A fair society can be described in a number of different and overlapping ways, with features such as:

**Fair legal systems.** These ensure that people receive equal treatment and protection under the law, including procedural fairness (fair and proper procedures for legal decision-making) and substantive fairness (outcomes of legal decision-making that can be justified by evidence or reason). For example, an accused person has the right to a fair trial, which includes being informed of the charges laid against them and being tried before an independent judicial officer or jury.

**Fair social structures.** These ensure that governments and other institutions of civil society are accountable, democratic and transparent, and that service providers apply rules and standards in a consistent way.

**Fair treatment of individuals in society.** This accords with universal human rights, which apply inclusively to all people, whatever their ethno-cultural background, gender, disability, religion, political opinion, age, property or other status. Fair treatment encompasses both equality of opportunity and equality of outcome:

- **Equality of opportunity** means that people have choices about how they live and the means to make those choices; that people are active participants in social, economic, cultural and political decision-making, with equitable access to information and to economic, social and political resources; and that people have the freedom and capacity to take responsibility for their own destiny.

- **Equality of outcome** means that all people have a decent standard of living, including acceptable levels of wealth, income and opportunities to meet basic needs such as health care, housing, transport and utilities.

**Respectful relationships.** Maintaining a society free from discrimination demands recognition of the intrinsic worth and dignity of all individuals, and recognition of their entitlement to be treated with respect and honesty.

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**Inequality and disadvantage in Australian society**

Although Australia is a relatively prosperous country, the distribution of wealth, income and opportunities is not evenly spread, and Australians who are relatively poor are unable to obtain the same living standards as others in the community.

The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) estimates that the wealthiest 10 per cent of households in Australia own 44 per cent of the nation’s total household wealth, and the wealthiest 20 per cent own 61 per cent of the nation’s household wealth, while the poorest 20 per cent own just one per cent. Similarly, a 2011 report by the OECD compared the highest-income 10 per cent and lowest-income 10 per cent of the Australian population. It found that the household income of the highest-income group was ten times that of the lowest-income group. This gap between the rich and poor is one of the clearest measures of social and economic inequality and can be used to compare the levels of inequality between different countries and across time. According to the OECD, Australia is ranked as the seventh most unequal country in the OECD, more equal than the USA and Britain, for instance, but less equal than many other wealthy countries, including Denmark and Norway. The gap between rich and poor, has, moreover been growing in Australia, as in most of the developed world, over the last few decades. In addition, Australia has recently experienced one of the fastest growing rates of inequality in the developed world, meaning that Australian society could become much more unequal in the future.

Economic, social and structural conditions sometimes work cumulatively to multiply the adverse effects of social and economic disadvantage. Measures of socio-economic disadvantage usually include indicators such as low income, high unemployment and low levels of education. These reflect the relative social and economic conditions of different groups in society. Disadvantage increases pressures on those at the margins of society, who often
Indigenous disadvantage

Indigenous Australians suffer systematic inequalities in health, education, employment and housing.

Differences in health outcomes are wide. For example, in the period 2005–2007, average life expectancy for Indigenous people was more than ten years shorter than for non-Indigenous people. While this represents a substantial narrowing in the life expectancy gap since 2001, the issue remains of very grave concern. Hospitalisation rates are higher for Indigenous Australians, particularly for conditions that are potentially preventable such as diabetes and kidney disease. Infant mortality, considered to be a good indicator of total population health, is also substantially higher among Indigenous populations. While the rate varies across Australia, the combined infant mortality rate for Indigenous people in NSW, QLD, SA, WA and NT is twice the rate for non-Indigenous people. In the Northern Territory the disparity is even greater, with Indigenous infant mortality occurring at more than three times the rate for non-Indigenous people.

Indigenous disadvantage also permeates the areas of education and employment. While educational attainment is improving, a 2008 report indicated that Indigenous people were still only half as likely to complete Year 12 as non-Indigenous people. In the same year, the rate of unemployment for Indigenous Australians was more than three times the rate for non-Indigenous Australians.

In terms of housing, relative to non-Indigenous households, Indigenous households are much less likely to be homeowner households and much more likely to receive some form of housing assistance. Some Indigenous people live in conditions that adversely impact their physical and psychological health. Overcrowding is a major problem, as it puts stress on basic facilities and contributes to the spread of infectious diseases. In 2008, a quarter of all Indigenous adults were living in crowded conditions, with the highest rate of overcrowding being among renters of community housing in remote areas. Some dwellings in Indigenous communities remain unconnected to essential services such as a sewerage system, electricity supply or water supply.

Indigenous homelessness is also a serious concern. Whilst Indigenous Australians represent only 2.5% of the Australian population, they accounted for around 25% of the total homeless population on Census night in 2011.

The ‘Close the Gap’ campaign, launched in 2007, aims to eliminate health and life expectancy inequalities between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians by 2030. The Council of Australian Governments (COAG) has prepared a national integrated strategy and set specific time frames for meeting targets relating to Indigenous life expectancy, infant mortality, early childhood development, education and employment. These targets include achieving Indigenous health equality with non-Indigenous Australians within a generation and halving the under-fives mortality rate gap within a decade from 2007.

Some theories and principles of fairness

Until disadvantage and social exclusion are comprehensively addressed, Australia will not begin to achieve social justice. Just how these problems should be tackled is, however, a matter for debate. Various ethical theories can be used to (may be adopted in the examination of) examine fairness in society.

One such theory, that known as utilitarianism, focuses on the consequences of public policies. For that reason it is sometimes called consequentialism. It emphasises the importance of outcomes that produce the greatest overall welfare, or the greatest degree of happiness for the largest number of people. Although at first glance this theory seems to be egalitarian, it has various weaknesses. For one, it depends on people being able correctly to predict the outcomes of actions and policies, yet making such predictions is an uncertain business, so the viability of utilitarianism is doubtful. Another drawback of utilitarianism is that it doesn’t guarantee justice for the most needy people in society. It may even obstruct justice: since utilitarianism is concerned only with achieving the maximum good, the theory would dictate that an individual should be oppressed if such oppression were to benefit a majority of the population.
The political philosopher Robert Nozick takes a different view. His concept of fairness is based on people starting out on an equal footing. Nozick focuses on equality of opportunity and free exchange between consenting adults, even while conceding that inequalities may eventually result. Unlike utilitarian thinkers, Nozick is more concerned with equitable starting-points than with equitable outcomes. He takes as an example the game of Monopoly, where each player begins with an equal sum of money and strives to gain a monopoly of property. According to Nozick, this game is fair on account of each player beginning with an equal opportunity to succeed.

Unfortunately, people don’t start out with equal opportunities in life. To achieve a fair and caring society, then, we need to look to ethical theories that prioritise rights and fair distribution of goods. According to the rights theory, a society upholds and protects rights or liberties that are consistent with the society’s goals – and in a fair society, such rights apply equally and universally to all citizens. An alternative conception of a fair society rests on the requirement for unbiased distribution of social and economic goods.

The philosopher John Rawls develops these ideas in his book, *A Theory of Justice*. He makes a case for a social system in which basic rights and liberties are accorded to all people equally. He further argues for the equal distribution of social and economic goods, unless unequal distribution benefits the least advantaged members of society. This exception to the requirement for unbiased distribution serves to maximize welfare for the most needy. Reducing poverty and socio-economic inequality in this way is known as distributive justice. The principle of affirmative action seeks to redress past or continuing discrimination by providing additional support to disadvantaged groups in the population. For example, an affirmative action employment policy might require that job applicants’ minority cultural background, Indigenous status or sex be considered an advantage. In benefiting groups traditionally subject to discrimination, affirmative action improves the distribution of benefits to the least advantaged members of society.

Equal opportunity, universal rights, distributive justice, poverty reduction and affirmative action are all important principles guiding efforts to create and maintain a fair society. At the same time, it is widely accepted that individual merit and contribution to society deserves reward.

**Benefits of equality**

The *Spirit Level: Why More Equal Societies Almost Always Do Better* is a book written by Wilkinson and Pickett, researchers who study the range of factors associated with patterns of health and illness in large population groups. Wilkinson and Pickett show that higher socio-economic inequality correlates with a range of negative health and social phenomena. Their research indicates that rates of infant mortality (death of babies under one year of age), drug and alcohol addiction and imprisonment are all higher in more unequal countries. It appears that in rich countries, such problems are not related to average income. Once average income reaches a certain level, further increases in wealth cease to improve well-being.

Concentrating their analysis on the problems of wealthy nations, Wilkinson and Pickett find that more socio-economically equal countries have a host of advantages. In such countries, there is greater child well-being, better educational performance, higher levels of trust, greater community life and more social mobility (the ability of individuals to improve their status in the social hierarchy), as well as lower rates of mental illness and obesity, lower rates of teenage birth, shorter working hours and lower rates of homicide relative to other, less equal countries. On almost every index of quality of life, well-being or deprivation, there is a strong relationship between a country’s level of economic inequality and its signs of social distress. Large income inequalities are clearly corrosive, and it is evident that the poor have shorter lives and suffer more from almost every social problem. *The Spirit Level* argues that while the benefits from greater equality are usually most felt among the poor, these benefits extend to the majority of the population, and almost everyone benefits from greater equality. Inequality can lead to people to feel anxious about their status in society, provoking stress and violence, whilst greater equality tends to promote a flourishing of human potential, with social, economic and environmental benefits for entire communities.

Governments can reduce socio-economic deprivation by tackling problems one-by-one, for instance through social housing, health care and education programs. Yet when it
comes to remedying the catalogue of social ills, such interventions may be less effective than addressing the underlying structures of socio-economic inequality.

Social Inclusion in Australia

The Social Inclusion agenda, introduced by the Rudd Government in 2007, sets out a vision of a socially inclusive society in which all Australians feel valued and have the opportunity to participate fully in the life of our society. It focuses on providing all Australians with the resources, opportunities and capabilities to learn, work, engage with their communities and influence the decisions that affect them. These provisions are intended to create a fairer, more cohesive and more resilient society. See The Australian Collaboration fact sheet entitled ‘Social Inclusion’.

Useful sources

The ABS is Australia's national statistical agency. See, in particular,


The Australian Council of Social Service is the peak council of the community services and welfare sector. This website includes papers and discussions on fairness in Australia.


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