

How do the other four-fifths live?

Researchers Danny Dorling and Anna Barford look at the gaps that divide us.

In most of the world today people tend to be segregated, mostly along economic lines. This division can block us from meeting and talking with people as equals and can be a barrier to social harmony.

Residential segregation takes place where the well-off buy themselves out of poorer neighbourhoods and rarely visit these places. The poorest often do not even feature in the mental maps which many of the rich hold of their home city. People in the poor parts of a city rarely spend time in wealthier areas and vice-versa.

In our research we found it useful to divide societies into fifths to talk about inequality. We ask people to imagine that the population of their country is divided into five groups – the poorest 20 per cent, a modest 20 per cent, a middle 20 per cent, an affluent 20 per cent and the richest 20 per cent.

In Kenya, Mexico, Zanzibar, New Zealand, the UK, the US and Japan we then asked six questions to gauge how much variation there is in how much we understand of each other. When we pose these questions we hold up our right hands and point to each of our fingers (and thumb for the rich) to ask for the answer for each group.

1 At what age do you think most people now leave full time education?

2 How many vacations do you think people take a year? (A vacation means a holiday staying away from home for at least one night, not in family or friends' homes.)

3 What do you think the typical household income is per year? (Income before tax and including benefits.)

4 What is the usual number of cars and vans that most households have or have access to?

5 What age, on average, do you think people live to in each group?

6 Which group are you in?

We found that rich and poor usually know little of each other's lives. The affluent know more about their rich neighbours than they do about the poor. Those on modest incomes know more about the poor than they do about the affluent. A majority placed themselves smack in the middle. Generally people perceive themselves to be average. The reality is that most of us tend to know people who are a bit richer and a bit poorer. Most of us don't know that many people who are very different from us. Thus, from each of our own differing vantage points in society, it often seems to us that we are average.

It is surprising to find how much we don't know about our own countries when we try to answer the six questions above.

In some countries affluent people do not have to study for as long as poorer people to gain employment, so they don't. In others, like Japan, you're more likely to own a car (the subject of our fourth question) if you live in the country rather than the city. So car ownership has little to do with economics.

The greatest gulfs are found when we look at what the 'correct' answers should be to the fifth question on life expectancy. People were widely off the mark when asked about the average lifespan of each group.

Try answering the six questions yourself. Try asking others what they think. Try finding out what the answers really are where you live. And please let us know what you discover.