Microsimulation models suggest that around 124 000 cases of depression and 118 000 cases of physical health problems would be prevented or postponed in the UK every year.[27] This translates into a health benefit, via poverty reduction alone, of £3.87 billion per year for a scheme that was already fiscally neutral. The payoffs for a Minimum Income Standard level UBI would be even higher and worth almost £20 billion per year.

UBI has well over majority support from the British public. Nationally, 69% of people approve of it, including more than half of those who were planning to vote Conservative in the 2024 general election and 75% of those planning to vote Labour.[28] There are also very high levels of support for the kinds of actions that could be taken to fund it, including taxing excessive corporate profits, removing certain tax reliefs, introducing carbon taxes and taxing wealth.

UBI, universal basic income.

then-president of Uruguay (José Mujica), who chose to live modestly. Iceland managed its financial crisis and banks. In Brazil, citizens direct public spending through participatory budgeting. Germany thrives on small and community banks. There is a shorter working week in the Netherlands. Bhutan famously measures its success by Gross National Happiness rather than Gross National Income, and so on.

THE CLIFF EDGE

The importance of prioritising prevention over treatment is clear. We are all familiar with the public health analogy of the cliff edge.[12] We will never prevent everyone from falling over the edge and will always need to provide them with the necessary supports and intervention, but as a society, we are surely keen to prevent that kind of harm from happening as much as possible.

We can put a safety net somewhere below the cliff edge so that at least people falling off the cliff don't fall so far. Even better, we could build a fence at the edge of the cliff. Much better, though, is to move everyone away from the edge.

Society should have a strong interest in favouring prevention over treatment and preferring prevention at the earliest possible stage. And this applies in education and social care, and in criminal justice, just as much as it does in healthcare.

THE OUTER RINGS OF THE RAINBOW

We know that we need to be acting on the wider social determinants of health, the 'causes of the causes'. A UK-based study brought together experts for their suggestions to tackle health inequalities. 99 different proposals were whittled to twenty with the most support. After further deliberation, the consensus was that tackling inequality, poverty and deprivation had the highest likelihood of improving health and reducing inequalities.[13]

The top proposal was a more progressive taxation and benefits system, developing and implementing a Minimum Income Standard came second;and better support for more vulnerable populations, such as the homeless or those with mental illnesses, came third. The experts were also asked to rate their suggestions against the strength of the evidence. They still put a more progressive taxation and benefits system at the top, but second and third places were now given to smoking cessation programmes and to putting fluoride into residential water supplies. Experts noted that the behavioural interventions were 'more politically and socially 'feasible' than the kinds of 'upstream', economic policies they felt were most likely to be effective'.

A conundrum then. We're as certain as we can be that addressing the broadest and most upstream social and economic factors will do the most to reduce health inequalities and improve the health of the population, but we haven't always got a lot of *experimental* evidence that proves it.

A GROWING EVIDENCE BASE

What we do have, though, is a growing and robust body of evidence from observational research and quasi-experimental evaluations of health and social policy. We now know, for example, that the UK's New Labour's health inequalities strategy worked, reducing the gaps in life expectancy and infant mortality that had been targeted with a raft of policies.[14]

It is also important to emphasise the economic case for investing in a good society.

In the Foreword to the 1980 Black Report, the Conservative Secretary of State for Social Services, Patrick Jenkin, wrote that '*additional expenditure on the scale which could result from the report's recommendations—the amount involved could be upwards of £2 billion a year—was quite unrealistic*'.[15] What Jenkin did not consider was how much those inequalities were actually costing society—in terms of lost productivity, additional spending on health and social services and the loss of medium- to long-term multiplier effects.

The economist James Heckman's work shows that investing in early childhood, and the earlier the better, is the most cost-effective intervention we know of for improving health, educational attainment, reducing crime and promoting economic growth.[16] The New Economics Foundation estimates that for every £1 spent on good childcare, society gets a £7 return, mostly because outcomes are improved for poor families. Even if we funded it entirely through borrowing, the investment pays for itself.[17]

We don't need more policy reviews or more research describing the problem, we need to move to action, so how can we do that?

There are two fundamental solutions to poverty and inequality that I think are big enough to really deliver a transformed and better society.

WEAVING THE GOOD SOCIETY, PART 1

Universal basic income (UBI)

First, a good society should be built upon a UBI, paid by the government to citizens. It should be universal, paid to everyone (with add-ons for additional needs like disabilities) and unconditional—you get it whether you are in paid employment or not, whether you are studying or caring for children or others, or volunteering, or in business for yourself. A basic income is the most fundamental way in which a government can express its commitment to the economic security and well-being of its citizens.

A basic income might seem less far-fetched if we consider that they already exist, in some form, for particular groups. The UK state pension and pension credit schemes provide a basic income. During the COVID-19 pandemic, government furlough schemes provided a kind of temporary basic income. Child Benefit policies are a type of basic income for a particular age group.

Basic income supports people's dignity and autonomy, in contrast to social security systems, which come with conditions, complicated eligibility criteria and complex application pathways, which can be stigmatising, demeaning and difficult to navigate.

If we believe that ensuring economic security is what makes a modern civilised society different from the days when we didn't have a social security safety net—then why not do it in a respectful way that supports people's autonomy and self-esteem and could solve the issues of poverty and inequality, almost at a stroke?

Work from the Common Sense Policy Group indicates that a basic income is the most efficient scheme for the government to help solve poverty, reduce inequality, give people security of mind and assets, enhance civic participation and people's engagement with society and promote population well-being.[18] We have developed a model of impact that traces how reducing poverty and inequality and giving people economic security through basic income not only increases health and well-being but also gives people more ability to provide care for one another, reduces crime and promotes educational attainment, entrepreneurship and productivity (figure 2).[19] These outcomes lead to reduced public spending on fixing problems and an increase in tax yields, with medium- to long-term cost neutrality at worst and most likely savings to society (box 2).

A common objection to UBI is that people won't work. None of the evidence from trials or implementation of basic income elsewhere in the world suggests that this is actually a problem. People want the additional income and sense of purpose that come from work, but a basic income would allow them more freedom and flexibility in their work choices throughout their lives. Two large UBI programmes and one big experiment show that basic income can be implemented without a negative impact on productivity.[20] Smaller trials of basic incomes and cash transfers have taken place, successfully, in North and South America, Europe, Africa and Asia, and provide evidence of improvements in population health and well-being, as well as education, employment, people's ability to provide care for one another, entrepreneurship and involvement in society. A basic income can do some very heavy work in solving multiple problems by tackling their wider determinants and preventing the need for more expensive solutions. It can support healthy livelihoods for everyone, with the added benefits over existing social security schemes of predictability and dignity.

The affordability of a UBI obviously depends on the level at which it is set and how it is funded. We can, as a society, decide to start small and then build progressively towards a higher level of UBI.

Introducing a basic income is undeniably a costly proposition, but what is the cost of doing nothing? The welfare system we have is already an enormous financial burden, and it entrenches the poverty and inequality that are at the root of so many of our problems. The costs to the health system, education system, social care and criminal justice exceed even the generous UBI that would guarantee a Minimum Income Standard. We know that governments can find the money for the things they want to do—paying for wars, bailing out the banks, keeping the economy going through a pandemic. As technological progress, including AI, transforms jobs and the labour market, there will be more and more reasons to implement UBI.

Taxing wealth

If UBI were to be my first choice for a comprehensive social policy—the warp on which to weave a good society—my second would be taxing wealth.[21]

Although UBI would be foundational to a good society, we still need to put sufficient resources into public services to provide the healthcare, social care, education and reforms to the criminal justice system that are so badly needed. We need to invest before we start to see the benefits of shifting towards prevention and addressing the root causes of the problems.

Wealth taxes can generate this revenue for the government, enabling it to invest in UBI, infrastructure, social services and other public goods that would build this good society, like housing, transport and digital access for all.

As our population ages and challenges society's capacity to meet increasing needs, wealth taxes are going to be an essential source of revenue. We won't have enough from an income tax base when the tax receipts balance starts shifting towards younger earners and lower-income earners. Population ageing will increase the demand for health and social care services, while at the same time reducing the proportion of the population who are of working age and contributing income tax to the government purse.

The government could offer wealth tax breaks for investment in sectors, companies and projects that prioritise social responsibility, such as encouraging investment in renewable energy, affordable housing or community development. There are real opportunities for win-win scenarios here, bringing down income inequality, while simultaneously contributing to the common good.

While UBI can help to tackle poverty, targeting the top end of the socioeconomic ladder through progressive income and wealth taxation tackles the root cause. Recent increases in inequality have been primarily driven by what is happening at the top, with the top 10%, 1% and 0.1% pulling away from the rest of society.

There are about 3000 billionaires on the planet; if a 2% super-rich tax were implemented, we would raise US$250 billion a year. Even if we did nothing with that money, we would be making a dent in their hold on power. Those in power have vested interests in the government not doing what is needed to create a good society. A wealth tax could help us break free of their stranglehold.

WEAVING THE GOOD SOCIETY, PART 2

So UBI and wealth taxes are my warps for weaving a good society. What about the wefts?

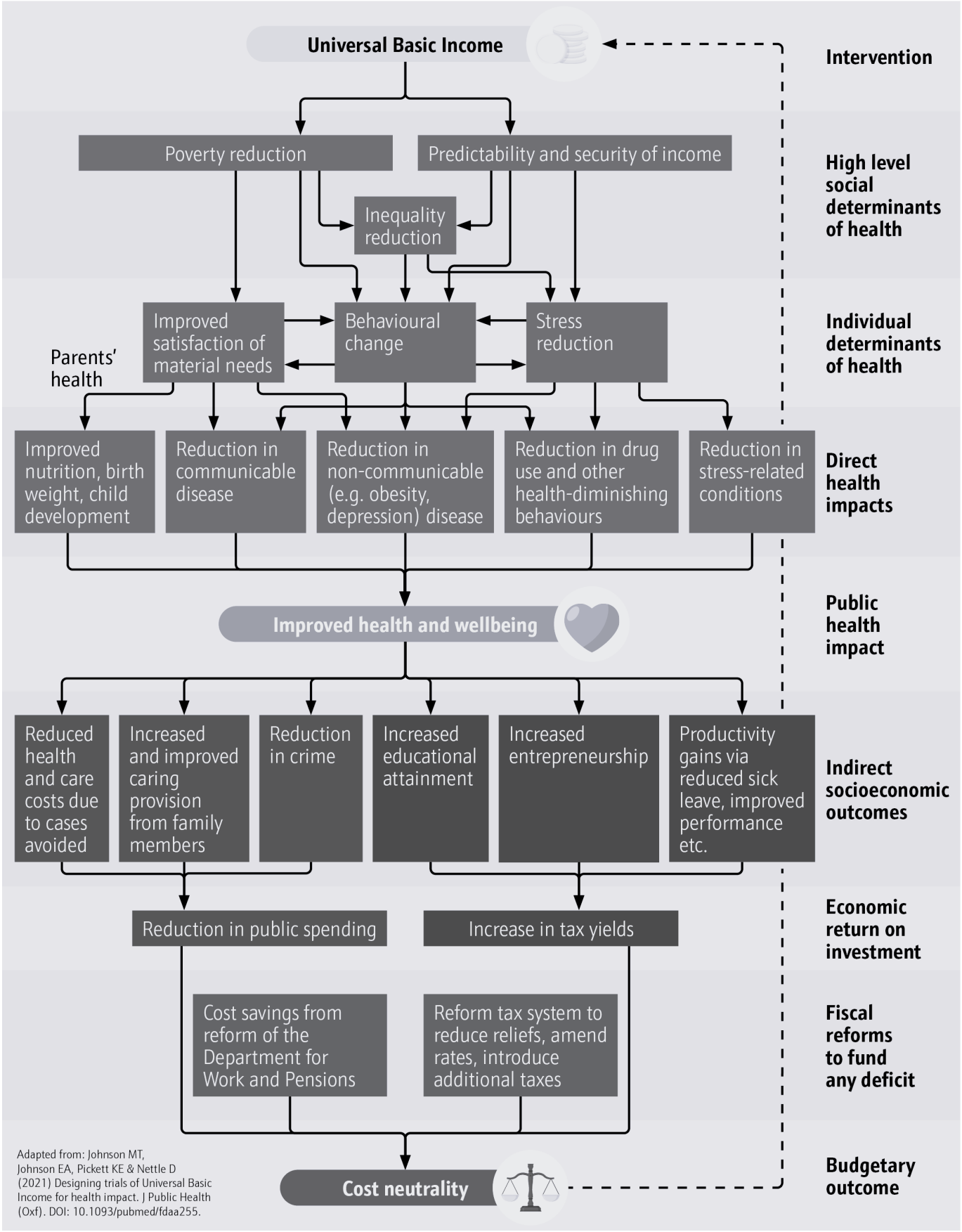

Figure 2 Universal basic income model of health impact.

Figure 3 The warp and weft of weaving a good society.

Here, I also think we need two things. First, we need ways to increase the range and agency of the voices of the people in policymaking—we need more deliberative democracy—and second, we need a set of institutions to bring more evidence into politics and social policymaking (figure 3).

CITIZENS' ASSEMBLIES AND PARTICIPATORY BUDGETING

Citizens' assemblies are an idea with the potential to dissipate our democratic malaise and re-energise our politics and policymaking.[22] They are a form of representative democracy and open government that can lead to unexpectedly radical change.

In Ireland, in 1983, under the influence of the Catholic Church and approved by a referendum, an Eighth Amendment was added to the Irish constitution, which established a near-complete ban on abortion. That was a position which appeared immovable—until 2018, when 99 Irish citizens, chosen at random, and including pro-lifers, pro-choicers and undecideds, met for 5 weekends across five short months and made history. After listening to medical, legal and ethical experts from various sides of the abortion debate, and testimony from people affected by the issue, these 99 citizens deliberated and reflected and finally recommended the repeal of the Eighth Amendment. The Irish government listened and held another referendum; when two-thirds of the population voted in favour, they repealed the amendment and opened the door to legal abortion. In less than 2 years, a deliberative democratic process brought Irish law and politics into line with Irish opinion, which turned out to be much more progressive and secular than many had realised. Citizens' assemblies, say leading experts, 'up-end our assumptions about an allegedly apathetic, ill-informed public'.[22]

In Ireland, another citizens' assembly led to the legalisation of same-sex marriage—again an issue that must have seemed out of reach just a few years previously. In France, a citizens' assembly was held to develop the details to allow medically assisted dying. Japan has held city-based citizens' assemblies on climate issues, including in Sapporo, where citizens' recommendations fed into the city's plan to reduce net emissions to zero by 2050. Canada leads the way, with more than 50 assemblies involving over half a million households. The UK government commissioned 'Climate Assembly UK', which recommended ways to achieve net zero by 2050, including a ban on the sale of new petrol, diesel and hybrid cars by 2030–2035 (a policy brought forward by the Labour government in early 2025) and support for onshore wind farms (also now receiving governmental support, with a ban lifted in mid-2024).

The EU is about to launch a randomly selected citizens' panel from countries across Europe to discuss the design of the EU's next long-term budget. This assembly has the potential to influence the priorities and spending of a budget of more than €1 trillion between 2028 and 2035. Which leads me to mention one more good idea for getting more of us involved in creating the good society: participatory budgeting.[23]

Participatory budgeting has been tried and tested all over the world. A notable example comes from the city of Porto Alegre in Brazil, which in the 1990s began to allow citizens to directly influence how a portion of the city budget was spent on public services and infrastructure.[24] By 1999, citizens were making annual decisions on how to spend US$64 million, a fifth of the city's budget. City residents have proposed projects in public meetings with ballot-box voting, leading to significant improvements in public services, including sanitation, transportation and education, particularly in the poorest areas of the city. In Porto Alegre, participatory budgeting has reduced poverty, but it has also increased civic participation and strengthened community ties.

If both citizens' assemblies and participatory budgeting were implemented at scale, we might begin to reverse the trend towards disengagement and disillusionment with our politics, as well as shifting policy and spending to what the public really wants.

EVIDENCE-BASED SOCIAL POLICYMAKING

Finally, we need new institutions for evidence-based policy and politics. We have a shining example of how to do this in the UK's National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE). The NICE model has been exported all over the world, advising international health organisations, ministries and government agencies on how to do evidence-based decision-making.

It would take some planning, and it would take some time, but we've done it once, so we can surely replicate that success for other kinds of policy. A social sciences-based body could help us quantify the payoff of investment in social and environmental infrastructure like childcare, schools and universities, culture and the arts, parks and more. This would help get around the problem that governments think short term, in electoral cycles, and not in the medium and long term.

Finally, we could back that up with a Social Science Advisory Group to the government and an Office for Social Responsibility. I have suggested, with colleagues Danny Dorling and Stewart Lansley from the Progressive Economy Forum, that if, over the past half century, UK governments had taken the advice of social scientists on just two issues—health inequalities and austerity—the UK would have been more resilient in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic. It was not, we said, enough to 'listen to the science' only during a crisis. A Social Science Advisory Group could provide consensus advice on key issues and answer questions. And an independent Office for Social Responsibility, to parallel the independent Office for Budgetary Responsibility, could provide independent and authoritative analysis of the UK's public policy and political party manifestos, holding government accountable for acting on the evidence.

BRADFORD (UK): A GOOD SOCIETY IN THE MAKING

I want to end with a tribute to the city where we're standing today, which this year has been transformed into a vibrant City of Culture. Bradford is also a City of Research, where more than 60 000 residents take part in

the trailblazing research programme that is Born in Bradford (BiB), which exemplifies the use of research evidence to improve lives and to build a good society (https://born-inbradford.nhs.uk/—check here for all Born in Bradford research publications).

BiB researchers have contributed to understanding the ill-health effects of air pollution and the benefits of access to green space for mental and physical health. They have made discoveries about the early pathways that lead to diabetes and heart disease. They have led educational research on early detection in schools of autism. Genetic research has led to new drugs and a better understanding of the molecular basis of disease. BiB also links its research data to all the data that are routinely collected in health, education, social care and other systems: the Connected Bradford database now includes 600 000 citizens, whose data can be harnessed for new discovery science and the evaluation of improvement initiatives.

BiB has brought in over £100 million of investment to the city. It has hosted artists and poets in residence, as well as festivals of science and culture. The city now has an ambitious Clean Air Zone, improved urban parks and green spaces, science-based early life interventions for diet, physical activity, speech and language and parenting, a Digital Creatives project for young people, a Centre for Applied Education Research and obesity prevention programmes in Islamic faith settings.

Bradford shows how in one real-world place, evidence and ambition can come together and set a city firmly on a path to actively creating a good society. That's a story that could, and should, belong to all of us.

Contributors KEP conceived the idea, conducting the analysis and writing, and acts as guarantor. AI has been used to support creation of some figures.

Funding The authors have not declared a specific grant for this research from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

Competing interests The Cochrane Lecture includes material from the upcoming book: K. Pickett, The Good Society: and How We Make It, London: Bodley Head, 2026.

Patient consent for publication Not applicable.

Ethics approval Not applicable.

Provenance and peer review Not commissioned; externally peer reviewed.

Data availability statement There are no data in this work.

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