

## Ten Chairs of Inequality

### Introduction

Join Right Sharing of World Resources for a game of **around one hour** that explores wealth inequality around the world and within the United States, and how we can respond to this. You need at least 10 people to play with additional people participating through discussion.

### Materials Needed

- 10 Chairs
- 10 Graham Crackers (to extend the game)

Throughout this exercise, facilitation comments (like the ones you are reading) are in italics. Your suggested script is without italics. Questions to ask **are in bold**. Each can spark a lively discussion that you can allow time for or you might need to keep moving forward given time constraints. Feel free to adapt the language to the audience (e.g. large dollar figures might not make as much sense to younger students without additional explanation). For questions that are asked “to everyone,” ask these to the witnessing group first for them to offer their perspectives, as they may feel less engaged than those on the “chairs of inequality.”

Each of these chairs represents 10% of the wealth in the world.

Later, I’m going to ask for 10 volunteers. Each of those people will represent 10% of the people in the world – about 550 million people, which is a little more than the entire population of the US, Canada, and Mexico altogether.

So, when 1 person is in each chair the wealth is shared equally.

Wealth is what you own. **What are examples of wealth?** You can add examples below if they don’t come up.

- your toys - children and adults both have toys
- your TV, phone, computer
- your clothes
- the food in your cupboards
- your family’s apartment or house and all the furniture in them
- your family’s car or cars
- your cash, bank accounts, and savings—in piggy banks or banking institutions

Wealth like this helps us get other things in life. **What else can we use wealth to get?** You can add examples below if they don’t come up.

- *An education*
- *A trip to the doctor when we are sick and the medicine we need to get well*
- *Trips to see relatives far away*
- *Going to restaurants*
- *Heating and air conditioning*
- *Vacations*
- *And other things we need or like to have in our lives*

Although there is a lot of wealth in the world, it is not distributed evenly. Some families have a lot and some families don't have enough for everyone to have enough food to eat, good healthcare, a home that is warm in the winter and doesn't leak when it rains, a chance to go to school, and more. Some countries are wealthier, and others have many many families who don't have enough for their necessities.

Now we are going to see how the world's wealth is really divided up. **If we divided all the wealth in the US equally among everyone, how much wealth would each person have?**

*Let people guess.*

The average individual net worth (one's wealth minus any debts) after redistribution would be about \$494,000.

Because the US is a wealthier country, the average individual wealth is higher. For the whole world, if wealth was redistributed only to adults, each adult would have a net worth of about \$180,600. **What would it feel like if every family with 2 adults could have a \$200,000 home, a \$20,000 car, and \$140,000 in savings?** *People may respond in a variety of ways.*

Now let's look at how wealth is actually distributed in the whole world.

I'd like 10 people to sit in these 10 chairs. Everyone else is going to watch.

*Look at the participants at either end of the lineup of chairs.*

**Which of you wants to represent the richest 10% and experience being rich.**

*Ask the one who volunteers, or both if they both volunteer.*

**Why do you want to represent the richest people?**

*Decide which person will be the richest.*

The four people next to the richest person – you four together represent 2.2 billion people – 40% of the world's population. So each of you represent about 550 million people.

To everyone, **How many chairs do you think belong to the person representing the wealthiest 10% of people?**

*After they have guessed, continue.*

I'm sorry, the nine of you who represent 90% of people, you have to move because the wealthiest person needs more chairs. In fact, they get EIGHT chairs in total! You who are the wealthiest, you can lie down and get comfortable across all your chairs. If you want to move your wealth around (your chairs) go right ahead.

*This next statement is optional to help them play into their role.*

**Can we get you some food or drink to help you feel how wealthy you are?**

The other nine of you. You get to share two chairs. Go ahead, figure out how to share them.

*See if they can find a way for all of them to fit onto those two chairs. After an appropriate amount of watching them struggle (before they get frustrated, it may be a group that is comfortable piling on each other), you can continue.*

It's very crowded on those chairs! There might be a way to give people more space.

To everyone, **How many chairs do you think belong to the next 4 richest people altogether?**

*Let the group guess.*

These 4 people get both of these two remaining chairs. The remaining five people, representing the bottom 50% of the population, have only 2% of the total wealth between them. That's not enough for a chair. A lot of people without wealth live in very crowded conditions. You all need to sit on the floor, and you need to touch at least one other person on the floor.

*Or, based on your sense of participants' comfort with one another in respect to their physical boundaries, you can ask them to all touch the same leg of one of the chairs that belongs to the person with the 8 chairs, as that person actually has only slightly less than 80% of the wealth, so they can spare some of a chair.*

To everyone, **Who is surprised at this wealth distribution in the world?**

*Once they are settled (some may be uncomfortably crowded), continue.*

This represents inequality around the whole world.

**To everyone, How do you think inequality might differ in the US? Is it more, less, or just as unequal?**

*After people guess, continue.* The US has greater equality, let's see how it's better.

You who have the most wealth, give one of your chairs to the next group of 4 people.

*Now the richest person has 7 chairs, the next 40% have 3.*

The 5 of you on the floor, you have to stay on the floor. But there is good news – instead of having 2% of the total wealth, which was true when we looked at the world, you now have 2.5% of the wealth – but it's still not enough for a chair.

**To everyone, Are you surprised at this wealth distribution in the US?**

**To the people on the floor, What is your life like down there?**

**To everyone, In real life, have you ever seen or known of people who are very poor, represented by those who are on the floor? If it's you or your family, you can choose whether to keep that private or not. What's it like to have very little wealth?**

**To the wealthiest person, What does it feel like – looking over at those who are all jammed together on just 3 chairs, or on the floor?**

**To everyone, Have ever known or seen super rich people—perhaps on TV or when traveling in a big city. What is life like for them? How do they spend their extra money?**

**To everyone, Do you think any super rich come from among the people in the last two chairs or from the floor? How often does this happen? Why do we hear so much about them?**

*It can be helpful to understand that the exaggerated publicity about these rags-to-riches icons perpetuates the myth that anyone who tries can make it.*

*This section has questions most appropriate for adults, high schoolers, and junior high participants.*

Ask the nine without the most wealth, **Why don't you get organized to force a redistribution of wealth?**

To everyone,

**What do those in power tell us about how to justify this huge inequality in the distribution of the world's wealth?** (e.g., if you worked harder you could be rich too, if you owned a business that gives others jobs you would deserve to make more for yourself, if your government weren't so corrupt there would be more money for you, etc.). If no one mentions scapegoating, identify one person from the lower 50% to represent the poorest 10%.

Ask everyone, **Would there be more money for the rest of you all if this person wasn't ripping off the system for welfare?**

Ask the identified person representing the poorest 10%, **What do you hear from the rich people about why you are so poor? Who might the rich people want everyone to blame for your tough economic conditions?**

After this, you can continue with people of all ages.

This section, involving the graham crackers, supports reflection from another direction if you have extra time.

Now, we're going to use another way to get a feel for the difference between the rich and the poor in the world. People are to stay on their chairs or the floor.

Bring out 2 plates, one with 7 graham crackers in a high stack, the other with 3 graham crackers.

These graham crackers represent the wealth of the world.

Give the large pile to the person with 7 chairs.

Give the small pile to the 4 people with 3 chairs.

To the person with seven chairs, My apologies, I gave you too much.

Break of one quarter of one graham cracker.

This represents 2.5% of the world's wealth.

*Give the one quarter of the graham cracker to the five people on the floor.*

This is for the five of you to share.

**To the 10 people, Count the crackers in your group. How many crackers are there for each person?**

**To the group on the floor, How does it feel to have only a few crumbs each when you can see the rich people with so much more?**

**Ask the people with modest wealth, What it's like looking at the wealthiest person?**

**Ask the richest person, How does it feel to have so much when you see the big group with only a little?**

Quakers, from their very beginning, have always believed in equality for all.

**What are Quakers doing in this country and the world to try to make things better for those who have very little?**

One Quaker organization working to make a difference is Right Sharing of World Resources. *Tell them a little more about Right Sharing. Read a profile of a woman in a women's group and how it has changed her life. Below are a few options.*

[\*Caring for One Another in Migori\*](#)

[\*We are not only taking care of ourselves; we are taking care of our whole village\*](#)

[\*Alamelu Bannan - A Leader Changing her Community\*](#)

**Ask everyone, What do you notice about how they were able to help each other? Is something like that possible in your life?**

**Ask everyone, What could we do to make things different—to make more space for those who are crowded? To make sure everyone has at least 1 cracker apiece?**

Adapted from “Ten Chairs of Inequality: A Classroom Simulation on the Distribution of Wealth” developed by United for a Fair Economy, to dramatize the increasingly unequal distribution of wealth in the United States. Some of the directions and questions above are from Polly Kellogg, an assistant professor in the Human Relations and Multicultural Education Department at St. Cloud State University, St. Cloud, MN. The exercise has been adapted to simulate the disparities in global wealth distribution and has been revised for use with younger students or with an intergenerational group. Wealth disparity figures for the US are for Q3 of 2025 from the [Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis](#). Wealth disparity figures for the world are from [World Inequality Report 2026](#). Below are the numbers which may be useful for further discussion.

US Wealth Inequality, with roughly 350 million people in 2026

Net worth held by bottom 50% - 2.5%, 175 million people, \$4,251,212,000,000 (avg. \$24k)

50th to 90th (40% of pop) - 29.4%, 140 million people, \$50,839,730,000,000 (avg. \$363k)

90th to 99th (9% of pop) - 36.4%, 31.5 million people, \$62,996,884,000,000 (avg. \$2 million)

Top 1% - 31.7%, 3.5 million people, \$54,826,173,000,000 (avg. \$15.6 million)

Top .1% - 14.4%, 350,000 people, \$24,887,247,000,000 (avg. \$71 million)

Total Net Worth: \$172,913,999,000,000

Average Net Worth: \$494,040

World Wealth Inequality

Bottom 50% - 2%, 2.8 billion people (average at €6,500 or \$7,700, to get to the next group you need at least €29,200. or \$34,800)

Middle 40% - 23%, 2.2 billion people

Top 10% - 75%, 556 million people

Top 1% - 37%, 56 million people (average at €1,000,000 or \$1,119,000)

Top .1% - 19%, 5.6 million people