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Perception Gaps: Approaches and Pitfalls

Abstract

A perception gap is the measured distance between what a public believes about a quantity and what the best available indicator says about it. This working paper reviews the principal approaches to measuring such gaps and the design choices on which the honesty of the measurement depends.

The paper gives particular attention to pitfalls: question wordings that invite estimation errors unrelated to belief, indicator choices that flatter or inflate the gap, aggregation that hides who actually holds the misperception, and comparisons across countries that ignore differences in the underlying indicators.

It closes with the checklist the institute will apply to its own gap measurements, so that a reader of any future IRISP gap finding can verify that each pitfall has been addressed.

1 · What a perception gap is

A perception gap is a comparison with three parts: a public estimate, obtained by asking a defined population about a quantity; a reference indicator, chosen and justified before the estimate is seen; and a distance between them, reported with the uncertainty of both. Remove any part and the result is not a gap measurement — it is an anecdote with numbers.

2 · Design choices that decide honesty

Four choices decide whether a published gap means what it appears to mean. The wording of the estimation question, which must ask for the quantity the indicator measures, in units respondents can actually use. The choice of indicator, which must be the best available measure of that quantity, not the one that makes the gap striking. The level of aggregation, since a national average can manufacture a gap held by no actual group, or hide one held intensely by some. And the treatment of "don't know", which is an answer, not a nuisance.

3 · Common pitfalls

The recurring failures are predictable. Questions that demand precise percentages measure numeracy as much as belief. Indicators silently swapped between countries make international league tables of ignorance that mostly rank statistical systems. Averages of skewed estimate distributions overstate the typical error. And gaps reported without the indicator's own uncertainty treat the reference as revealed truth, which no indicator is.

4 · The IRISP checklist

Every gap measurement the institute publishes will state, in its methods note: (1) the estimation question verbatim, in every language fielded; (2) the reference indicator, its source and its uncertainty; (3) the justification for that indicator recorded before fieldwork; (4) the distribution of estimates, not only their centre; (5) the treatment of non-response; and (6) every deviation from this checklist, with its reason. A reader who cannot find all six items is entitled to discount the finding.

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