

Disclosing systematic misconceptions related to each of the UN's Sustainable Development Goals

a study by

GAPMINDER

in collaboration with



First: Test your worldview

Below are the 18 questions of this study. Test yourself before reading the report.
You find the correct answers upside down at the end of the report.

1. What share of the population in high-income countries (like Germany and the USA) live in extreme **poverty** (with less than \$2/day)?

- A. Less than 1%
- B. Around 11%
- C. Around 21%

2. What share of the world's population don't have enough **food** to meet their daily needs?

- A. Around 11%
- B. Around 23%
- C. Around 37%

3. What happened to the global **suicide** rate in the last 20 years?

- A. Decreased about 25%
- B. Stayed about the same
- C. Increased about 25%

4. In low-income countries across the world, what share of girls went to **school** until at least age 11 (before the pandemic)?

- A. Around 20%
- B. Around 40%
- C. Around 60%

5. How many **companies** in the world have a woman as top manager or CEO?

- A. Around 2%
- B. Around 10%
- C. Around 18%

6. How many people have access to safe drinking **water** in their home or close by?

- A. Around 30%
- B. Around 50%
- C. Around 70%

7. Of all **energy** used in the world how much comes from natural gas, coal and oil?


- A. Around 42%
- B. Around 62%
- C. Around 82%

8. In 1990, 58% of the world's population lived in **low-income countries**. What is the share today?

- A. Around 9%
- B. Around 37%
- C. Around 61%

9. How much of the world's economy comes from **agriculture**, forestry and fishing?

- A. Around 4%
- B. Around 24%
- C. Around 44%

Continue test on next page 

Test your worldview

10. What share of countries in the world have laws against **sexual harassment** at work?

- A. Less than 35%
- B. Around 55%
- C. More than 75%

11. What share of the world's population live in **megacities** (cities with at least 10 million people)?

- A. Around 8%
- B. Around 28%
- C. Around 48%

12. After water, which **raw material** is most used in the world in terms of volume?

- A. Oil
- B. Sand
- C. Wood

13. How much of the excess heat from **global warming** is absorbed in the oceans?

- A. Around 10%
- B. Around 50%
- C. Around 90%

14. What share of all **plastic waste** in the world ends up in oceans?

- A. Less than 6%
- B. Around 36%
- C. More than 66%

15. Biologists have evaluated the status of 120,000 **plants and animals**. How many are endangered or threatened?

- A. Around 30%
- B. Around 60%
- C. Around 90%

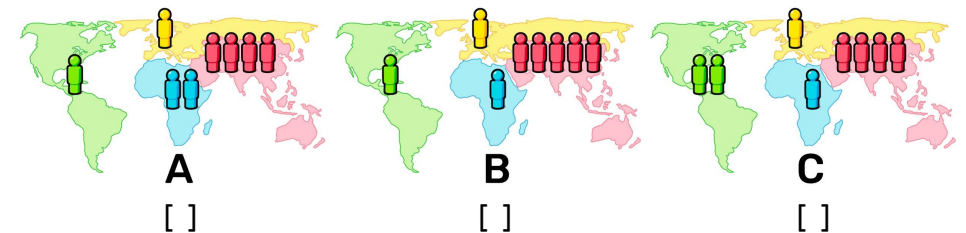
16. What share of the world's population are **refugees**?

- A. Around 0.4%
- B. Around 4.4%
- C. Around 14.4%

17. In high-income countries, how much on average of a government's revenue comes from **customs and import** duties?

- A. Around 2%
- B. Around 12%
- C. Around 22%

18. There are roughly eight billion people in the world today. Which **map** shows best where they live? (Each figure represents 1 billion people.)



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Humans scored worse than monkeys...

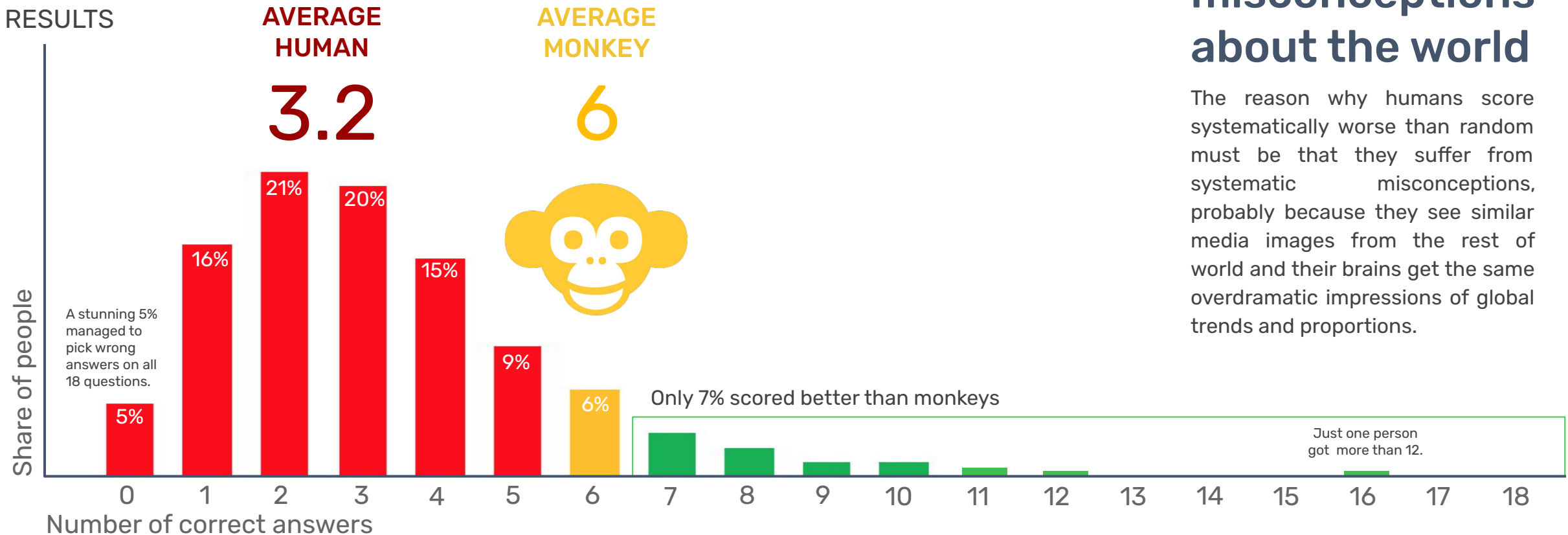
Most **humans** got 1 to 4 correct answers. They would have scored better if they had closed their eyes and picked answers randomly. All the questions had three options which means that the

average **monkeys** (or humans with closed eyes who don't know what options they choose) would pick the right answer every third time, by pure luck, giving them 6 correct answers out of 18.

... because they suffer from systematic misconceptions about the world








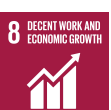

The reason why humans score systematically worse than random must be that they suffer from systematic misconceptions, probably because they see similar media images from the rest of world and their brains get the same overdramatic impressions of global trends and proportions.

RESULTS



This shows how many correct answers people got out of 18 possible.

Systematic misconceptions related to UN Sustainable Development Goals

UN GOAL	WRONG ANSWERS	SYSTEMATIC MISCONCEPTION
	77%	think the poor in rich countries are much poorer than they actually are
	79%	of people have more hungry mouths in their heads than there are in reality
	94%	have the impression that suicides are not becoming less common in the world
	86%	believe that very few girls in poor countries get a basic education
	89%	assume the worst when asked about women's status in business
	82%	don't realize how many people actually have safe drinking water
	65%	wrongly believe fossil fuels no longer provide most of the world's energy
	96%	think that there are still many low-income countries
	84%	mistakenly believe that agriculture , forestry and fishing yield lots of income

UN GOAL	WRONG ANSWERS	SYSTEMATIC MISCONCEPTION
	92%	think laws against sexual harassment aren't widespread
	77%	massively overestimate how many people live in huge cities
	84%	don't realize how much sand is in the products we use every day
	92%	assume that little of the global warming is hiding in the seas
	86%	think more than a third of all plastic waste ends up in oceans
	62%	overestimate how many known species are threatened
	89%	of people have ten times more refugees in their heads than there are in reality
	82%	hugely overestimate how much money rich governments get from taxes on imports
	69%	of people don't realize that more than half the world's population live in Asia

Monkeys win over humans on sustainability facts

With our heads full of misconceptions we can't build a sustainable future

Predicting the future is often very difficult. To have any chance of succeeding, we first need an accurate understanding of the present. This study shows that the public in the Nordic countries and UK are in a very bad position to plan for a sustainable future, as they are devastatingly wrong about all kinds of global trends and proportions.

For example: Fossil fuels still make up more than 80% of all energy used in the world, but a majority think it's far less. People wrongly believe that the transition to sustainable energy has already come a long way, while almost nothing has changed.

Most people shape their understanding of the world based on news stories. What gets attention in media are events that are newsworthy by being unusual. Slow trends and big proportions almost never make it to the news.

We believe in collective wisdom

You probably believe in democracy and the idea that free elections should determine the future of the world. You probably agree that awareness among consumers can guide businesses to make profit in a more responsible way. And you probably realize that the staff of large organizations are making millions of decisions which will have a more positive impact if they are more knowledgeable.

We believe in collective wisdom, not only the wisdom of a small group of experts advising top level decision makers. This misconception study is part of Gapminder's efforts to fight global misconceptions and make it possible for everyone to have a fact-based worldview. In a changing world, the facts keep changing, and therefore we have built a new tool that will help people rid themselves of common misconceptions and stay up to date in a world that will keep changing. We call it the Worldview Upgrader: gapm.io/upgrader

*Ola Rosling & Anna Rosling Rönnlund
Co-founders of Gapminder Foundation*

1 NO POVERTY *“What share of the population in high-income countries (like Germany and the USA) live in extreme poverty (with less than \$2/day)?”*

CORRECT ANSWER

“Less than 1%”



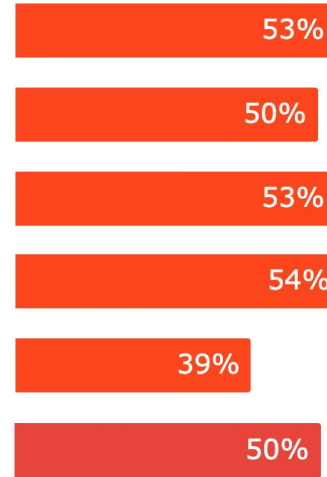
23%

ANSWERED CORRECT

Less than 1% of people in high-income countries live in extreme poverty, with less than \$2/day.

WRONG ANSWER

“Around 11%”

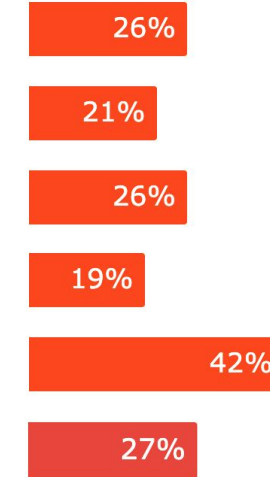


77%

ANSWERED WRONG

VERY WRONG ANSWER

“Around 21%”



think the poor in rich countries are much poorer than they actually are

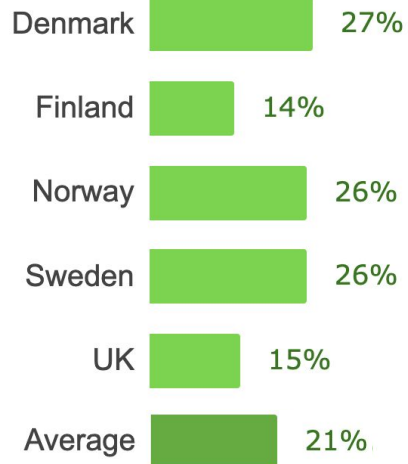
The poverty they see in rich countries is so undefendable that they probably assume it's the worst kind of poverty. More: gapm.io/wu1



“What share of the world’s population don’t have enough food to meet their daily needs?”

CORRECT ANSWER

“Around 11%”



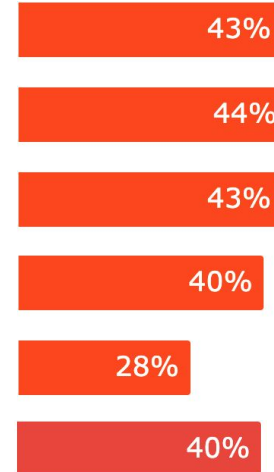
21%

ANSWERED CORRECT

Around 11% of the world’s population don’t have enough food.

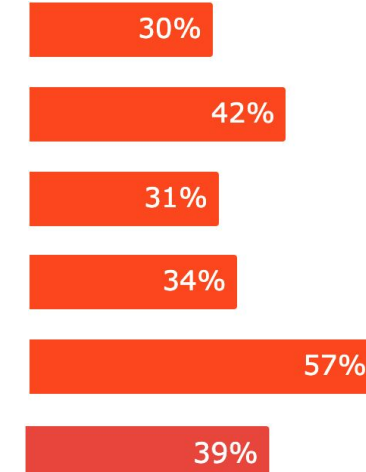
WRONG ANSWER

“Around 23%”



VERY WRONG ANSWER

“Around 37%”



79%

ANSWERED WRONG

of people have more hungry mouths in their heads than there are in reality

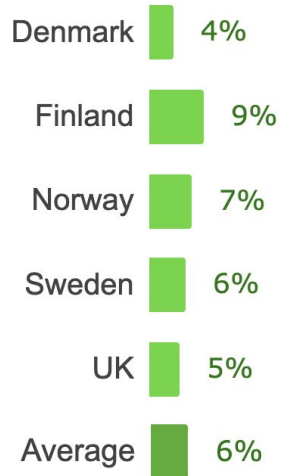
People don’t want to trivialize suffering, so they often overestimate when guessing about any kind of victims. More: [gapm.io/wu2](https://gapminder.io/wu2)



“What happened to the global suicide rate in the last 20 years?”

CORRECT ANSWER

“Decreased about 25%”



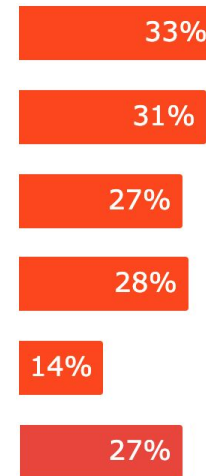
6%

ANSWERED CORRECT

The global suicide rate decreased by around 25% during the past 20 years.

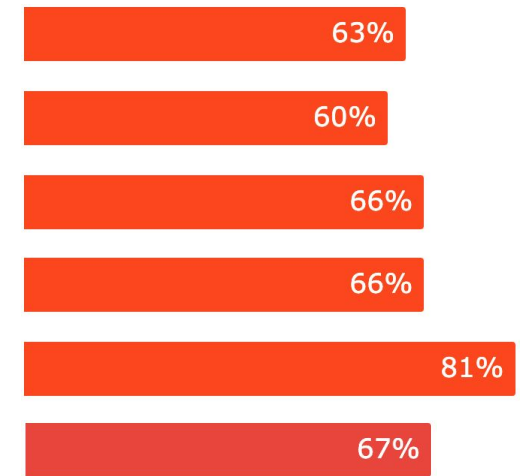
WRONG ANSWER

“Stayed about the same”



VERY WRONG ANSWER

“Increased about 25%”



94%

ANSWERED WRONG

have the impression that suicides are not becoming less common in the world

More people talk openly about suicides, and it's easy to get the impression that it is becoming more common. See: gapm.io/wu3

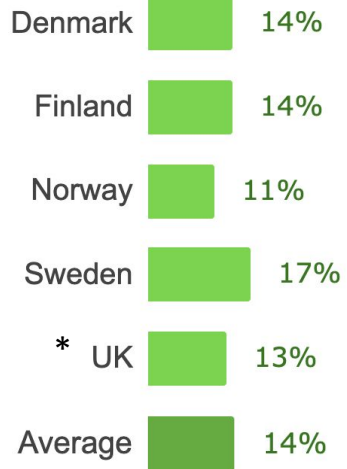




"In low-income countries across the world, what share of girls went to school until at least age 11 (before the pandemic)?"

CORRECT ANSWER

"Around 60%"



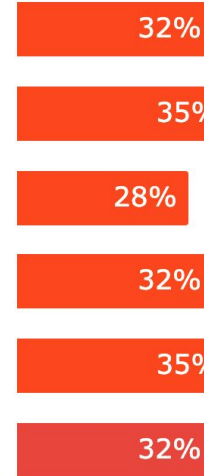
14%

ANSWERED CORRECT

Around 60% of young girls in low-income countries go to school.

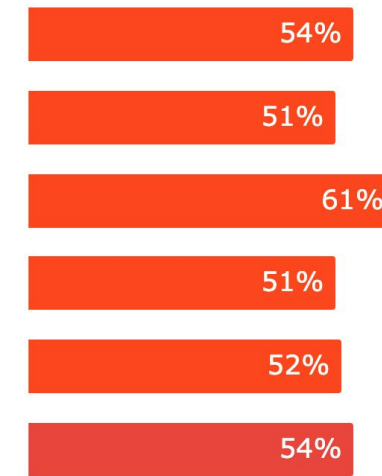
WRONG ANSWER

"Around 40%"



VERY WRONG ANSWER

"Around 20%"



86%

ANSWERED WRONG

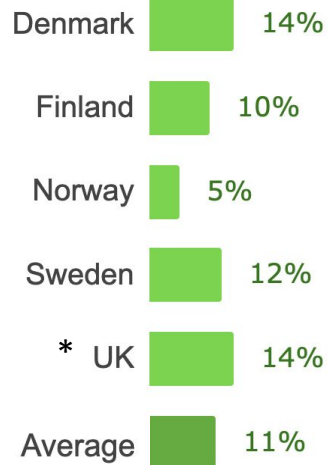
believe that very few girls in poor countries get a basic education

As they know there are still huge gender inequalities in the world, they probably can't imagine that most boys - and girls - go to school even in low-income countries. More: gapm.io/wu4

5 GENDER EQUALITY *"How many companies in the world have a woman as top manager or CEO?"*

CORRECT ANSWER

"Around 18%"



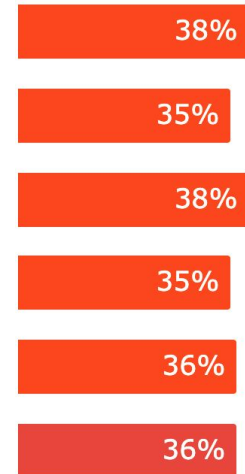
11%

ANSWERED CORRECT

Around 18% of companies worldwide have female top managers.

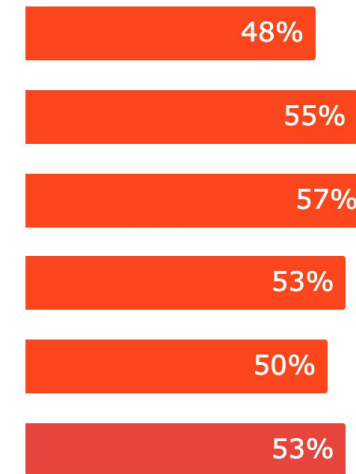
WRONG ANSWER

"Around 10%"



VERY WRONG ANSWER

"Around 2%"



89%

ANSWERED WRONG

assume the worst when asked about women in business

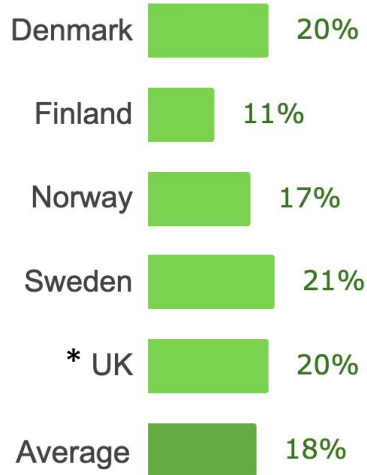
As the world of business is still very male dominated, people underestimate the increasing number of women who actually make it to the top. More: gapm.io/wu5



"How many people in the world have access to safe drinking water in their home or close by?"

CORRECT ANSWER

"Around 70%"



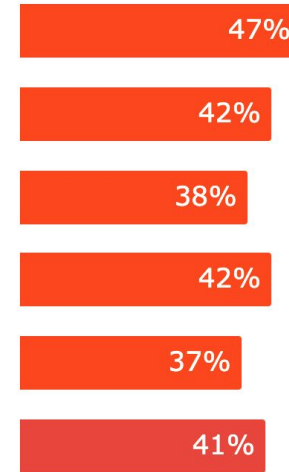
18%

ANSWERED CORRECT

Around 70% of all people have easy access to safe drinking water.

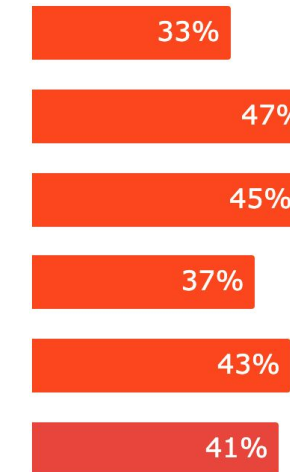
WRONG ANSWER

"Around 50%"



VERY WRONG ANSWER

"Around 30%"



82%

ANSWERED WRONG

don't realize how many people actually have safe drinking water

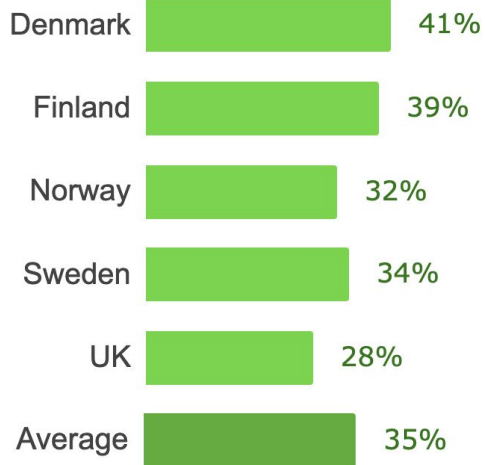
If you imagine that half of humanity lacks safe drinking water, the problem must seem too big to be solved. More: gapm.io/wu6



"Of all energy used in the world how much comes from natural gas, coal and oil?"

CORRECT ANSWER

"Around 82%"



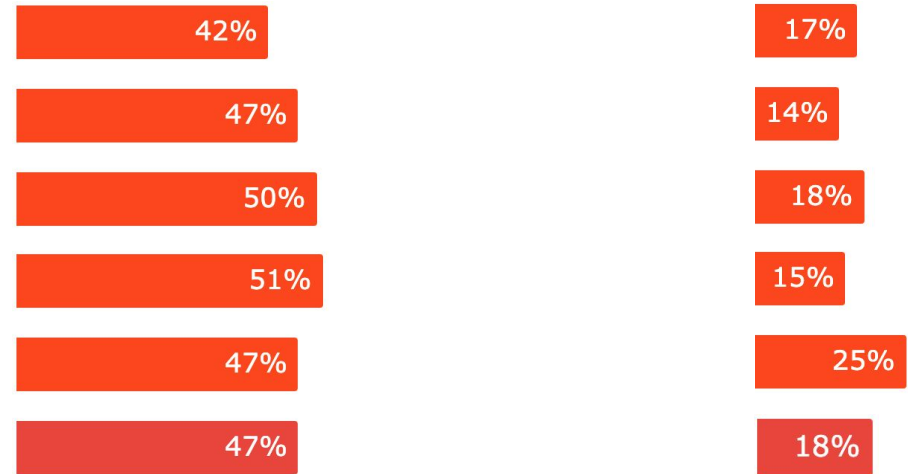
35%

ANSWERED CORRECT

Around 82% of all energy used in the world comes from coal, oil and natural gas.

WRONG ANSWER

"Around 62%"



VERY WRONG ANSWER

"Around 42%"

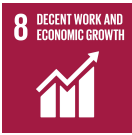


65%

ANSWERED WRONG

wrongly believe fossil fuels no longer provide most of the world's energy

All the talk about new and clean technologies probably makes people wrongly assume that a lot of the fossil fuels have already been replaced. More: gapm.io/wu7



"In 1990, 58% of the world's population lived in low-income countries, what is the share today?"

CORRECT ANSWER

"Around 9%"



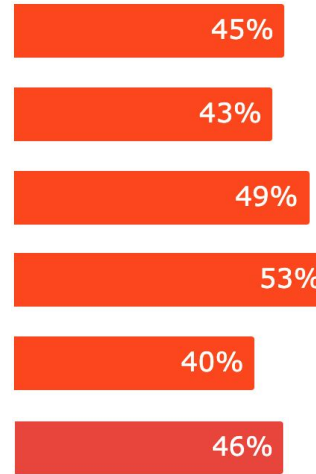
4%

ANSWERED CORRECT

Today, only 9% of people live in low-income countries.

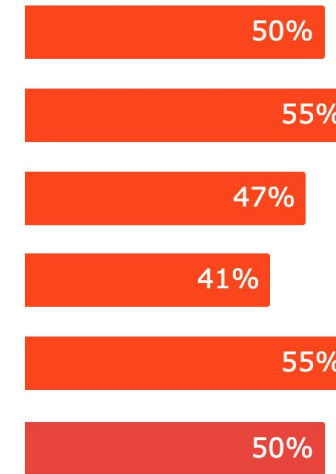
WRONG ANSWER

"Around 37%"



VERY WRONG ANSWER

"Around 61%"



96%

ANSWERED WRONG

think there are still many low-income countries

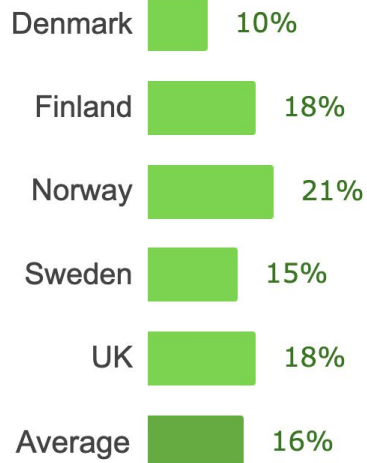
Nearly everyone missed that most of the world got richer in recent decades and that lots of low-income countries became middle-income countries. More: [gapm.io/wu8](https://gapminder.org/wu8)



"How much of the world's economy comes from agriculture, forestry and fishing?"

CORRECT ANSWER

"Around 4%"



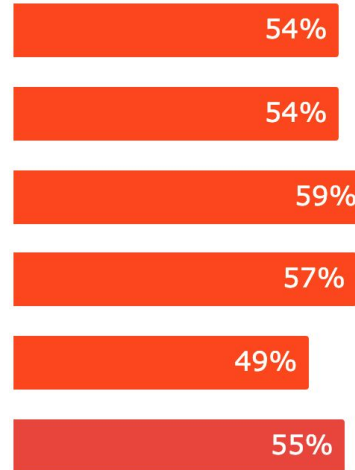
16%

ANSWERED CORRECT

Around 4% of the world's economy comes from agriculture, forestry and fishing.

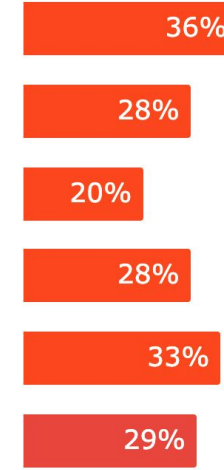
WRONG ANSWER

"Around 24%"



VERY WRONG ANSWER

"Around 44%"



84%

ANSWERED WRONG

mistakenly believe that agriculture, forestry and fishing yield lots of income

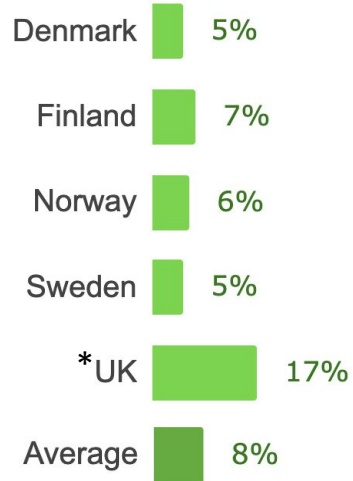
During the last 200 years, the share of the world's economy that comes from agriculture, forestry and fishing has been dropping steadily. More: [gapm.io/wu9](https://gapminder.org/wu9)



“What share of countries in the world have laws against sexual harassment at work?”

CORRECT ANSWER

“More than 75%”



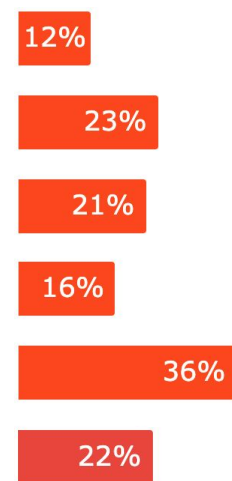
8%

ANSWERED CORRECT

Around 75% of countries have laws against sexual harassment at work.

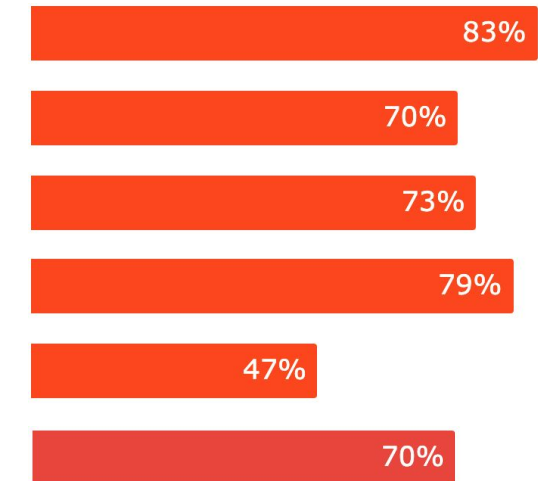
WRONG ANSWER

“Around 55%”



VERY WRONG ANSWER

“Less than 35%”



92%

ANSWERED WRONG

think laws against sexual harassment aren't wide spread

In most cases the laws are in place. It's the enforcement of the laws that is the problem. More: gapm.io/wu10

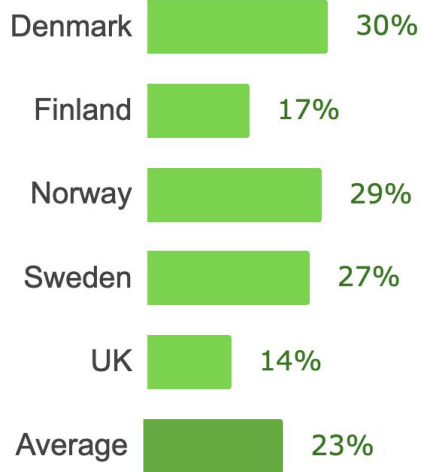




“What share of the world’s population live in megacities (cities with at least 10 million people)?”

CORRECT ANSWER

“Around 8%”



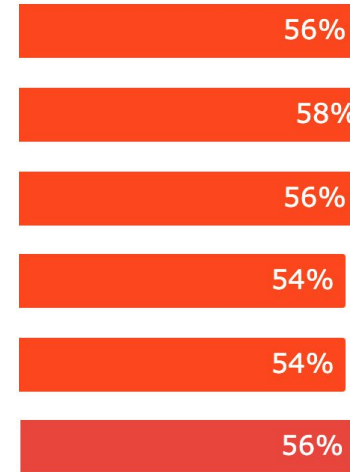
23%

ANSWERED CORRECT

Around 8%(or less) of the world’s population live in megacities.

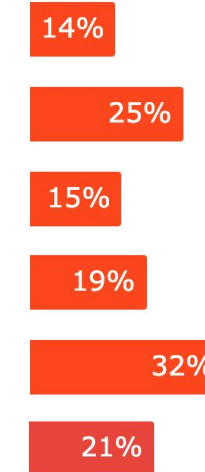
WRONG ANSWER

“Around 28%”



VERY WRONG ANSWER

“Around 48%”



77%

ANSWERED WRONG

massively overestimate how many people live in huge cities

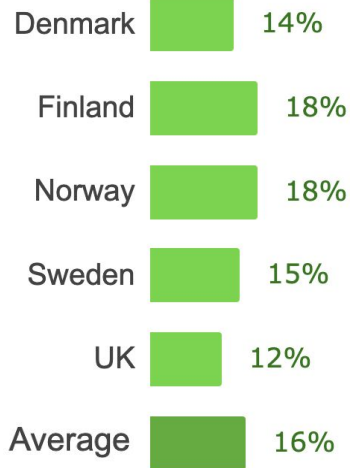
Media often covers people living in the big cities, while almost everyone lives in other places. More: gapm.io/wu11



"After water, which raw material is most used in the world in terms of volume?"

CORRECT ANSWER

"Sand"



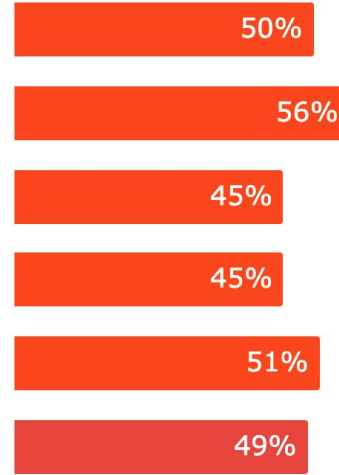
16%

ANSWERED CORRECT

Ten times more sand is used compared to oil and wood.

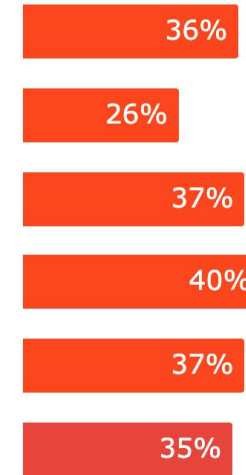
WRONG ANSWER

"Oil"



VERY WRONG ANSWER

"Wood"



84%

ANSWERED WRONG

don't realize how much sand is in the products we use every day

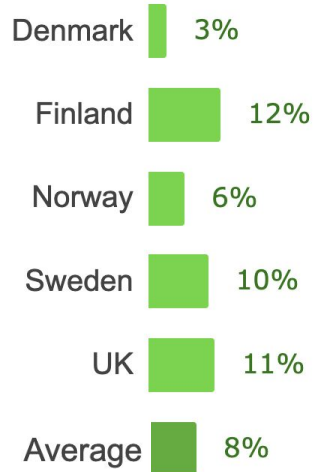
If we don't keep track of data, we easily miss invisible materials with huge environmental impacts. More: gapm.io/wu12



"How much of the excess heat from global warming is captured in the oceans?"

CORRECT ANSWER

"Around 90%"



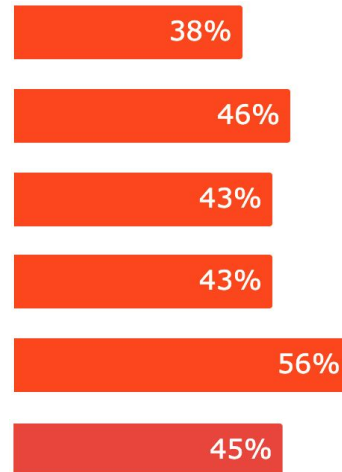
8%

ANSWERED CORRECT

More than 90% of global warming is captured in oceans.

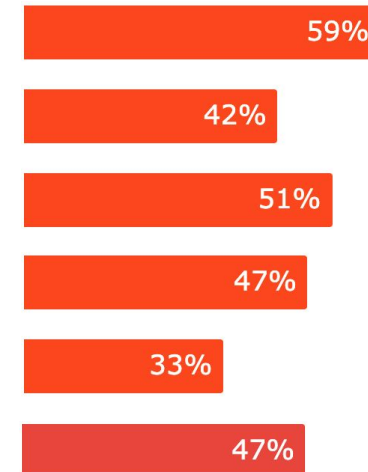
WRONG ANSWER

"Around 50%"



VERY WRONG ANSWER

"Around 10%"



92%

ANSWERED WRONG

assume that little of the global warming is hiding in the seas

If they don't realize that oceans have absorbed most of the excess heat, they can't understand the size of the climate change. More: gapm.io/wu13

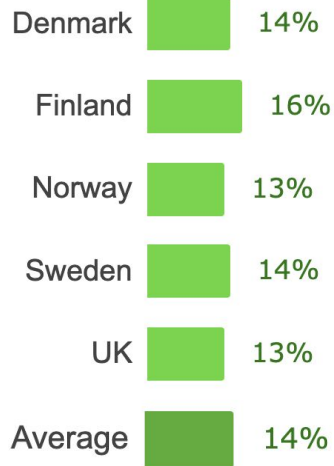




"What share of all plastic waste in the world ends up in the oceans?"

CORRECT ANSWER

"Less than 6%"



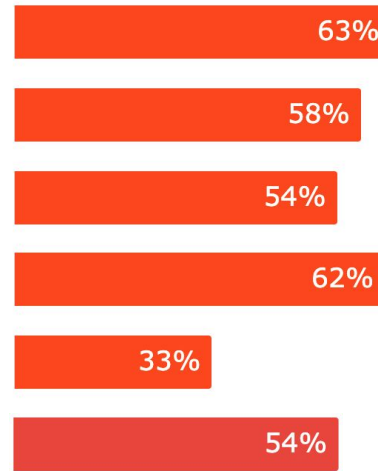
14%

ANSWERED CORRECT

Less than 6% of plastic waste ends up in the oceans.

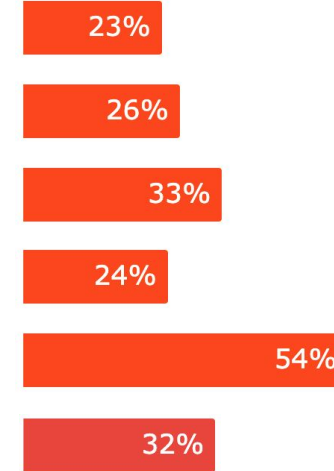
WRONG ANSWER

"Around 36%"



VERY WRONG ANSWER

"More than 66%"



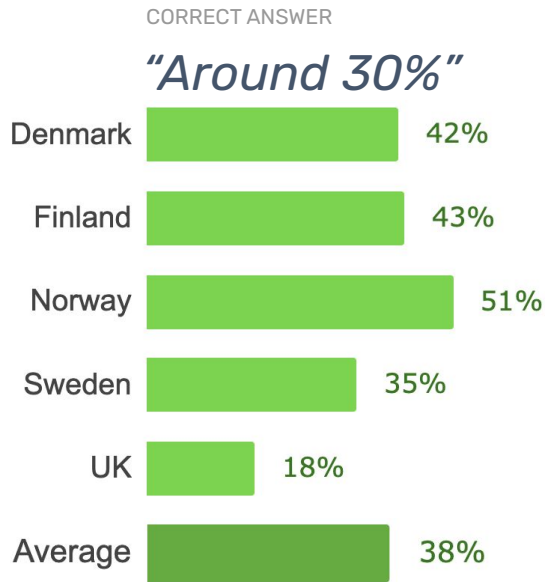
86%

ANSWERED WRONG

think more than a third of all plastic waste ends up in oceans

When you completely overestimate how much plastic ends up in the sea, the problem might seem too big to solve. More: gapminder.io/wu14

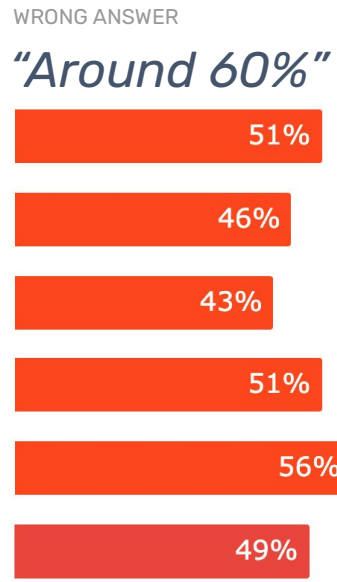
15 LIFE ON LAND
"Biologists have evaluated the status of 120,000 plants and animals. How many are endangered or threatened?"



38%

ANSWERED CORRECT

Around 30% of all evaluated species are threatened or endangered.

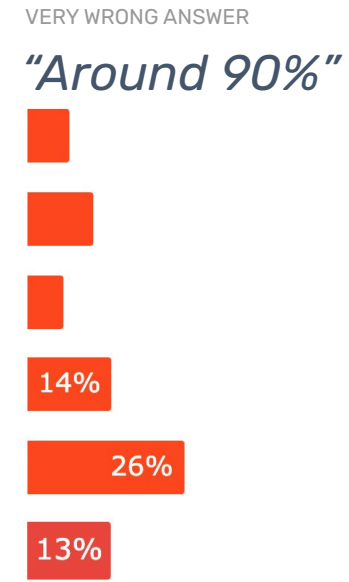


62%

ANSWERED WRONG

overestimate how many known species are threatened

One third threatened species is terribly high, but it means it's still possible to reverse the trend towards mass extinction. More: gapm.io/wu15

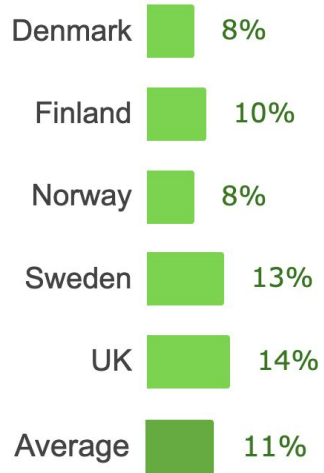




"What share of the world's population are refugees?"

CORRECT ANSWER

"Around 0.4%"



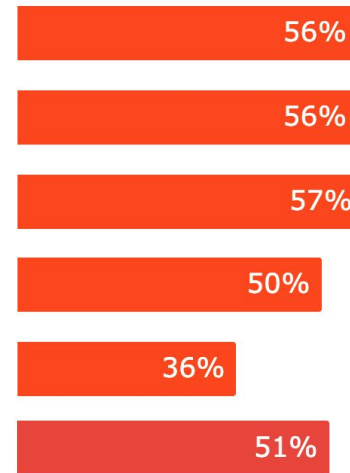
11%

ANSWERED CORRECT

Around 0.4% of the world's population are refugees.

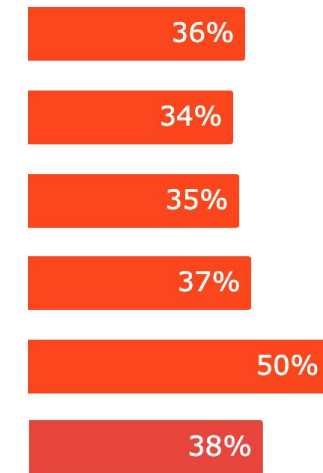
WRONG ANSWER

"Around 4.4%"



VERY WRONG ANSWER

"Around 14.4%"



89%

ANSWERED WRONG

have ten times more refugees in their heads than there are in reality

Refugees are in the news all the time, so it isn't surprising most people get this wrong. More: gapm.io/wu16

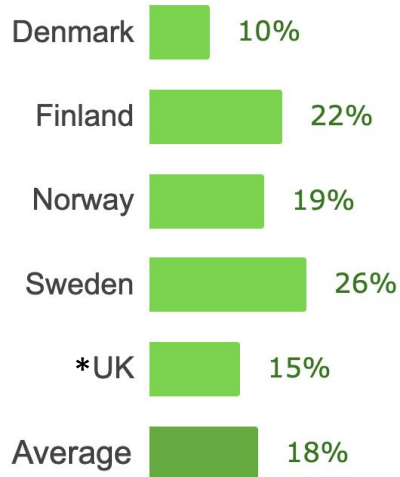




"In high-income countries, how much on average of a government's revenue comes from customs and import duties?"

CORRECT ANSWER

"Around 2%"



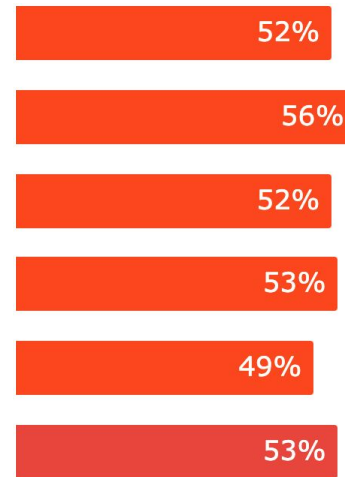
18%

ANSWERED CORRECT

Around 2% of a government's revenue in high-income countries comes from import duties.

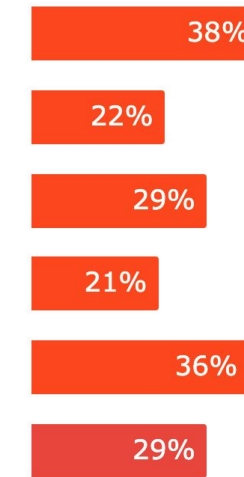
WRONG ANSWER

"Around 12%"



VERY WRONG ANSWER

"Around 22%"



82%

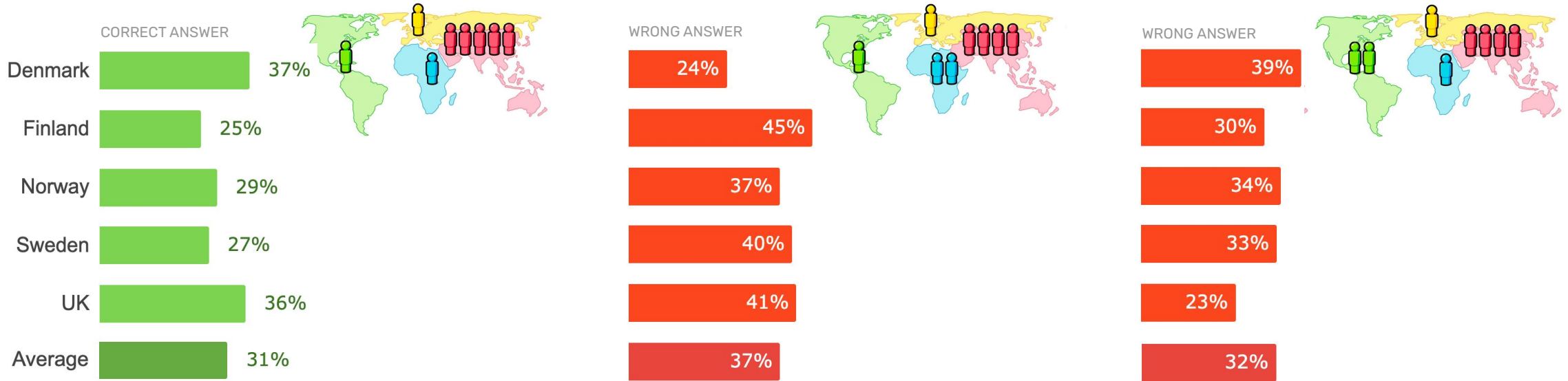
ANSWERED WRONG

hugely overestimate how much rich governments get from taxes on imports

As more products than ever are imported from abroad, people assume that taxes on imports result in lots of revenue. More: gapm.io/wu17



“There are roughly 8 billion people in the world today. Which map shows best where they live? (Each figure represents 1 billion people)”



31%

ANSWERED CORRECT

More than 4.5 billion people live in Asia, and only 1 billion in each of Europe, Africa and the Americas.

69%

ANSWERED WRONG

don't realize that more than half the world's population live in Asia

Many people have strong opinions about the world but put billions of people on the wrong continent. More: gapm.io/wu18

Summary

The five countries tested in this study, scored more or less equally bad on all eighteen questions.

The first country in the world with a feminist foreign policy, Sweden, did worst on the question about laws against sexual harassment. A whopping 95% of Swedes underestimate the progress in this area. Probably because gender inequality is an enormous global problem which gets a lot of attention in Swedish media.

We're not trying to trivialize any of the problems related to these questions. We are convinced that, if more people get the global trends and proportions right in their heads, and if more people realize the progress that has actually been made, then they will better see what is possible to do next and they can more constructively try to solve the problems.

In all five countries a majority believed that the world has already made a lot of progress towards clean energy, away from fossil fuels, which isn't remotely true.

People were most wrong about mental health and income. For instance, 96% overestimated dramatically how many live in low-income countries. Poverty, in all its forms, is so unacceptable to most of us, that we can't help overestimating the numbers. But when doing so, we also overestimate the challenge of helping the poor.

This is not an academic study and we haven't investigated all the possible origins of the systematic misconceptions we present. Instead we hope others will be inspired to do so. We would love to better understand the social and psychological reasons why so many people are wrong in the same way.

For example: The idea that more than 60% of all plastic waste ends up in the oceans is outlandishly wrong. Why did almost half of the UK respondents pick that answer, but only a quarter of the Finns? Is it because UK is an island and fewer Finns live by the sea?

No matter their origins, we are convinced that misconceptions are useless guides for planning a sustainable future, and therefore we will keep hunting them down, and disclosing them.

Please help promote a fact-based worldview, by spreading this study. We have also found hundreds of more misconceptions related to the UN's Sustainable Development Goals, which we will soon publish on: [Twitter](#), [Facebook](#), [Instagram](#) and [Linkedin](#)

Stay tuned!

/The Gapminder Team

About the study

The surveys in four nordic countries were conducted by Novus in October 2020. A total of 1,036 random and representative interviews were conducted with members of the public (18–79 years of age) in Sweden, Norway, Denmark and Finland. In the reference country, the UK, the survey was conducted by Google Surveys various weeks during 2020, with 150 respondents per question.

The results presented in this study come from online panels that are somewhat representative of the population as a whole. But the precision of the data is not high enough to say much about small differences between countries' results in the range of 5% up or down.

The total results presented for each question across all countries' surveys was simply calculated by taking the mean of the five countries' results.

The surveys for the four Nordic countries and the UK were done at different times. Some questions had slightly different phrasing in the UK, see those to the right:

NOTE: The answer results in this report have been rounded slightly, using the largest remainder method, so the results bars for each question add up to 100%.

QUESTION PHRASING USED IN THE UK

- 4** *In low-income countries across the world, what share of girls goes to school until they are at least 11 years old?*
- 5** *In what share of companies worldwide is a woman the top manager or CEO?*
- 6** *How many people in the world have access to safe drinking water in or close to home?*
- 8** *Thirty years ago, 58% of the world's population lived in low-income countries. What is the share today?*
- 10** *What share of countries in the world have laws against sexual harassment in employment?*
- 12** *After water, which raw material is most used in the world?*
- 14** *How much of all plastic produced in the world ends up in the oceans?*
- 15** *Biologists have evaluated the status of more than 100,000 plants and animals. How many are endangered or threatened?*
- 17** *In high-income countries, how much on average of the government's revenue comes from customs and import duties?*

CORRECT ANSWERS ON THE TEST ON PAGE 2&3:
1A 2A 3A 4C 5C 6C 7C 8A 9A 10C 11A 12B 13C 14A 15A 16A 17A 18B

The world keeps changing. What about your worldview?

The Worldview Upgrader

gapm.io/upgrader



It's difficult to stay up to date in a world that is constantly changing. Gapminder checks the data and test public knowledge to identify which global trends and proportions most people are wrong about. The Worldview Upgrader is a service that helps people and organizations replace common misconceptions with updated facts.

Gapminder is an independent educational non-profit specialized in global misconceptions.

This report was produced by: Ola Rosling, Anna Rosling Rönnlund, Keith Moore, Lewis Day, Klara Elzvik, Kristin Lagerström, Maike Winters, Pdraig Lyons, Diane Ingabire and Helena Nordenstedt. Thank you AFRY and all of the experts who helped validate hundreds of data sources and questions.

