

Perceptions are *not* reality: what the world gets wrong

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Perceptions are *not* reality: what the world gets wrong

Global – Ipsos’ latest version of the Perils of Perception survey highlights how wrong the public across 33 countries are about some key issues and features of the population in their country.

1. **The top 1%:** most developed countries greatly overestimate the proportion of adult wealth the wealthiest 1% in their country own. Britain is the most inaccurate (estimating it to be 59%, over twice the real figure of 23%), but France, Australia, Belgium, New Zealand and Canada are all at least 30 percentage points out of line. A few countries, though, underestimate how much of their country’s wealth is concentrated in the hands of the top 1% - Peru, India, Israel, Brazil and Russia (where the top 1% actually own an incredible 70% of all wealth). There is a lot of variation between the countries on what they think the figure *should* be, though most of them think it should be lower than it really is – with Russia again standing out as having the highest gap between the amount of wealth they think the top 1% should acceptably own (23%) and the true figure (70%).
2. **Obesity/overweight:** Nearly every country we surveyed underestimates how much of a problem weight is in their country. The average guess for the proportion of overweight or obese people is 40%, which is much lower than the actual figure of 54%. Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Israel are the most inaccurate, underestimating the prevalence of overweight and obese people by a massive 43, 33 and 33 percentage points respectively. The only countries that prove the exception are India, Japan, China and South Korea,



all nations where the population is much less overweight than the other countries in the study.

3. **Non-religious:** Asian countries such as China, Japan and South Korea are fairly accurate about the (relatively high) proportions of non-religious people in their country, but most other countries hugely overestimate the proportion that are non-religious: the average guess across the countries is 37% when the actual average proportion is 18%. This is particularly noticeable in India (average guess 33%, when the true figure is under 1%), in many Latin American countries such as Mexico, Brazil and Peru (who overestimate by 30, 27 and 25 points respectively), and countries as diverse as Russia (overestimation of 29 points), Norway, Ireland and Serbia (all out by 28 points).
4. **Immigration:** The average guess across 32 countries is that 23% are immigrants when the actual figure is less than half that (10%). The biggest overestimations tend to be in countries with very low levels of immigration – such as Argentina, Brazil, South Africa, India, Mexico and Peru, all of which overstate the proportion of immigrants by over 20 percentage points – but Canada and the USA, countries with higher levels of immigration, are also among the most inaccurate. Saudi Arabia and to a lesser extent Israel are the only countries that underestimate the proportion of immigrants.
5. **25-34 year-olds living with parents:** this question was only asked in developed countries where “actual data” was available. People in almost every country overestimate how many young people live with their parents (by an average of 16 percentage points), both in countries like Spain (with an average guess of 65% compared with a reality of 40%), but also in countries that have less of an excuse for thinking the number of young



people living with their parents is so high, notably Britain (which overestimates the reality by 43% to 14%), and France (by 36% to 11%).

6. **Average age:** Despite the huge range of countries covered in this study, nearly everyone thinks their population is much older than it actually is. Across the study the average guess is 50 years old when the actual is 37 years. Most inaccurate were Brazil, Turkey, Hungary and India, all of whom thought the average age is 20 years older than it really is.
7. **Population aged under 14:** At the same time, nearly every country also overestimates the number of under 14 year olds in their country. The average guess across all countries is 29%, compared with the actual figure of 20% (Israel is the one exception which underestimates the proportion of young people – but they are correct in appreciating they are a relatively young country.)
8. **Female politicians:** None of the countries in our study have achieved a gender balance in their lower house (or equivalent), although Sweden comes closest with female politicians making up 44% – in contrast only 10% are women in Brazil, Hungary and Japan. Some countries are reasonably accurate on these true figures – 13 guess within three percentage points – but there are still wide variations. Some countries that do relatively well on their gender balance don't seem to realise this (such as Mexico, Spain and Belgium), while Columbia, Russia, India and Brazil all think there is better female representation than there really is.
9. **Female employment:** The public mostly showed a high degree of accuracy across countries when they were asked how many women of working age were employed in their country – ten countries get within three percentage points of the correct figure. There are though some outliers – Israel



significantly underestimates the proportion of female employment (by 29 percentage points), while India, Mexico, South Africa and Chile all think more women in work than really are.

10. **Rural living:** Almost all countries in the study overestimate the proportion of their population who live in rural areas. This suggests the public underestimate just how densely populated cities are and conversely how sparse the rural population actually is. The average guess across all countries is 38% when it is actually 23%. Japan is most out of line on this question – by a massive 56% to a real 7%, while India and Serbia both actually underestimate how rural their populations are.
11. **Internet access:** There is a big divide between the developed and developing world on estimates of internet access. While most in richer countries slightly underestimate their (relatively high) levels of internet access, in the developing world respondents overestimate how many of their fellow citizens are online. The research was carried out with an online sample, so these findings may reflect how the middle-class/connected population generalise to the whole population from their own experience. For example in India the average guess among online respondents for internet access is 60% - an overestimation of the true picture of 41 percentage points, and in China the average guess is 72%, 26 points too optimistic.

The full Ipsos “**Index of Ignorance**” is given in the table below. Mexico and India receive the dubious honour of being the most inaccurate in their perceptions on these issues, while South Koreans are the most accurate, followed by the Irish. There are some regional patterns in this table – for example Latin American countries tend to be more inaccurate, European and Americans more accurate –



but this hides individual differences, and is not the whole story. New Zealand is the least accurate of the developed countries (in the top five most ignorant), while China is in the top 5 most accurate.



Ranking	Country	
1	Mexico	Least accurate
2	India	
3	Brazil	
4	Peru	
5	New Zealand	
6	Colombia	
7	Belgium	
8	South Africa	
9	Argentina	
10	Italy	
11	Russia	
12	Chile	
13	Great Britain	
14	Israel	
15	Australia	
16	Japan	
17	Canada	
18	Germany	
19	Netherlands	
20	Spain	
21	Norway	
22	France	
23	Sweden	
24	United States	
25	China	
26	Poland	
27	Ireland	
28	South Korea	Most accurate

Bobby Duffy, Managing Director of Ipsos MORI Social Research Institute, London, said:

“Across all 33 countries in the study, each population gets a lot wrong. We are often most incorrect on factors that are widely discussed in the media or highlighted as challenges facing societies, such as the proportion of young adults still living at home, immigration and wealth inequality. We know from previous studies that this is partly because we over-



estimate what we worry about – as well as worrying about the issues we think are widespread.

But we do also underestimate some key challenges such as obesity. In many countries, we're maybe not as worried as we should be, given the extent to which our populations are overweight.

We also get facts wrong that will make us focus on some issues more than they perhaps deserve: for example, we tend to think our populations are much older than they actually are, and that more people live in rural areas than is really the case.

There are multiple reasons for these errors – from our struggle with simple maths and proportions, to media coverage of issues, to social psychology explanations of our mental shortcuts or biases. It is also clear from our “Index of Ignorance” that the countries who tend to do worst have relatively low internet penetrations: given this is an online survey, this is therefore likely to reflect that this more middle-class and connected population generalise from their own experience rather than consider the much greater variety of circumstances in the full populations of their country.”

For more information and to take the Perils of Perception Quiz please go to:
www.ipsos-mori.com/perilsofperception

These are the findings of the Ipsos MORI Perils of Perception Survey. 25,556 interviews were conducted between conducted between October 1st – October 16th 2015. The survey is conducted in 33 countries around the world via the Ipsos Online Panel system in Argentina, Australia, Belgium, Brazil, Canada, Chile, China, Colombia, France, Germany, Hungary, India, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Japan, Mexico, Montenegro, Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Peru, Poland, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Serbia, South Africa, South Korea, Spain, Sweden, Great Britain, Turkey and the United States of America. Approximately 1000+ individuals were surveyed in Australia, Brazil, Canada, China, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Japan, Serbia, Spain, Great Britain Montenegro, the



Netherlands, Sweden, Norway and the United States of America. Approximately 500+ individuals were surveyed in the remaining countries. Where results do not sum to 100, this may be due to computer rounding, multiple responses or the exclusion of don't knows or not stated responses. Data are weighted to match the profile of the population. The “actual” data for each question is taken from a variety of verified sources for each question and country – a full list of sources/links to the actual data can be found [here](#).

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For more information on this news release, please contact:

Bobby Duffy
Managing Director
Ipsos MORI
+4402073473267
bobby.duffy@ipsos.com

James Stannard
Research Manager
Ipsos MORI
+4402073473914
james.stannard@ipsos.com

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