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## Neighborhood income inequality, social capital and emotional distress among adolescents: A population-based study



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### ABSTRACT

Theory holds that income inequality may harm adolescent mental health by reducing social capital within neighborhood communities. However, research on this topic has been very limited. We use multilevel data on 102 public schools and 5958 adolescents in Iceland (15 and 16 years old) to examine whether income inequality within neighborhoods is associated with emotional distress in adolescents. Moreover, we test whether indicators of social capital, including social trust and embeddedness in neighborhood social networks, mediate this contextual effect. The findings show that neighborhood income inequality positively influences emotional distress of individual adolescents, net of their personal household situations and social relations. However, although the indicators of social capital negatively influence emotional distress, they do not mediate the contextual effect of neighborhood income inequality. The study illustrates the role of economic disparities in adolescent mental health, but calls for more research on the underlying social and social-psychological mechanisms.

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### Introduction

A recent rise in mental health problems among younger cohorts (Kessler et al., 2007; Twenge, 2015) has directed attention to how the modern social context influences adolescent's mental health (Hidaka, 2012; Viner et al., 2012). In this vein, research has shown that an important contextual determinant of adolescent mental health is societal income inequality (Elgar et al., 2015). However, as scholars have proposed various accounts of the income inequality effect, differing in both generalizability across subpopulation and specificity of the causal path (Lynch et al., 2004), it still remains unclear how income inequality impacts mental health. Some have argued that in affluent societies great income inequality evokes psychosocial processes that generate emotional distress in the form of symptoms of anxiety and depression (Kawachi & Subramanian, 2014; Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009), but these processes have rarely been applied to adolescents. This is surprising because most mental health problems have their onset in adolescence (Kessler et al., 2007, 2009), indicating that

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adolescence may be the period when individuals are particularly vulnerable to the effects of societal factors such as income inequality.

One major psychosocial process that may be of particular importance to adolescents is that income inequality may undermine social capital (Gold, Kennedy, Connell, & Kawachi, 2002; Morgan & Haglund, 2009; Viner et al., 2012). Social capital has been defined as a support network existing within the broader social context (e.g. society, neighborhood, or a community), incorporating dense social relationships, high levels of social trust, norms of reciprocity, and collective action (Coleman, 1987, 1988). Social capital may influence adolescent emotional well-being in two ways. First, social capital may benefit adolescent emotional well-being because of its support function (Thoits, 2011). Social networks provide individuals with access to material and psychological resources that can be used to cope with distress (Kawachi & Berkman, 2001). Second, communities rich in social capital provide a platform for fulfilling adolescent's needs for social interaction and integration that are necessary for psychological well-being (Blakemore & Mills, 2014). Social capital is nevertheless distinct from personal ties with parents or friends. For example, dense social ties within a community may enable its members to secure benefits by the sole virtue of belonging to the community (Portes, 1998). Thus, adolescents who have access to cohesive community networks may experience better emotional well-being than those living in communities sparse in social ties (Kawachi & Berkman, 2014).

Income inequality may undermine social capital because it creates social boundaries within communities (Baron & Pfeffer, 1994). People tend to perceive those belonging to other social groups as less trustworthy and are consequently less willing to reciprocate benevolently across social groups (Tanis & Postmes, 2005; Williams, 2001, 2015). For example, research indicates that members of advantaged groups often believe that members of disadvantaged groups hold different (and less deserving) values than they do, and are, therefore, less willing to help them (Levy, West, & Ramirez, 2005). Likewise, the less privileged often view the more privileged as being exploitative and, thus not to be trusted (Fairbrother & Martin, 2013). In short, income inequality may restrain social interaction within communities with harmful consequences for all community members, rich and poor alike.

Multilevel research has shown that a high level of country income inequality reduces both trust and collective action (Delhey & Dragolov, 2013; Delhey & Newton, 2005; Elgar & Aitken, 2011; Park & Subramanian, 2012). But results on the direct effect of income inequality on individual emotional well-being have been mixed (Hiilamo, 2014; Muramatsu, 2003; Rai, Zitko, Jones, Lynch, & Araya, 2013; van Deurzen, van Ingen, & van Oorschot, 2015). To our knowledge, only one multilevel study (Layte, 2012) has tested whether social capital mediates the influence of income inequality on adult psychological well-being, assessed using a general measure of mental well-being (i.e. WHO-5). Using survey data on adults in 27 European countries, Layte (2012) tested three possible mediators; social capital, status anxiety, and the structure of the welfare system. He found that individual level social capital (e.g. social trust and access to affective support) mediated the negative effect of country income inequality on psychological well-being, especially in affluent countries.

Like most multilevel studies on income inequality effects, Layte's (2012) study focused on the mental well-being of adults across large scale social units. However, neighborhoods—as opposed to larger scale units—constitute social units that may be of particular relevance to the emotional well-being of adolescents, because neighborhood communities provide adolescents with a source of social capital (Aneshensel & Sucoff, 1996; Morgan & Haglund, 2009). Moreover, as adolescents spend more time in their neighborhood than adults do (Allison et al., 1999; Call et al., 2002), neighborhood communities are an important extra-familial social context for adolescent development (Duncan & Raudenbush, 1999). Importantly, research has shown that neighborhoods differ on the major dimensions of social capital, such as density of social networks and level of normative consensus among residents, according to the neighborhood's structural characteristics (e.g., the demographic and economic composition of residents) (Bernburg & Valdimarsdóttir, 2014; Lenzi, Vieno, Santinello, & Perkins, 2013; Thorlindsson & Bernburg, 2009).

Although this implies that income differences among residents influence dimensions of social capital, research on the effects of income inequality at neighborhood level are surprisingly scarce. While a growing body of evidence shows that neighborhood social capital positively influences adolescent well-being (Aminzadeh et al., 2013; De Clercq, Pfoertner, Elgar, Hublet, & Maes, 2014; De Clercq et al., 2012), we are aware of only one multilevel study exploring the contextual effects of neighborhood income inequality on social capital and well-being outcomes among adolescents (Pabayo, Molnar, & Kawachi, 2014). The study showed that neighborhood income inequality influenced aggression and victimization among US adolescents, but did not find that social capital mediated these effects. However, the study did not address symptoms of anxiety and depression directly and was quite limited in the number and type of neighborhoods (37 Boston neighborhoods) that might have restrained its power to detect significant effects.

### *The current study*

In the current study we aim to test if social capital mediates the contextual effect of neighborhood income inequality on adolescent emotional distress; specifically, symptoms of depression and anxiety. We use Icelandic population survey data to measure social capital and emotional distress, in combination with tax registry data on income distribution of neighborhood households. The Icelandic setting is ideal for studying this issue. First, our data is obtained in the year 2006. As elsewhere in the decade leading up to the financial recession in 2008, income inequality in Iceland had increased considerably (Piketty, 2014). The country GINI coefficient for equalized disposable earnings including capital gains had risen from 0.26 in 1994 to 0.40 in 2006, with the top 1% share increasing five-fold from 1992 to 2007 compared to 86% in the USA during the period

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