

CHAPTER 1

INEQUALITY AND REAL INCOME GROWTH FOR MIDDLE- AND LOW- INCOME HOUSEHOLDS ACROSS RICH COUNTRIES IN RECENT DECADES

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ABSTRACT

This paper places what has happened to income inequality in rich countries over recent decades alongside trends in median and low incomes in real terms, taken as incomplete but valuable indicators of the evolution of living standards for “ordinary working families” and the poor. The findings demonstrate first just how varied country experiences have been, with some much more successful than others in generating rising real incomes around the middle and toward the bottom of the distribution. This variation is seen to be only modestly related to the extent to which income inequality rose, which itself is more varied across the rich countries than is often appreciated. The extent to which economic growth is transmitted to the middle and lower parts of the distribution is seen to depend on a range of factors of which inequality is only one. Sources of real income growth around the middle have also varied across countries, though transfers are consistently key toward the bottom. The diversity of rich country experiences should serve as an important corrective to a now-common “grand narrative” about inequality and stagnation based on the experience of the USA.

Keywords: Inequality; poverty; living standards; growth; stagnation; distribution

1. INTRODUCTION

The USA has seen a dramatic rise in income inequality from an already high base since the late 1970s: the share of total income (before tax) going to the top 1% has approximately doubled from around 10% to 20%, according to estimates in the World Inequality Database, and the Gini coefficient measuring inequality in disposable income across the entire distribution has also risen markedly. This has gone together with stagnation in real incomes for much of the distribution: median income was only about 10% higher in real terms in the mid-2000s than it had been around 1980 (Proctor, Semega, & Kollar, 2016), and a substantial proportion of that very modest gain was then lost in the Great Recession and only recovered slowly. At the same time, poverty measured either in purely relative income terms or vis-à-vis the official US poverty threshold fixed in real terms is at a similar level now to in the early 1980s (Chaudry et al., 2016).

The contrast between the reasonably strong levels of aggregate economic growth that the USA achieved over this period and stagnation in household incomes across much of the distribution has been highlighted (e.g., Economic Report of the President, 2015; Fixler & Jaditz, 2002; Fixler & Johnson, 2014; Jorgenson & Slesnick, 2014). This has been central to a “grand narrative” that has emerged linking stagnating ordinary living standards and a “squeezed middle” to rising inequality, taking the USA as exemplar but often now applied across the rich countries more generally in current debates about inequality, stagnation, and their economic, social, and political consequences (see, e.g., Tóth, 2014 on the narrative about rising inequality, Boushey, 2019; OECD, 2015a; Reich, 2015; Stiglitz, 2012, 2015 on its economic impacts, and Nolan & Valenzuela, 2019 for an overview of and references to the wide-ranging literature on social and political impacts). It is noteworthy that the implications for poverty, on the other hand, have not featured prominently in these debates.

Rising income inequality could affect the growth of middle incomes via several different routes. If those in the upper-middle or at the top receive an increasing share of total income, there must be a compensating decline in shares elsewhere; however, this could of course still represent a real increase in middle and lower incomes, depending on the overall rate of economic growth. A second potential channel is via the impact of inequality on economic growth itself. For many years, the prevailing wisdom held that higher inequality provides the incentives required to drive economic growth. More recently, though, Stiglitz (2012, 2015), IMF and OECD studies (Cingano, 2014; OECD, 2015b; Ostry, Berg, & Tsangarides, 2014), and some prominent financial sector commentaries (Morgan Stanley, 2015; Standard and Poor's, 2014), among others, have suggested that rising income inequality may instead be damaging to growth. A wide range of different causal channels, with varying time-lags and dynamics, may be implicated (for an overview, see Boushey, 2019). Rising top income shares may hold back consumer demand, since rich people save more. Middle- and lower-income households may then borrow beyond their means to maintain consumption, fueling boom-bust economic cycles. The shift in managerial reimbursement has also focused CEOs on short-term earnings targets and higher dividends or shares

buybacks, so despite high profits, firms are reluctant to invest. Higher inequality may reinforce the capacity of firms and their owners that dominate particular sectors to protect their excess profits and stifle competition and innovation. Greater inequality may also impede the capacity of middle and lower earners to invest in their own education and skill upgrading, and also lead to under-investment in the education of poorer children and increase barriers to socio-economic mobility between generations. Inequality may also undermine institutions that are critical for sustained growth, by increasing the voice of the wealthy and undermining trust in those institutions in the general population, undermining social cohesion, reducing voter turnout and increasing support for “populist” parties. Concern about such damaging economic, social, and political effects underpins the focus of the OECD and other multilateral organizations on “inclusive growth” and “shared prosperity” (de Mello & Dutz, 2012; IMF, 2017; OECD, 2015b; World Bank, 2016).

Here, the core aim is to bring together what has happened to inequality in the distribution of income across households with trends in median and low incomes in real terms, to see how these have evolved and the extent to which they appear to be related. In pursuing this aim we draw on key findings from the recently published volume *Generating Prosperity for Working Families in Affluent Countries* (Nolan, 2018b), and develop its investigation of low incomes in particular. Section 2 describes the comparative data to be employed. Section 3 sets out what these show about how income inequality has evolved. Section 4 correspondingly presents key findings on how real incomes around the middle of the distribution have, or have not, grown over time. Section 5 then examines the relationship between the two, and whether rising inequality appears to be associated with slower real income growth around the middle. Section 6 probes the transmission of GDP growth to “ordinary” incomes in greater depth, to identify the most important “leakages” in that transmission. Section 7 focuses on real incomes in the lower reaches of the distribution, examining how these have moved over time and how this relates to trends in the median, inequality, and economic growth. Finally, we discuss in Section 8 the implications for monitoring societal progress and for promoting prosperity.

2. MEASURING INCOME INEQUALITY AND INCOME GROWTH ACROSS RICH COUNTRIES IN RECENT DECADES

While living standards and prosperity broadly conceived are the underlying concern, here we focus on household income as the best available proxy to capture variation across the rich countries over recent decades. Income has well-documented limitations as a measure of living standards, but crucially for comparative purposes, it is available on a consistent basis across rich countries for recent decades. We take growth in real disposable income at the median as key reference point or benchmark for the evolution of “middle” living standards. We then take real

income growth at the 10th percentile (the income dividing the bottom 10% from the rest of the distribution, conventionally labeled P_{10}) as an indicator of trends in the purchasing power of incomes among the poor (with the rationale for doing so to be brought out below). For comparative purposes, we also look at the income cutting off the bottom 30%, P_{30} , as an indicator of how real incomes have evolved for households well below the middle but not in poverty. With much of the generalized concern focused on the situation of “ordinary working people,” the particular emphasis is placed on how working-age households, as distinct from older people, have fared, both around the middle and toward the bottom.

The measure of household disposable income from household surveys available over this span does not capture capital gains (or losses) on assets, or impute an income for the use value that home-owners obtain from owner-occupation. It also does not include the value of the services made available free or in subsidized form by the state, notably in education and health care, which are crucial to household living standards and quality of life, and affect how changes in household incomes are felt. While estimates of the value of these services to households at different points in the distribution have been made for some countries and time-points (see, e.g., [Aaberge, Langorgen, & Lindgren, 2013](#); [Garfinkel, Rainwater, & Smeeding, 2006](#); [Marical, Mira d’Ercole, Vaalavuo, & Verbist, 2006](#); [Paulus, Sutherland, & Tsakoglou, 2010](#); [Smeeding, Tsakoglou, & Verbist, 2008](#); [Verbist, Förster, & Vaalavuo, 2012](#)), this has not been done on a consistent basis across the rich countries over time, so this very important aspect of living standards cannot be directly incorporated into our analysis.

The income concept employed is total income of the household from all sources, including wages, self-employment income, income from capital, pensions, social transfers, net of direct tax, and employee social insurance contributions. In using household income as an indicator of trends in living standards, adjustment has to be made for differences in household size and composition, and for that purpose, we employ the commonly used square root of household size equivalence scale; while the choice of scale is somewhat arbitrary, it does not generally affect measured patterns of overall income growth over time. To capture changes in the purchasing power of nominal incomes over time, these are deflated using consumer price indices to produce changes in “real” incomes. In using income to compare (absolute) living standards across countries, the purchasing power parity (PPP) conversion factors produced by the International Comparison Program for 2011 are employed; while such estimates are subject to considerable debate, here the primary interest is in comparing real income growth across countries over time rather than levels at a point in time.

The nature of the data available for this analysis has major implications for the form it takes. The two core sources are the Luxembourg Income Study (LIS) and the OECD Income Distribution Database ([Atkinson, Rainwater, & Smeeding, 1995](#); [Gasparini & Tornarolli, 2015](#); [Gornick & Jäntti, 2013](#); [OECD, 2008, 2011, 2012, 2015a](#); [Ravallion, 2015](#)). Both provide data on household incomes standardized, insofar as possible, across countries and over time, which is critical for this comparative analysis. The LIS database brings together micro-datasets from surveys for each country, whereas the OECD database comprises various measures

related to incomes, inequality, and poverty drawn from such surveys. LIS mostly has data in “waves,” for years around 1975, 1980, 1985, etc.; the OECD database also has figures at intervals for around 1980, 1985, etc, but has more annual data, especially from the mid-2000s. Most of the OECD countries are covered in both sources, but LIS allows one to go back as far as 1980 for more countries. Whereas most comparative studies on household incomes, inequality, etc. rely entirely on one or the other of these data sources, here we draw on both to cover the longest period, and come up as far as possible, for each country. This means we mostly employ data from LIS, but use data from the OECD database for eight countries.¹ While we go back as close to 1980 as possible, for quite a few countries we have to start later: for two-thirds of the countries covered it goes back at least as far as the mid-/late-1980s, but for the remainder only a shorter period can be covered, sometimes considerably shorter. This varying coverage in terms of time-period maximizes the span of countries and years included in the analysis but must be kept in mind in interpreting the differing growth rates then observed across countries. We exclude countries that are in the LIS database but are not OECD members and countries that are OECD members but generally categorized as middle income (Chile, Mexico, and Turkey).

3. WHAT HAS HAPPENED TO INCOME INEQUALITY?

We first set out what happened to income inequality for these countries over the period covered for each, in the data source we are using for each.² Table 1 shows the period covered for each country, the Gini coefficient at the beginning and the end, and the overall change in the Gini; since the length of period covered varies across countries, the average annual change in the Gini is also shown. We see that some increase in the Gini coefficient was the most common experience across these rich countries in recent decades. However, there has been very wide variation in both the extent and timing of that increase. Some countries have seen little or indeed no increase, while others have seen rapid rises. Sweden, the UK, and the USA had the most pronounced increases in inequality. Australia, the Czech Republic, Finland, and New Zealand also saw marked increases, while Canada had a smaller but still substantial increase. Japan, Germany, and the Netherlands saw some increase in inequality. Norway had a more modest rise, as did Italy and Spain. Austria, Denmark, France, and Ireland were among the minority of countries for which little or no increase in the Gini was seen. For the formerly state socialist and low-inequality countries, the picture is mixed, with some seeing large increases from their initially low levels of inequality. Overall, about two-thirds of the countries saw an increase in the Gini over the period covered by the data being used here for each. Focusing on working-age households only, one sees a similar pattern overall but a greater increase in inequality in some countries, notably Spain and the UK.

While a simple summary along the lines of “Income inequality increased in most rich countries in the decades up to the Crisis” is valid as far as it goes, it risks obscuring major, consequential differences in country experiences. The scale of

Table 1. Gini Coefficient from 1980 (or Nearest Available Year) to 2013 (or Nearest Available Year), Total Population.

Country	First Year	Last Year	Gini in First Year	Gini in Last Year	Change in Gini (in 'Gini points')	Average Annual Change in Gini
Australia	1981	2010	28.19	33.38	5.19	0.18
Austria	1994	2013	28.18	28.07	-0.12	-0.01
Belgium	1985	2013	22.79	26.19	3.40	0.12
Canada	1980	2013	28.88	32.36	3.49	0.11
Czech Republic	1992	2013	20.58	25.87	5.29	0.25
Denmark	1987	2013	25.71	25.16	-0.56	-0.02
Estonia	2000	2013	36.41	35.37	-1.04	-0.08
Finland	1987	2013	20.70	26.11	5.41	0.21
France	1978	2010	31.86	29.17	-2.69	-0.08
Germany	1984	2013	26.60	29.48	2.89	0.10
Greece	1986	2013	35.20	34.38	-0.82	-0.03
Hungary	1991	2012	28.86	29.26	0.40	0.02
Iceland	2004	2010	25.71	24.60	-1.12	-0.19
Ireland	1987	2010	32.96	29.61	-3.35	-0.15
Israel	1986	2012	31.01	37.32	6.30	0.24
Italy	1986	2014	30.95	33.25	2.30	0.08
Japan	1985	2012	30.45	33.00	2.55	0.09
Luxembourg	1985	2013	23.60	28.36	4.76	0.17
Netherlands	1977	2014	26.30	28.30	2.00	0.05
New Zealand	1985	2012	27.10	33.30	6.20	0.23
Norway	1979	2013	22.56	25.26	2.71	0.08
Poland	1992	2013	26.22	32.20	5.98	0.28
Portugal	2004	2013	38.19	34.51	-3.69	-0.41
Slovak Republic	1992	2013	18.94	26.96	8.02	0.38
Slovenia	1997	2012	22.93	27.11	4.17	0.28
South Korea	2006	2014	30.60	30.24	-0.36	-0.05
Spain	1980	2013	32.05	34.55	2.50	0.08
Sweden	1983	2013	19.75	28.08	8.33	0.28
Switzerland	2000	2013	28.54	29.61	1.07	0.08
United Kingdom	1979	2013	26.71	33.37	6.66	0.20
United States	1979	2013	31.15	38.28	7.13	0.21
Average			27.73	30.41	2.68	0.11

Source: LIS except OECD for Canada, Greece, Japan, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Portugal, South Korea, and Sweden, and for Belgium from 2004.

increase in the Gini seen in the UK or the USA versus Norway or Italy represents very different realities. Furthermore, a very substantial increase from a very low initial base level relative to other countries, as in the case of the Czech Republic, Finland, or Sweden, may be very different in terms of how it makes itself felt to an increase of a similar scale from an already high level, as in the case most notably of the USA.

This emphasis on the diversity of experiences is reinforced when one looks at the timing of inequality increases, which were often concentrated in specific sub-periods rather than smooth and consistent over time, as captured by Atkinson, (2015) and Tóth (2014) highlighting their “episodic” nature. The impact of the

Great Recession on income inequality also varied widely across the rich countries, with inequality rising sharply in some but little changed in others.

The (mostly) survey-based figures on overall income inequality in LIS and the OECD IDD may not adequately capture what has been happening at the very top, but the now widely cited estimates of top income shares based on tax data and the national accounts, brought together in the World Inequality Database, provide a very valuable complement in that regard. These estimates cover only some of the rich countries being studied here, but for them, [Table 2](#) shows an increasing concentration of pretax income at the top in most in the decades up to the financial crisis. However, the scale of that increase again varied widely. It was greatest for the UK and the USA, followed by Canada and Australia, and Portugal and Sweden saw large rises. Finland, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Korea, Norway, and Spain also saw quite substantial increases, with smaller ones in the Netherlands, Switzerland, and New Zealand. The crisis is generally seen to have interrupted this upward trend, reflecting its impact on profits, top executive reimbursement, and the financial sector. For the USA, though, while the top 1% share fell quite sharply at the onset of the Crisis, it was back to its 2007 level by 2014. The trends shown by these estimates of top 1% shares do not always align with the measured changes in overall inequality across countries, for a variety of reasons explored elsewhere (including differences in income concept, income recipient unit, and data source) on which we cannot dwell here.

Table 2. Top 1% Shares in Selected OECD Countries, 1980 Onwards.

	1980	2007	Change 1980–2007	Post-2007 Value (Year)
	%	%	ppt.	%
Australia	4.61	9.09	+4.48	9.10 (2014)
Canada	8.88	15.63	+6.75	13.62 (2010)
Denmark	5.47	6.12	+0.65	6.41 (2010)
Finland	4.32	8.26	+3.94	7.46 (2009)
France	8.17	11.69	+3.52	10.80 (2014)
Germany	10.72	14.04	+3.32	12.98 (2011)
Ireland	6.65	11.64	+4.99	10.50 (2009)
Italy	6.90	9.86	+2.96	9.38 (2009)
Japan	8.36	11.35	+2.99	10.44 (2009)
Korea	7.47	11.28	+3.61	12.33 (2012)
Netherlands	5.85	7.57	+1.72	6.33 (2012)
New Zealand	5.65	7.83	+2.18	8.09 (2014)
Norway	4.60	8.54	+3.94	7.80 (2011)
Portugal	4.32	9.77	+5.45	
Spain	7.63	11.24	+3.61	8.58 (2012)
Sweden	4.13	9.95	+5.82	8.73 (2013)
Switzerland	8.40	10.91	+2.51	10.62 (2010)
United Kingdom	6.67	15.44	+8.77	13.88 (2014)
USA	11.05	19.87	+8.82	20.20 (2014)

Source: World Inequality Database.

The factors driving income inequality upwards, albeit at differing rates, across many rich countries have been reviewed in [Förster and Tóth \(2015\)](#), [Nolan and Förster \(2018\)](#), and [Nolan \(2018a\)](#). These include increasing earnings dispersion among employees, primarily reflecting the widening in economic returns to education and skills, with globalization and skill-biased technological change interacting with one other. Institutions and policies with respect to minimum wages and labor and product market deregulation, and declining union density and power, are also important. Changes in top executives' pay and the expanded role of finance were very important in the growth in top incomes. Income from self-employment and capital has grown in importance and become more unequally distributed, with a shift from wages to profits common. Changes in household structures due to population aging and the trend toward smaller households have also contributed. Assigning weights to specific factors in terms of their relative importance is extremely challenging, giving the limited data available and range of potential contributory factors (as brought out effectively by [Förster and Tóth \(2015\)](#); this also makes it very difficult to robustly identify the factors accounting for differences across countries in the way inequality has evolved, though contexts, institutions, and policies clearly play a central role.

4. GROWTH IN MIDDLE INCOMES

Against this background, what happened to real incomes around the middle of the distribution? [Table 3](#) repeats for each country the years covered by the data employed, and then shows the overall increase in the median in real terms and the annual average growth rate over that period. The most striking feature of these figures is the very wide range of variation across countries in real income growth at the median. For countries where the data covered at least several decades, the (compound) average annual growth observed over those decades ranges from as high as 3% down to a modest decline. The average growth rate across all the countries/time-periods covered is about 1%. The USA, where the data cover all the way from the late 1970s to 2013, had an average annual growth rate of only 0.3%. It is not unique in that respect: Japan did even worse, seeing essentially no overall increase in the median (measured from 1985), while Italy (measured from 1986) saw as little overall growth as the USA. However, these countries were amongst the poorest performers in the OECD. The USA is far from typical in terms of this key indicator: to highlight just one contrast, the UK is often categorized alongside the USA as a “liberal/Anglo-Saxon” economy, but the US median was only 12% higher in real terms in 2013 than it had been in 1979, whereas the UK median went up by almost 70% over the same period. These represent very different realities for middle-income households.

As well as varying across countries, median income growth varied widely over time for most countries. There were certain periods of reasonably healthy growth even for the poorest performers overall. The USA had the “Clinton boom” in the 1990s, Japan some growth in the early 1990s, and Italy and Germany saw

Table 3. Growth in Median Equivalized Household Income in Real Terms by Country, Longest Period Covered from about 1980.

Country	Initial Year	End Year	Overall Increase, %	Annual Average Growth Rate, %
Australia	1981	2010	41.93	1.21
Austria	1994	2013	15.58	0.77
Belgium	1985	2013	52.34	1.51
Canada	1980	2013	20.22	0.56
Czech Republic	1992	2013	61.12	2.30
Denmark	1987	2013	17.84	0.63
Estonia	2000	2013	105.97	5.72
Finland	1987	2013	38.01	1.25
France	1978	2010	31.27	0.85
Germany	1984	2013	14.11	0.46
Greece	1986	2013	-13.90	-0.55
Hungary	1991	2012	-4.44	-0.22
Iceland	2004	2010	-1.10	-0.18
Ireland	1987	2010	105.76	3.19
Israel	1986	2012	55.27	1.71
Italy	1986	2014	9.53	0.33
Japan	1985	2012	0.31	0.01
Luxembourg	1985	2013	80.34	2.13
Netherlands	1977	2014	32.17	0.76
New Zealand	1985	2012	23.78	0.79
Norway	1979	2013	125.24	2.42
Poland	1992	2013	32.91	1.36
Portugal	2004	2013	-4.62	-0.52
Slovak Republic	1992	2013	45.36	1.80
Slovenia	1997	2012	27.36	1.63
South Korea	2006	2014	13.92	1.64
Spain	1980	2013	64.99	1.53
Sweden	1983	2013	69.01	1.76
Switzerland	2000	2013	13.32	0.97
United Kingdom	1979	2013	69.47	1.56
United States	1979	2013	11.66	0.32
Average				1.22

Source: LIS except OECD for Belgium (from 2004), Canada, Greece, Japan, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Portugal, South Korea, and Sweden.

growth in the 1980s before the “shocks” of the early 1990s currency crisis and the incorporation of the former German Democratic Republic, respectively. Canada did better than these overall, but growth was concentrated in the period from 1995 onwards, with the median declining for much of the preceding 15 years. For the better performers, growth was also often concentrated in specific sub-periods, interspersed with stagnation or decline. For Australia, most of the growth over the period as a whole was from the mid-1990s, and especially from 2000 to 2007 at the height of its minerals boom. Finland, Norway, and Sweden saw sharp declines from 1990 to 1995, when they were hit by financial crises and recession. The UK had sharply contrasting experiences of stagnation in the early 1980s and early 1990s versus strong growth from 1985 to 1990 and 1995 to 2007, followed by a decline from 2007 on as the economic crisis struck.

That Crisis and Great Recession was a profound macroeconomic shock for the rich countries as a whole, but its effects on household incomes varied widely across countries. The median fell between 2007 and 2010 in about half the countries covered, but the scale of the decline and subsequent trajectory of the median differed between them. Some saw the accumulated growth in median incomes over previous decades wiped out, and in others median incomes returned only slowly and haltingly to their pre-Crisis levels, representing a lost decade of income growth. Ireland and Spain had experienced very rapid growth in the years up to the Crisis, so even with the sharp falls, it produced they still registered a substantial increase in the median over the whole period. For Greece, by contrast, the scale of the declines both in the initial stages of the Crisis and especially from 2010 onwards were more than enough to offset the substantial growth also seen there from the mid-1990s; this decline was on a much larger scale than any other OECD country.

The extent of this variation in growth over time means that the ranking of countries in terms of median income growth is quite sensitive to the period examined – which itself is affected by the availability of data. To illustrate the point, Australia and Canada would have been regarded as very poor performers indeed, as bad or worse than the USA, if one was looking back from 1995 at the preceding 15 years. For the UK, even having the starting point in the late 1970s versus mid-1980s would make a considerable difference. It is not possible to have a common starting point across countries for the analysis here due to data availability, but even if one could that would not address the underlying issue that countries do not share a common pattern of variation over time, and any starting point may be a low point for one country and a peak for another. This also applies to comparisons focused simply on economic growth and macroeconomic performance. However, with much longer runs of macroeconomic data available on an annual basis, various smoothing methods can be applied to ameliorate if not eliminate this problem. The occasional nature of the observations available on incomes across the distribution does not allow this to be done here. This has to be kept firmly in view, including in seeking to assess whether one country has a better “model” for inclusive growth than another.

Despite an increasingly interlinked global economy, countries also faced major differences in the environment in which they operated, influencing – for better or worse – the trajectory of living standards. Countries such as Australia, Canada, and Norway, and to some extent the UK, benefited, in particular, periods from oil, gas, or mineral resources not available to others. On the other hand, Germany had to cope with the incorporation of the former East Germany, Japan with its distinctive macroeconomic and demographic challenges, and Italy also with distinctive macroeconomic, public finance, and demographic challenges.

The transition countries of eastern and central Europe underwent such a fundamental restructuring of their economies that comparisons of performance between the countries in this group may be more illuminating than between them and other OECD countries. There were dramatic differences among them in growth performance as it affected middle-income households. At one extreme, Poland and even more so the Czech Republic registered very substantial growth in median income since the early 1990s. At the other end of the spectrum, Hungary

saw real incomes at the middle being lower in 2012 than they were two decades earlier. Differences in the time-period covered by the data for other transition countries make it more difficult to assess the implications of the observed growth rates for them, which also varied widely. Teasing out why such profound differences emerged among the countries facing this highly distinctive challenge is a very important topic for research.

It is also relevant that some of the countries seeing relatively little growth in median incomes over the period from the early/mid-1980s had already achieved high levels of income by that point. Conversely, some of the fastest-growing countries started from much lower levels in the early/mid-1980s and were catching up. Comparison of median income levels expressed in PPP terms for the early/mid-1980s shows that the USA was highest by a considerable margin, with Canada, Germany, and Japan also at comparatively high levels. The subsequent increase in the median in \$PPP terms was particularly high in some countries that had relatively low levels at the outset, such as Ireland and Spain, but also in Luxembourg and Norway that started with intermediate levels. The average annual increase in the median in the USA was among the lowest seen (though not as low as Japan), much lower than in other countries that had relatively high initial income levels. This meant that by 2010 or 2013 Luxembourg and Norway had higher levels for the median than the USA, and Australia, Canada, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, and the Netherlands were much closer to it. The UK, despite achieving relatively strong increases and narrowing the gap, remained further behind the USA and below the levels reached in Germany or France.

When the evolution of real disposable income at the median for the entire distribution is compared with that for working-age households only, [Table 4](#) shows that the general perception that older households have done relatively well in recent years finds some support, with the working-age median lagging behind in about half the countries. However, focusing on working-age households has little impact on how most countries ranked in terms of median income growth over decades. (The divergence over shorter periods, in particular 5-year sub-periods, was much greater.)

Focusing then on the 21 non-transition countries for which data was available going back at least to the mid-1990s, the following broad groupings in terms of performance in generating sustained real income growth for middle- and lower-middle working-age households can be distinguished:

- three countries which saw exceptionally high growth, of 2% per year or above on average, namely Ireland, Norway, and Luxembourg;
- another three countries which saw growth lower than that but still comfortably above the average, in the range 1.5%–1.9% per year, namely Belgium, Israel, and Sweden;
- four countries that generated growth that was more modest but still above average, in the range 1.25%–1.5%, namely the UK, Finland, Spain, and Australia;
- seven countries that saw average growth markedly below average in the range 0.50.8% per year, comprising France, Austria, New Zealand, the Netherlands, Denmark, Germany, and Canada;

- three countries with very modest growth indeed, of only 0.2%–0.27% per annum on average, namely the USA, Italy, and Japan;
- and finally, with a decline in the median over the period as a whole, there is Greece.

The USA is not the only rich country to have seen little growth in the real value of household incomes around and below the middle in recent decades, but as we have seen only a few others have done as poorly. A grand narrative framed

Table 4. Growth in Median Equivalized Household Income for Entire Sample versus Working-Age Households Only, Longest Period Covered From About 1980.

Country	Average Annual Growth All	Average Annual Growth Working Age	Difference	Rank by Working-Age Growth (All)
	%	%		
Australia	1.21	1.26	0.05	16 (16)
Austria	0.77	0.77	0.00	19 (20)
Belgium	1.51	1.70	0.18	10 (13)
Canada	0.56	0.50	−0.06	24 (23)
Czech Republic	2.30	2.39	0.10	3 (4)
Denmark	0.63	0.64	0.00	22 (22)
Estonia	5.72	6.20	0.48	1 (1)
Finland	1.25	1.35	0.10	14 (15)
France	0.85	0.81	−0.04	18 (18)
Germany	0.46	0.53	0.07	23 (24)
Greece	−0.55	−0.64	−0.09	30 (31)
Hungary	−0.22	−0.38	−0.17	29 (29)
Iceland	−0.18	−0.34	−0.15	28 (28)
Ireland	3.19	3.23	0.05	2 (2)
Israel	1.71	1.64	−0.07	11 (8)
Italy	0.33	0.23	−0.09	26 (25)
Japan	0.01	0.22	0.21	27 (27)
Luxembourg	2.13	2.00	−0.13	5 (5)
Netherlands	0.76	0.73	−0.03	21 (21)
New Zealand	0.79	0.77	−0.02	20 (19)
Norway	2.42	2.38	−0.04	4 (3)
Poland	1.36	1.34	−0.02	15 (14)
Portugal	−0.52	−0.95	−0.43	31 (30)
Slovak Republic	1.80	1.86	0.06	7 (6)
Slovenia	1.63	1.76	0.13	8 (10)
South Korea	1.64	1.88	0.24	6 (9)
Spain	1.53	1.43	−0.10	13 (12)
Sweden	1.76	1.75	−0.02	9 (7)
Switzerland	0.97	0.97	0.01	17 (17)
UK	1.56	1.49	−0.08	12 (11)
USA	0.32	0.27	−0.05	25 (26)
Average	1.13	1.13	0.00	

Source: LIS except OECD for Belgium (from 2004), Canada, Greece, Japan, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Portugal, South Korea, and Sweden.

centrally around the US case in these terms is thus misleading if applied to the OECD more generally. Some countries have been much more successful than others in generating inclusive growth over a 20- or 30-year period, and many have seen periods of growth interspersed with stagnation. The variation in country experiences over time also serves to highlight the importance not just of context and dynamics but also of institutions and policies.

As well as the way their real incomes evolved, other ways of capturing a “squeezed middle” been advanced in the literature can also be discussed briefly here (for more details, see [Nolan & Thewissen, 2018a, 2018b](#)). One is to look at the share of disposable income going to the broadly defined “middle” of the income distribution; this declined in the years up to 2007 in half the countries examined. This decline was particularly marked in the UK and the USA, where the middle three-fifths of the working-age population saw their share of total income fall by more than 4 percentage points. A substantial increase in the Gini coefficient was generally, though not always, accompanied by a declining share going to the middle, so rising inequality has generally been bad for the broad middle in terms of its share of total income. Patterns through the Crisis itself were more varied: the income share of the middle 60% did not continue to decline in most of the countries where it had been falling (though Sweden, the UK, and the USA were exceptions), but it did start to fall in a number of countries where it had previously been stable or increasing.

Another concern about the middle is that the size of the group itself has been squeezed, often discussed in terms of a middle-class lifestyle becoming harder to sustain people and people “falling out” of the middle class. “Middle class” is a term which is open to a wide range of different interpretation, meaning different things not only to economists versus sociologists but also in everyday usage from one country to another. It is nonetheless of interest to look at what has been happening to the proportion of households who can be thought of as “in the middle” in purely income terms. The proportion of households with incomes between 75% and 167% of the median was found to have declined in most of the countries examined, up to the economic crisis. Countries with particularly marked falls include Australia, Canada, Czech Republic, Finland, Iceland, Israel, Poland, Slovak Republic, and especially Sweden, the UK, and the USA. While rising inequality may not always go together with a shrinking of the size of the middle framed in this fashion, it has very often done so in practice in the decades up to the Great Recession.

5. INEQUALITY AND MIDDLE-INCOME GROWTH

The notion that rising income inequality may be at least partly to blame for stagnation in real incomes and living standards for ordinary working families plays a central role in the “grand narratives” in circulation about recent economic and political instability. This represents a recent departure from the more traditional framing of the relationship between equality and economic efficiency as “the Great Trade-Off.” Now, instead, the ways in which inequality may negatively impact on

middle-income growth are to the fore, especially in the USA, as emphasized in the introduction. Recent aggregate-level comparative studies from the IMF and the OECD suggesting that an increase in the share of total income going to the top drags down growth, and that the scale of redistribution through direct taxes and transfers does not damage it, have received a great deal of attention. While empirical studies are also now emerging on the specific channels through which inequality may affect growth, these are often for just one or two countries, with the USA being the primary focus. Even effects that are robustly identified in a US context may not apply elsewhere, and much research remains to be done on these causal channels.

Here, we put the way the Gini coefficient and top income shares evolved as presented in Section 3 alongside the trends in the median as described in Section 4. Descriptively, one can see that, once again, there have been widely varying experiences. Fig. 1 plots the average real growth in the median for each country from Section 4 against the change in the Gini over the entire period covered by the data for the country in question. This brings out the wide spread in the scatterplot; if anything, average growth in the median is marginally higher where the increase in the Gini has been greater, but there is little sign of a clear relationship between the two.

Focusing on the sub-periods distinguished in our data,³ Fig. 2 plots the annual average change in the median against the average change in the Gini coefficient in the same sub-period. This again does not suggest a strong relationship between the two (though the slope of a simple linear regression line would now be downwards). Simply deriving the correlation between them, median income growth

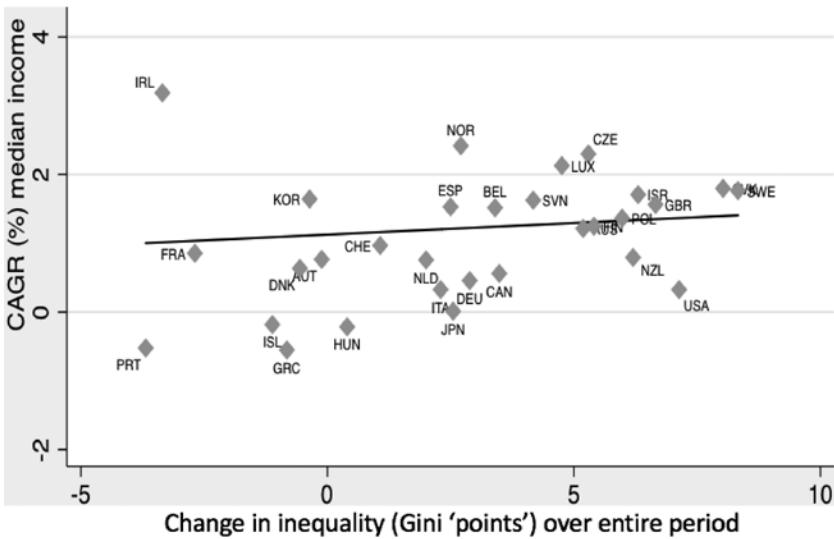


Fig. 1. Annual Average Growth in Median Income Versus Change in Inequality, OECD Countries, Longest Period Covered.

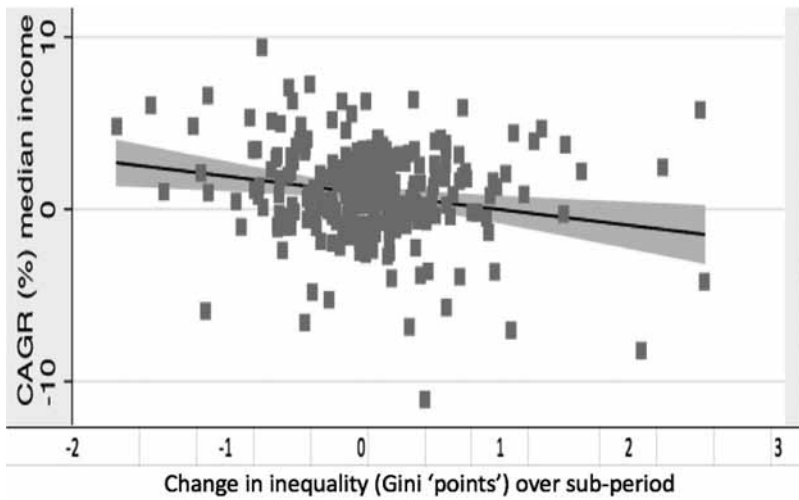


Fig. 2. Annual Average Growth in Median Income Versus Change in Inequality in Same Sub-Period, OECD Countries.

is negatively correlated with the change in the Gini across all these observation points, but that correlation is very modest at -0.13 . There are countries and sub-periods where the median stagnated and inequality rose rapidly, but also ones where increasing inequality accompanied rapid growth in the median, and others where the median rose only modestly while inequality was stable.

Thewissen, Kenworthy, [Nolan, Roser, and Smeeding \(2018\)](#) probe this relationship in more depth, estimating a variety of statistical models with the change in median income in the sub-period in question as the dependent variable, and explanatory variables including the change in the Gini coefficient, the change in the income share of the top 1%, the level of the median and of the Gini in the previous period, and a set of control variables including the average years of schooling of the working-age population and the dependency rate. A negative and statistically significant association between median income growth and the contemporaneous change in the Gini coefficient was found, but this accounted for only a small proportion of the variation in median income growth. When the rate of GDP growth in the same period (which could itself be influenced by inequality levels and changes) is included this substantially increases the explanatory power of the model, the change in the Gini is still marginally statistically significant, but a substantial part of the variation in income change at the middle remains unexplained.

These findings can only be suggestive, but they do suggest that neither the previous presumption that high inequality would boost growth nor the “grand narrative” featuring so strongly in current debates that high or rising inequality consistently reduces real income growth for the middle adequately captures the variety of experiences actually observed across the rich countries in recent decades.

6. GDP GROWTH AND GROWTH IN MIDDLE INCOMES

Growth in national output/income per head as measured in the national accounts, while subject to a variety of critiques, is still the most frequently used benchmark for assessing macroeconomic performance. How misleading is it as an indicator of how real incomes and living standards evolve for ordinary working families? [Table 5](#) compares the average annual growth in median incomes we derived as described earlier with the average annual growth in national output/income per head by country, calculated over the years covered by our survey data for each country, together with each country's ranking on those outcomes from highest to lowest. This brings out first that growth in the median lagged considerably behind that in real gross national income (GNI) per head in most countries, though there were exceptions such as Norway, Luxembourg, and Estonia.

Table 5. Average Annual Growth in Real Median Equivalized Household Income and GNI Per Capita by Country, Longest Period Covered From About 1980.

	Average Annual Growth in Median (%)	Rank by Growth in Median	Average Annual Growth in GNI (%)	Rank by Growth in GNI
Estonia	5.72	1	4.11	2
Ireland	3.19	2	3.53	4
Norway	2.42	3	2.04	8
Czech Republic	2.30	4	2.01	9
Luxembourg	2.13	5	1.50	23
Slovak Republic	1.80	6	3.94	3
Sweden	1.76	7	1.78	11
Israel	1.71	8	2.21	6
South Korea	1.64	9	3.15	5
Slovenia	1.63	10	2.14	7
United Kingdom	1.56	11	1.52	21
Spain	1.53	12	1.59	17
Belgium	1.51	13	1.62	16
Poland	1.36	14	4.40	1
Finland	1.25	15	1.62	15
Australia	1.21	16	1.72	13
Switzerland	0.97	17	0.48	29
France	0.85	18	1.51	22
New Zealand	0.79	19	1.28	26
Austria	0.77	20	1.52	20
Netherlands	0.76	21	1.53	19
Denmark	0.63	22	1.32	25
Canada	0.56	23	1.36	24
Germany	0.46	24	1.67	14
Italy	0.33	25	0.87	27
United States	0.32	26	1.73	12
Japan	0.01	27	1.58	18
Iceland	-0.18	28	-2.21	31
Hungary	-0.22	29	1.82	10
Portugal	-0.52	30	-0.34	30
Greece	-0.55	31	0.52	28

Second, the gap between the two is not consistent, so two measures give a rather different impression of how countries compare. The USA, in particular, would rank 12th out of these 31 countries in terms of average GNI growth, compared with 26th by median income growth. Germany, Japan, Hungary, and Poland also rank considerably higher by average GNI growth per head.

The relationship between average annual growth in the median versus in GNI is illustrated in Fig. 3. This, and the simple fitted regression line it includes, underlines that growth in the median has lagged behind that in GNI on average across these countries, with only four-fifths of the increase in GNI reflected in median income growth on average. However, it also brings out that there is considerable variation in the proportion of GNI growth that is transmitted to the median. This is even more pronounced if one looks at the relationship within sub-periods rather than across the period as a whole, where the ability of GNI growth to “predict” growth in the median is considerably weaker.

One reason why a country could see growth in the median lag behind national income per capita would be if the benefits from the latter are concentrated toward the top rather than the middle of the distribution: increasing inequality could be key. However, the model estimates in Thewissen et al. (2018) described in the previous section, with changes in inequality included in the model, suggest that on average only about three-quarters of the increase in national income in a given sub-period is reflected in real income growth at the median. It is clear that a variety of other factors, in terms of both underlying dynamics and measurement-related issues, also contribute to the divergence.

Nolan, Roser, and Thewissen (2018b) investigate the complexities of this relationship, distinguishing a number of distinct contributory factors. Increasing

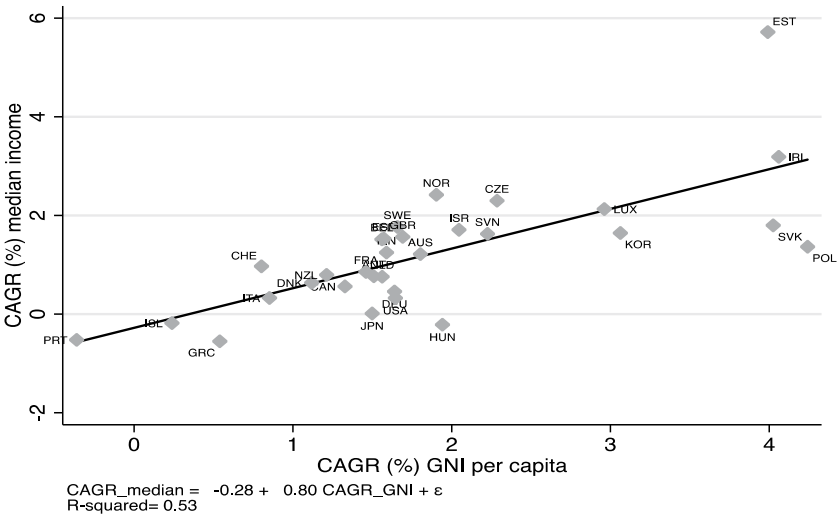


Fig. 3. Annual Average Growth in The Median Versus GNI, Longest Period Covered for Each Country.

income inequality was found to play a substantial role in the case of the USA, as well as Canada, but even there was by no means the main factor at work. The fact that nominal growth in national income is generally deflated by the change in producer prices whereas household incomes are deflated by the change in consumer prices was seen to be important in the case of the USA but was not as important in most other countries. The distinction between GDP and GNI, where the latter includes only flows relating to residents in the country in question, was important for only a few countries with exceptionally large net factor outflow, such as Ireland and Luxembourg. The most important factor on average across countries and the most consistent contributor to the divergence have received very little attention in this context, or indeed in thinking about the evolution of household living standards more generally, namely declining household size. With average household size falling over time in most countries, in effect fewer of the potential economies of scale from living together are being exploited.

Among the other factors at work, GNI refers to the entire economy, with a significant proportion of national income flowing to the corporate rather than the household sector. Honing in on the household sector in the national accounts (which is only possible for many countries on a harmonized countries since the mid-1990s), certain income sources such as imputed rent, retained profits, or in-kind benefits are taken into account in the national accounts but are (often) not reported in household surveys. Finally, surveys may not reliably capture the income from different sources that they aim to cover, while national accounts aggregates are also measured imperfectly. [Nolan, Roser, and Thewissen \(2018a\)](#) found that these factors also contributed to the observed GDP-median gap for some countries, but mostly less than other factors. The scale of the divergence and the factors contributing to it, including the impact of rising inequality, were distinctive to the USA, serving again to underline how cautious one must be about generalizing from the experience of a single country, no matter how important.

7. INEQUALITY, GROWTH AND REAL INCOMES OF THE POOR

So far we have been focused on real income growth around the middle of the distribution, in keeping with the widespread concern about the “squeezed middle.” We now turn our attention to those in the lower parts of the income distribution, to see whether they shared in the experiences of the middle, or generally did better or worse in terms of real income growth. We employ the trajectory of the income level cutting off the bottom 10% from the rest of the distribution, P_{10} , as a crude but informative indicator of how the real incomes of the poor have evolved. It will not capture the mean or even the median income of the poor, since where P_{10} lies in the distribution among the poor will depend on the scale of poverty, how many are below the poverty threshold, and that in turn will depend on how poverty is being conceptualized and measured. However, it can provide a sense of how real incomes in the relevant part of the income distribution have evolved, as well as how that relates to incomes around the middle. [Table 6](#) compares average annual growth in the median for working-age

households with the corresponding growth rates at the P_{10} and (for comparative purposes) P_{30} cut-offs over the longest observation period available for each country. The patterns vary across countries, but there are some common if not universal features. First comparing the average growth rates for the median and P_{30} across all the countries, the latter grew by 0.2% less on average. Looking country by country, this differential was also almost always to the disadvantage of the lower percentile – only in four countries did it grow faster than the median, and then only marginally. However, for most countries, the growth in the median, down-scaled by about 20%, would be a reasonably good predictor of growth in P_{30} .

Table 6. Real Growth in Median Equivalized Household Income versus P_{10} and P_{30} for Working-Age Households by Country, Longest Period Covered From About 1980.

	Median	P_{30}	P_{10}
	%	%	%
Australia	1.26	1.14	1.06
Austria	0.77	0.71	0.84
Belgium	1.70	1.68	0.94
Canada	0.50	0.38	0.37
Czech Republic	2.39	2.16	1.41
Denmark	0.64	0.53	0.61
Estonia	6.20	6.01	4.92
Finland	1.35	1.17	0.77
France	0.81	0.84	0.59
Germany	0.53	0.36	0.11
Greece	−0.64	−0.81	−1.32
Hungary	−0.38	−0.62	−1.06
Iceland	−0.34	−0.67	−0.35
Ireland	3.23	3.33	3.34
Israel	1.64	1.28	0.45
Italy	0.23	0.01	−0.84
Japan	0.22	−0.07	−0.69
Luxembourg	2.00	1.80	1.45
Netherlands	0.73	0.61	0.12
New Zealand	0.77	0.54	0.27
Norway	2.38	2.28	1.93
Poland	1.34	1.05	0.38
Portugal	−0.95	−1.10	−2.05
Slovak Republic	1.86	1.46	0.39
Slovenia	1.76	1.34	0.63
South Korea	1.88	2.23	2.65
Spain	1.43	1.14	0.49
Sweden	1.75	1.39	0.67
Switzerland	0.97	0.85	0.89
UK	1.49	1.27	1.22
USA	0.27	0.01	−0.08
Average	1.20	1.01	0.59

Source: LIS except OECD for Belgium (2001–2013), Canada, Greece, Japan, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Portugal, South Korea, and Sweden.

The divergence between the median and P_{10} is considerably larger, though, at 0.6% on average; this means that the average annual growth at this percentile across all the countries/periods covered was only half that of the median. Strikingly, in a substantial minority of countries, P_{10} grew by as much as a full percentage point per year less than the median on average. In Sweden, the median grew 1.8% per year on average while P_{10} grew by only 0.7%; in Poland, the corresponding figures were 1.3% and 0.4%. In Italy, while the median grew by a very modest 0.2% on average, P_{10} actually declined by about 0.8% per year. In the US case, while the median only grew by 0.3% per year on average, remarkably P_{10} was no higher in 2013 than it had been in 1980. As well as average growth rates across the full periods for which we have data, the trajectory of the different percentiles over time varies across sub-periods, with wider or narrower gaps between them being seen.

The fact that growth in lower incomes generally lagged behind the middle is an important aspect of rising inequality, in danger of being obscured by the attention paid to what has been going on at the top. This can be brought out by looking at the ratio of the 90th to the 10th percentile, a commonly used summary inequality measure where one can readily see the role being played by developments toward the bottom as well as the top. It will by construction not be affected by what is happening at the very top or bottom, unlike the Gini coefficient, but captures what is happening across the broad mass of the income distribution. [Table 7](#) first shows this ratio and how it changed over the longest period for which we have data for each country. It again shows inequality rising in most though not all of the countries covered. Countries where the Gini rose markedly general also saw P_{90}/P_{10} rise substantially, though there is by no means a perfect alignment between the two measures (e.g., Japan saw a sharp rise in this ratio but only a quite limited increase in the Gini). Israel saw the largest increase, from 4.1 to 6.4.

We can then look behind the change in the P_{90}/P_{10} ratio at what underlies it, in terms of the changing relationship between the middle of the distribution and those toward the bottom versus the top, with [Table 7](#) also showing how the ratios of the median to the tenth percentile and of P_{90} to the median changed. As we have seen, the tenth percentile lagged behind the median in most countries, reflected in an increase in the ratio of the median to P_{10} . The countries where the gap between them widened most substantially were Estonia, Greece, Israel, Italy, Japan, Slovak Republic, Spain, and Sweden. That gap also widened in the USA, but not much more than the average increase across all the countries. The ratio of the 90th percentile to the median, in fact, rose less consistently than P_{50}/P_{10} . It did however rise particularly sharply in the UK and the USA, the countries where the focus on the top has been most prominent in debates about rising inequality. (This has mostly focused on what has been happening at the very top of the distribution rather than around the 90th percentile; capturing the very top entails drawing on other sources than household surveys, as discussed earlier.) Elsewhere, what has been happening in the bottom half may be as important in driving inequality upwards, at least insofar as survey data capture it. In the case of Sweden, for example, the bottom falling away from the middle made a considerably greater impact on the overall change in P_{90}/P_{10} . For Greece, that was responsible for all the increase in P_{90}/P_{10} , with P_{90}/P_{50} actually declining.

Table 7. Percentile Ratios by Country, Longest Period Covered From About 1980, Working-Age Population.

Country	P_{90}/P_{10} Initial Value	P_{90}/P_{10} End Value	Change in P_{90}/P_{10}	Change in P_{50}/P_{10}	Change in P_{90}/P_{50}
Australia	3.83	4.44	0.60	0.12	0.17
Austria	3.44	3.38	-0.06	-0.03	-0.01
Belgium	2.72	3.22	0.51	0.23	0.07
Canada	4.01	4.64	0.63	0.10	0.19
Czech Republic	2.28	3.19	0.91	0.34	0.22
Denmark	2.82	2.90	0.08	0.01	0.04
Estonia	5.32	5.70	0.38	0.40	-0.19
Finland	2.42	3.15	0.73	0.26	0.18
France	3.61	3.74	0.13	0.14	-0.06
Germany	3.08	3.77	0.69	0.24	0.14
Greece	4.94	5.65	0.71	0.46	-0.11
Hungary	3.35	4.05	0.70	0.29	0.09
Iceland	2.90	2.81	-0.09	0.00	-0.05
Ireland	4.31	3.83	-0.48	-0.05	-0.18
Israel	4.14	6.36	2.22	0.74	0.26
Italy	3.94	5.24	1.31	0.71	-0.03
Japan	4.00	5.27	1.27	0.60	0.05
Luxembourg	2.86	3.61	0.75	0.27	0.14
Netherlands	2.87	3.55	0.67	0.41	-0.02
New Zealand	3.43	4.35	0.92	0.27	0.20
Norway	2.56	3.13	0.56	0.27	0.08
Poland	3.16	4.21	1.05	0.39	0.16
Portugal	5.39	5.34	-0.04	0.24	-0.24
Slovak Republic	2.21	3.59	1.39	0.53	0.30
Slovenia	2.76	3.54	0.78	0.32	0.14
Spain	4.28	6.17	1.88	0.76	0.12
Sweden	2.34	3.56	1.22	0.58	0.16
Switzerland	3.21	3.33	0.11	0.02	0.04
United Kingdom	3.18	4.20	1.02	0.18	0.36
United States	4.40	5.97	1.57	0.31	0.38
Average	3.48	4.18	0.70	0.29	0.08

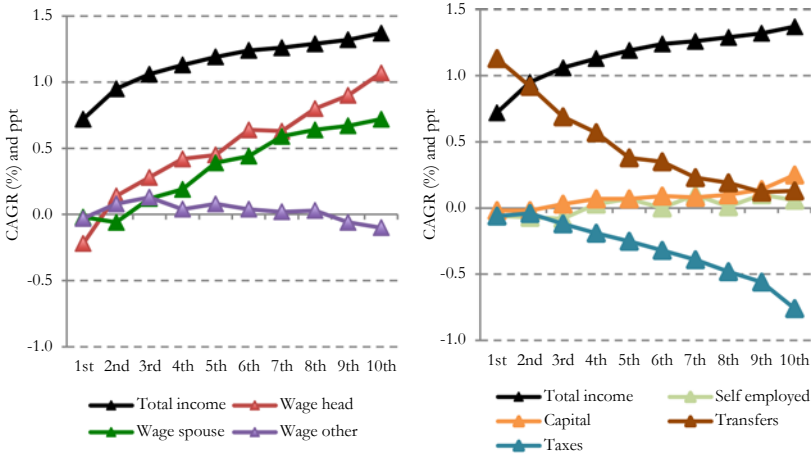
Source: LIS except OECD for Canada, Greece, Japan, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Portugal, and Sweden, and for Belgium from 2004.

8. SOURCES OF GROWTH FOR MIDDLE AND LOWER INCOMES AND THEIR RELATIONSHIP WITH GDP GROWTH

In seeking to understand the drivers of income growth for ordinary working households and for the poor, it is helpful to identify the main sources of income accruing to households at different points in the income distribution and assess the role each has played in household income growth over time around the middle and toward the bottom. For this purpose, we draw initially from findings of analysis based on data from the OECD's Income Distribution Statistics covering 26 countries as reported in [Nolan, Thewissen, and Lazzati \(2018\)](#).

For the fifth decile, this showed that, on average across these countries around 2011/2012, the wage of the main earner made up more than half of total disposable income, with the wage income of the spouse contributed another quarter. Around one-fifth of total income came from transfers, but these households paid slightly more in direct taxes/social contributions than they received in such transfers on average. (Before the onset of the Great Recession, the share of income coming from wages was about 2 percentage points higher and that of transfers

A/: All available years



B/: Years Before the Great Recession

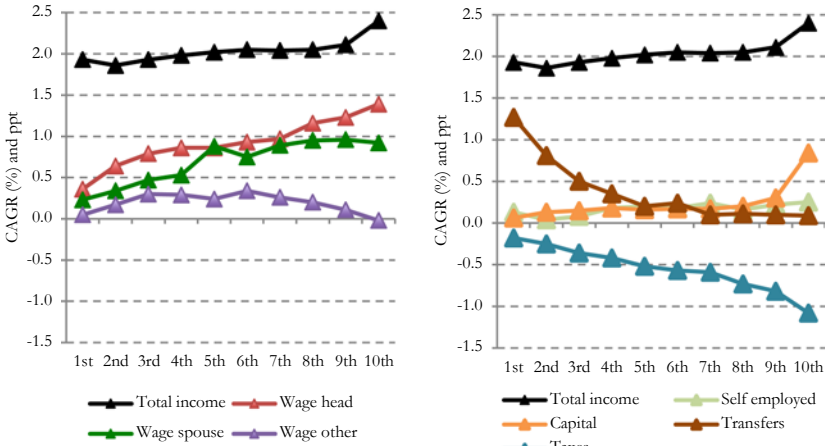


Fig. 4. Decomposed Growth Incidence Curves for OECD Countries Pooled.

correspondingly smaller.) What was striking in these findings, though, was the extent of variation across countries in the make-up of income around the middle. The wage of the main earner accounted for 40% or less in some countries, versus 70% or more in others; the earnings of the spouse/partner ranged from as little as 10% up to as much as 40% or more; and public transfers represented only 10% in some countries versus 30% in others.

This variation was also seen in how these income composition patterns evolved over time for the fifth decile, going as far back for each country as the data permitted. [Fig. 4](#) shows average growth incidence curves, where countries are simply pooled as a sample. These bring out that on average, around the middle of the distribution the wages of the main earner were the single most important contributor to overall income growth, closely followed by the earnings of the spouse/partner and by public transfers; other sources were much less important. However, there was a good deal of variation around this average from one country to the next. In some, the wage of the main earner made little or no contribution to growth, or even served to reduce it; in others, it was the main driver, and very much more important than the wages of other household members. More commonly, it made some positive contributions alongside the wages of other household members. The net impact on middle-income growth of public transfers, once direct taxes and social security contributions are deducted, also varied very widely across countries. Distinguishing those countries that saw reasonably strong growth in middle incomes from those which did much less well in that regard, the wage of the main earner boosted growth in the former and pulled it down in the latter, but the earnings of the spouse and other earners also mattered.

The bottom decile unsurprisingly looks very different to the middle in income composition terms. On average across countries, more than half of its income comes from public transfers, with the wage of the main earner being the other important source. [Fig. 4](#) shows that transfers were also key to the income growth seen over time for this part of the distribution, again on average.

9. THE IMPLICATIONS FOR MONITORING AND PROMOTING PROGRESS

The analysis and findings presented here have major implications for how economic progress should be measured and monitored. They reinforce existing concerns about relying on growth in GDP per head to capture living standards in the longer term, or how incomes at and below the middle are faring in the short term. GDP per head will not be a reliable indicator of income change for these households, in the short or long run, due to a variety of factors that themselves vary in significance across countries and over time. Given the difficulty of assessing the likely impact of these factors in “real time,” median income needs to be accorded a central role alongside GDP per capita in both official monitoring of living standards and how they are changing over time, and, as here, in research on inclusive growth.

However, the median for all households may not provide a good guide to what has been happening to working-age households, at least over shorter periods. Given the specific interest in working-age households, it is also important to have income indicators that apply to them. Furthermore, the trajectory of incomes lower down the distribution may well diverge, it would be hazardous to rely on growth in median incomes for the working-age population, or for the population as a whole, as a reliable indicator of income growth for those much lower down the distribution over a relatively short period such as 5 years, much less from 1 year to the next. That does not take away from the value of the median in capturing what is happening to incomes around the middle of the distribution and the extent to which economic growth has fed through to those incomes, but it does mean that low incomes and poverty certainly need to be separately monitored and analyzed: one cannot assume that growth that transmits to the middle is also going toward the bottom.

This means that placing the median for the entire population alongside GDP (or GNI) per capita as a key indicator, as some have advocated (e.g., [Atkinson et al., 2015](#)), may be a real advance but not go far enough. If how middle-income working-age families are faring is of particular salience, then the income trajectory for such households needs to be captured directly. That will not be a reliable measure of what is happening to the incomes of the poor, though, and thus of inclusive growth more broadly conceived. The “dashboard” of indicators employed to assess progress and inform policy needs to incorporate measures focused directly both on the middle and toward the bottom, since each is of central societal concern.

Such measures relating to household incomes, as captured for the most part in household surveys can usefully also be set in a broader framework where their relationship to national accounts income aggregates is elaborated, and the distribution of elements missed by surveys and/or not reflected in cash incomes incorporated into the picture. In that context, recent advances toward the development of distributional national accounts, by both the OECD/EU and national statistics offices and by academic researchers in the DINA project are of fundamental importance. However, they should be seen as complements rather than substitutes: tracking and understanding the evolution of household cash incomes remains of central importance, and improving the capacity to measure incomes across the distribution drawing on survey and administrative data is key to doing so reliably.

Turning from monitoring progress to strategies to promote it, we noted at the outset that a “grand narrative” has emerged in commentary and public debate that sees rising inequality as responsible for long-term stagnation in living standards for “ordinary working families”; emphasizes the various ways in which the “middle” in particular is being “squeezed”; identifies globalization and technological change as key drivers, especially in “hollowing out” the labor market and driving more and more polarization into a small “cognitive elite” with secure well-rewarded jobs versus the bulk of the workforce with “bad jobs”; and sees inequality in wealth rising alongside that in incomes, choking off opportunity for those not coming from advantaged backgrounds. This toxic combination is then held responsible for a wide range of societal and political ills, not least the

erosion of solidarity, social trust, and faith in democratic institutions and the rise of populism, which – harking back to the 1930s – are seen to threaten the future of democracy.

This is now especially common in debates about the USA, but is often taken to apply across the rich countries much more widely. What the findings presented here bring out, however, is the diversity of rich country experiences in terms of the key elements of this “story,” which should serve as an important corrective to a common narrative. This applies with respect to real income growth around and below the middle; the extent of the increase in income inequality; the degree to which “the middle” can be taken to have done poorly in relative or absolute terms; the contributors to income growth or its absence; and the scale and nature of the divergence between growth in median incomes versus GDP per head.

This “grand narrative” undoubtedly captures important aspects of US experience, although not representing the whole story even there, and some parts are certainly salient for other rich countries, and more salient for some than for others. However, their experiences, contexts, and challenges vary to such a degree that no single narrative can do them justice, including this one. Losing sight of this complexity is hazardous in terms of both understanding and responding to those challenges. This applies not only to the economic domain which is the focus here, but also to the political aspects of the narrative. Stagnating wages and rising inequality share some common roots, and many of the policies required to effectively address inequality would also enhance income growth for ordinary households. However, addressing inequality, however desirable, could not be relied upon to produce adequate income growth, nor should the case for tackling inequality be reduced to this instrumental one, pushing concerns about fairness and social justice into the background. While common forces will continue to operate across the rich countries, such as the advance of AI and robotization, the way they play out will continue to depend crucially on the institutions in place and the policies adopted in the country in question. Even what are often debated as “one-size-fits-all” solutions, such as universal basic income, turn out on closer examination to mean very different things depending on the context. While learning from experiences elsewhere, different countries will have to continue to find their own road to salvation.

NOTES

1. These are New Zealand and Portugal, which are not included in LIS; Japan, for which LIS only has data for one year; Sweden, for which LIS has data only up to 2005; the Netherlands, for which the early waves in LIS are drawn from a different source, giving rise to what looks like a major break in the time-series; Greece, where LIS only starts in 1995 whereas OECD data go back to 1986; Canada, for which LIS only goes up to 2010 whereas the OECD database allows 2013 to be included; and South Korea, for which OECD goes up to 2014 whereas LIS has data only to 2012. For Belgium, LIS runs only up to 2000 and OECD from 2004 to 2013, so we link those two series to provide estimates that are necessarily tentative but allow us to include it in our analysis.

2. LIS and the OECD IDD do not always show an identical picture for inequality levels or changes, nor do these always agree with other sources – see Nolan and Thewissen (2018b). The priority here is to ensure that the overall inequality measure and growth in the

median and other percentiles are taken from the same source for each country and are in that sense internally consistent.

3. These approximate to 1980–1985, 1985–1990, 1990–1995, 1995–2000, 2000–2007, 2007–2010, and 2010–2013, as closely as the available data for a given country permit.

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