
ATTITUDES TOWARDS INEQUALITY IN THE UK

A review of opinion surveys

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As part of Oxfam's commitment to tackling inequality in order to end extreme poverty, we need to understand how different people feel about inequality. This briefing examines three UK population surveys and notes that there is widespread agreement with statements that promote greater equality. Those on lower incomes tend to be more egalitarian; the impact of other demographic variables is less clear. In one survey, younger people were the more egalitarian group, but in other surveys, older people were more egalitarian. To campaign effectively and represent the interests of different groups, we need a clearer understanding of how and why attitudes differ. This research note identifies areas where further investigation is needed.

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FOREWORD

Extreme wealth inequality and, in many countries, income inequality, are rising – damaging our societies, economies and political systems. There is a growing body of evidence that economic inequality exacerbates and is exacerbated by other inequalities, such as gender. Research shows us that we cannot achieve the goal of ending extreme poverty by 2030 unless we tackle inequality within and between countries. That makes it central to Oxfam’s mission.

The causes of extreme and rising inequality are many and complex, but we know that these trends can be reversed. To do so is going to require the mobilization of huge numbers of people around the world, standing up together to demand a different kind of economy – one that that leaves no one behind, that treats women and men, girls and boys equally, that shares value more fairly and pays everyone a fair reward for the work they do, and one that increases well-being for all while at the same time protecting the planet and its resources. Our job as campaigners is to mobilize people so that they understand why extreme inequality is increasing, what its consequences are, and what we can all do to reduce inequalities for a better world.

To do this, we need to understand what people think and feel about the issue. Do people know, for instance, how high inequality levels are in their country, or how those levels are changing over time? Do people want to change this situation and, if so, do they believe they could play a role in changing things? Do the answers to these questions vary significantly depending on which demographic group you’re talking to?

This is why we undertake research – to find out what members of the public think about the issues we work on. We’d like to do even more of this, although we’re sometimes limited by resource constraints, and we sometimes just don’t make enough time for it. That’s why we also look at research that others are doing, asking similar questions about pressing global issues.

This briefing summarizes some of the things we’ve learned from Oxfam’s own research, and from research conducted by others. Sometimes the results from these different research projects are similar, and other times the outcomes seem more inconsistent – highlighting areas that we need to investigate further.

Slowly but surely, as we undertake more research – and more ambitious research – we build up a clearer sense of what people know and think about inequality, and we understand better what we need to do as campaigners to bring people with us as we seek to create a fairer, better world.

Nick Bryer, Global Inequality Moment Lead, Oxfam GB

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Evidence from surveys and opinion polls shows a widespread desire for less unequal distribution of income and wealth in the UK – and beyond.¹ However, there are differences between data sources, and no consensus over what variables are really at the core of wanting more redistribution. This briefing examines three such sources (UK population surveys) to compare and contrast attitudes about inequality. What becomes clear is that Oxfam needs to understand better where attitudes converge and diverge to campaign effectively.

According to the three surveys, there is widespread agreement with statements that promote greater equality. One survey also found that people preferred greater equality to greater wealth. People on lower incomes were more concerned about inequality than people on higher incomes. An Oxfam survey found that there was more concern about inequalities within the UK than inequalities around the world. People on lower incomes tended to be more concerned about inequality in their own country than those on higher incomes, which could partly be explained by self-interest. However, those on lower incomes were also more concerned than higher income groups about inequalities around the world.

The impact of age on attitudes is equivocal and may be confounded by income differences among age groups. In one survey, younger people were the more egalitarian group, but in the other two surveys, older people were more egalitarian. Gender makes little or no difference to attitudes towards inequality. Multivariate analyses indicate that income (or wealth) has a greater impact than other demographic variables on attitudes towards inequality.

1 INTRODUCTION

This briefing examines data on attitudes towards wealth and income inequality from three UK surveys:

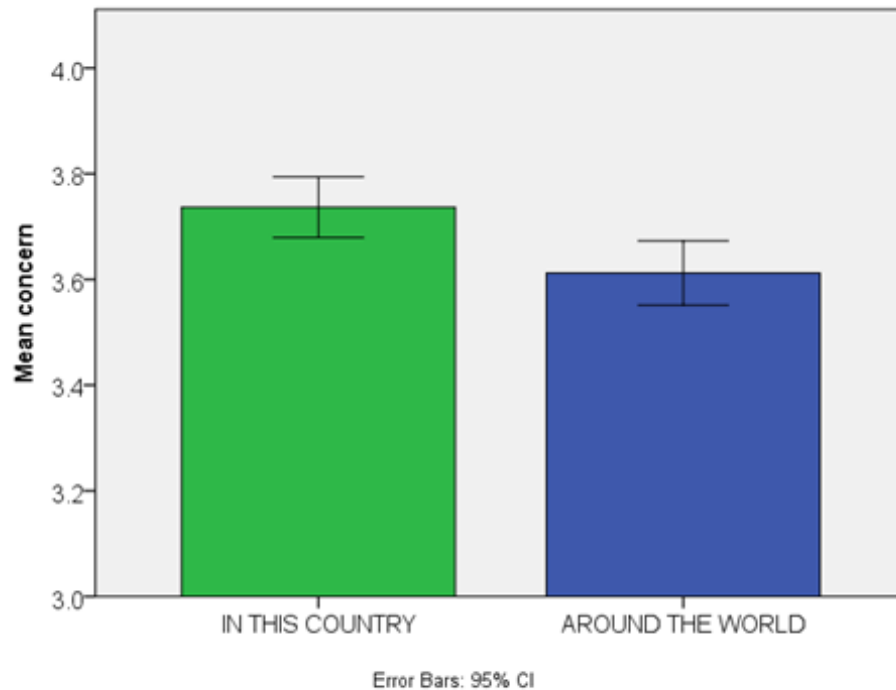
1. A telephone survey of 1,253 UK responders conducted by Oxfam in 2015, which provides the most recent data;
2. The International Social Survey Programme (ISSP), a global rolling survey, for which the most recent UK data are from 2009, when 958 people were interviewed. The ISSP data are publicly available so could be analysed directly;
3. A YouGov survey of attitudes towards inequalities conducted in 2014 with 1,804 interviewees; although the raw data are not available, the published results are included and compared with the findings from the other two surveys.

The briefing describes the findings of all three surveys, highlighting consistencies and differences.

2 GENERAL ATTITUDES TOWARDS INEQUALITY

The Oxfam survey asked people to rate their concern on a 5-point scale (ranging from 'not at all concerned' to 'Extremely concerned') about two types of income and wealth gaps: 'in this country' and 'around the world'. For both types of gap, most responses were between the mid-point of the scale and the 'extremely concerned' end. On average, concern about the gap between rich and poor *in this country* was higher than concern about gaps *around the world* (see Figure 1). (Paired samples $t(1252)=5.16$, $p<.001$.)

Figure 1: Oxfam survey: concern about income/wealth gaps *in this country* and *around the world*, UK

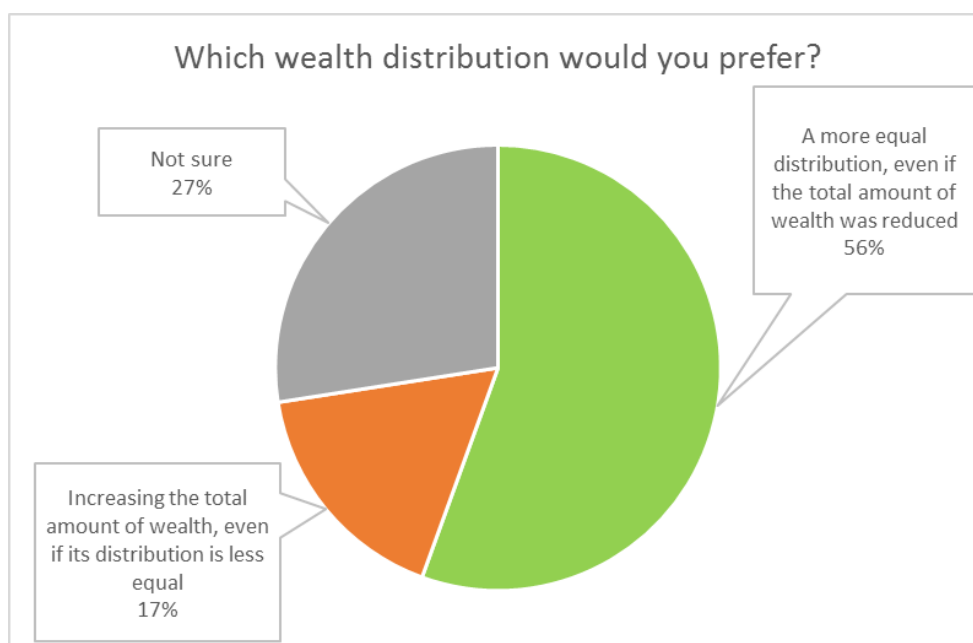


N=1253

Consistent with the Oxfam findings, most ISSP responders tended to agree with these egalitarian statements: ‘Differences in income in [my country] are too large’ and ‘It is the responsibility of the government to reduce the differences in income between people with high incomes and those with low incomes’.

YouGov responders also gave egalitarian responses (see Figure 2). More than three-quarters (77%)² said they would prefer equality over inequality, even if the unequal distribution meant greater overall wealth – i.e. ‘equality trumps wealth’. Similarly, more than half of YouGov responders³ said they would support increasing the current top rate of income tax from 45% to 60% for those earning over £120,000 a year.

Figure 2: YouGov: preference for equality or wealth, UK



N=1804

In summary, all three surveys provide evidence that people in the UK tend prefer a more equal distribution than they currently believe to be the case in the UK and around the world.

3 THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN RESPONDER INCOME AND ATTITUDES

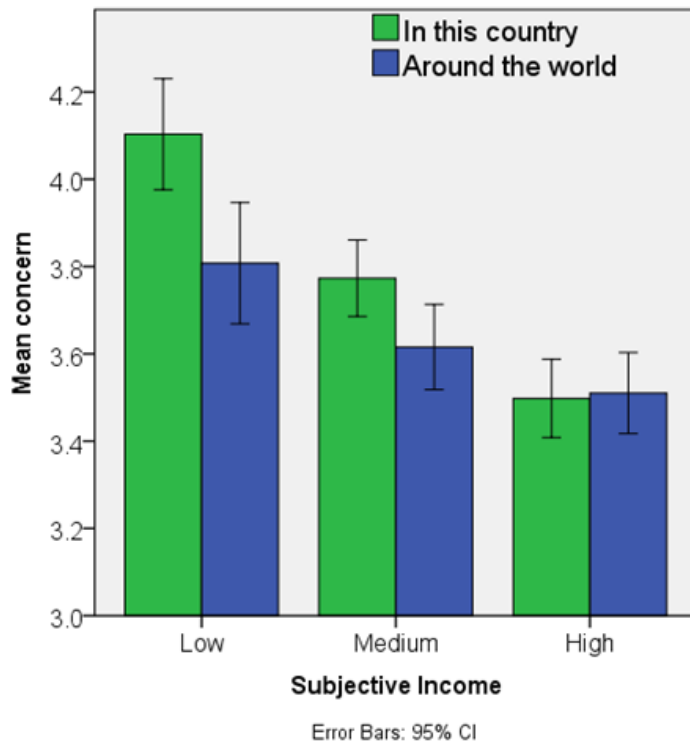
3.1 Responder income

For both the Oxfam survey and ISSP, subjective income (how well-off people felt) and reported income were positively correlated. Subjective income takes account of a wider range of factors that would have an impact on the responder's disposable income (such as household size, home ownership, cost of living and number of dependants) than reported income. Therefore, subjective income is used to examine the relationship between income and attitudes. For ease of interpretation and comparison between the surveys, we re-categorized subjective income responses into three approximately equal groups: low, medium and high. For the Oxfam survey, those who said they were 'really struggling' or 'struggling' on their present income were categorized as low-income, 'neither comfortable nor struggling' was medium, and those who said they were either 'living comfortably' or 'living really comfortably' were the high-income group. For the ISSP, the income categories were determined by responses to the question '*In our society there are groups which tend to be towards the top and groups which tend to be towards the bottom. Below is a scale that runs from top to bottom. Where would you put yourself now on this scale [where 1=lowest and 10=highest]?*'. Those who responded 1–4 were low-income, 5 was medium, and 6–10 was high. Responses tended to cluster around the mid-point, so the middle-income group spanned fewer response options.

3.2 Differences in attitudes among income groups

Figure 3 shows Oxfam responders' concern about the gap between rich and poor *around the world* (the blue bars) and *in this country* (green bars) for each income group. First, considering differences in attitudes among the three income groups, concern about inequality *in this country* decreases significantly as income increases. (One-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) for differences among responder groups: $F(2, 1237)=32.5, p<.001$.) This finding could be interpreted as self-interest, since those on lower incomes would directly benefit from reduced inequality *in this country*. However, those on lower incomes are also more concerned than those on higher incomes about inequalities *around the world*, suggesting that these attitudes are not necessarily driven by self-interest. (One-way ANOVA for differences among responder income groups in attitudes towards inequalities *around the world*: $F(2, 1237)=6.7, p=.001$.)

Figure 3: Oxfam survey: concern about gaps between rich and poor (*in this country* and *around the world*) by subjective income, UK



N=1240

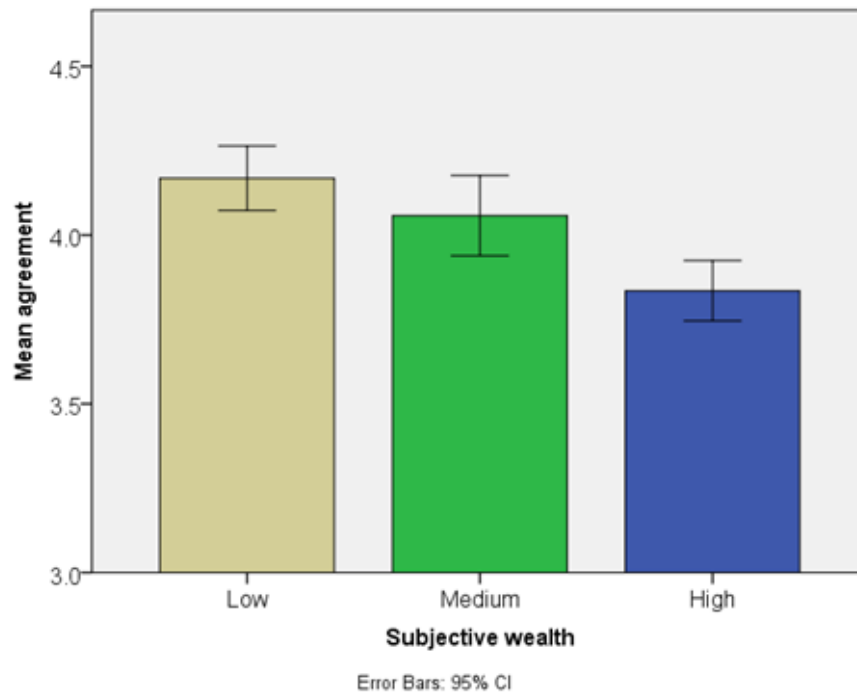
Box 1 examines differences within responders in their relative concern about the two types of inequality.

Box 1: Comparative levels of concern about inequality in home country vs globally for each income group

Figure 3 also shows that for those on *low* and *medium* incomes (*low* paired samples $t(462)=4.1, p=.001$; *medium* paired samples $t(280)=5.3, p<.001$), there is significantly greater concern about income gaps *in this country* than about gaps *around the world*. However, for those on *high* incomes, there is an equal level of concern about gaps in both contexts, albeit a relatively lower level overall.

The effect of income on attitudes was similar for ISSP responders. Figure 4: shows that high-wealth responders have a small, yet statistically significant less egalitarian attitude than middle- and low-wealth responders. (One-way ANOVA: $F(2, 911)=12.9, p<.001$.)

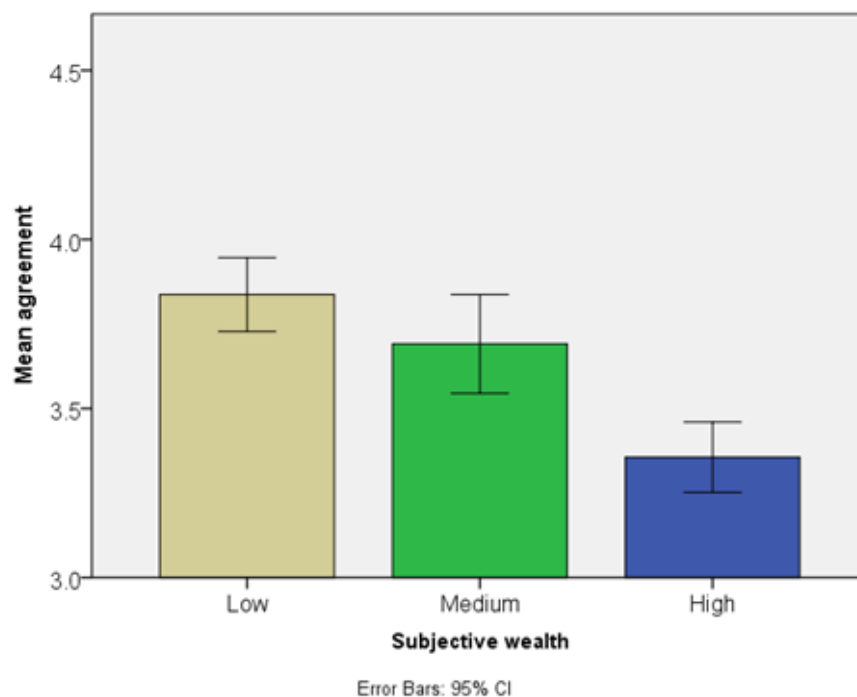
Figure 4: ISSP: agreement that ‘income differences are too large’ by responder’s subjective wealth, UK



N=914

Similarly, Figure 5:5 shows that ISSP responders with low wealth were more likely to agree that ‘It is the government’s responsibility to reduce income inequalities’ than high-wealth responders, and this difference, although fairly small, is statistically significant: one-way ANOVA: $F(2, 912)=19.9, p<.001$.

Figure 5: ISSP: agreement that ‘government should reduce income differences’ by responder’s subjective wealth, UK



N=915

In summary, both the Oxfam survey and the ISSP provide evidence that people on lower incomes are more concerned about inequality than people on higher incomes.

4 THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN RESPONDER AGE AND ATTITUDES

For the Oxfam survey and ISSP, attitudes were compared for three responder age groups: 'young', 'middle' and 'older'.

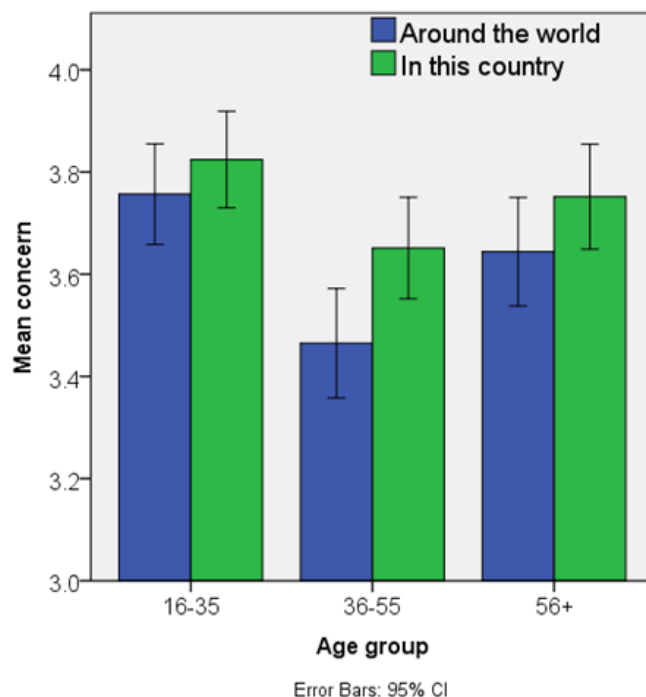
4.1 Oxfam survey: age differences

Box 2: A note about the relationship between responders' age and income

The relationship between age and income has a bearing on the relationship between age and attitudes. For the Oxfam survey, age and income are related in a complex way. As noted in Section 3.1, subjective and actual income/wealth are positively correlated. However, the 'middle' age group has the lowest subjective wealth but the highest reported income. This makes sense because it is reasonable to suppose that the 'middle' age group has higher wages but greater financial responsibilities. However, it means that differences in attitudes among the age groups of Oxfam survey responders must be interpreted with caution.

Figure 6: shows Oxfam responders' concern about the gap between rich and poor *around the world* and *in this country* by age group. The least concerned group for both questions is the 'middle' age group and, for gaps *around the world*, the difference is significant. (One-way ANOVA: $F(2, 1250)=7.6, p=.001$.) This is surprising, considering the 'middle' age group's lower subjective income, since lower incomes are associated with greater concern about income gaps. In this case, it is possible that reported income is having a greater impact on attitudes than subjective income, so the 'middle' age group's higher reported income could be the reason for their lower concern. It is also possible that age has a direct impact on attitudes, regardless of income.

Figure 6: Oxfam survey: concern about gaps between rich and poor by age group, UK



N=1253

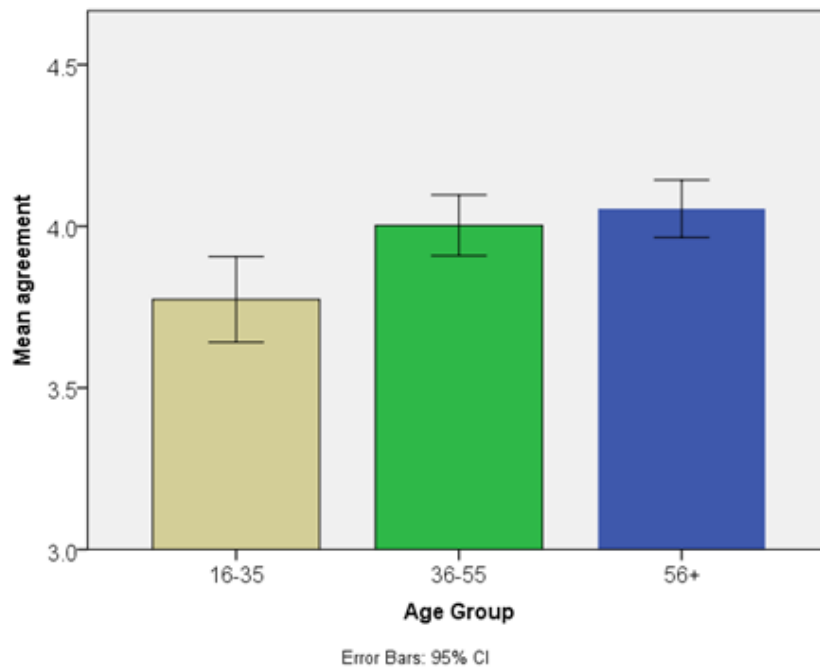
4.2 ISSP: age differences

Box 3: A note about the relationship between ISSP responders' age and income

Unlike the Oxfam survey, for ISSP responders, subjective wealth is approximately equal for all age groups. Therefore, it may be inferred that differences among age groups in attitudes are about age *per se*, rather than income differences among the groups.

Figure 7: shows agreement with the statement 'income differences are too large' by age group. The 'young' age group is significantly less likely to agree with this egalitarian statement than the other two age groups. (One-way ANOVA: $F(2,929)=6.8$, $p=.001$.)

Figure 7: ISSP: agreement that 'income differences are too large' by age group, UK

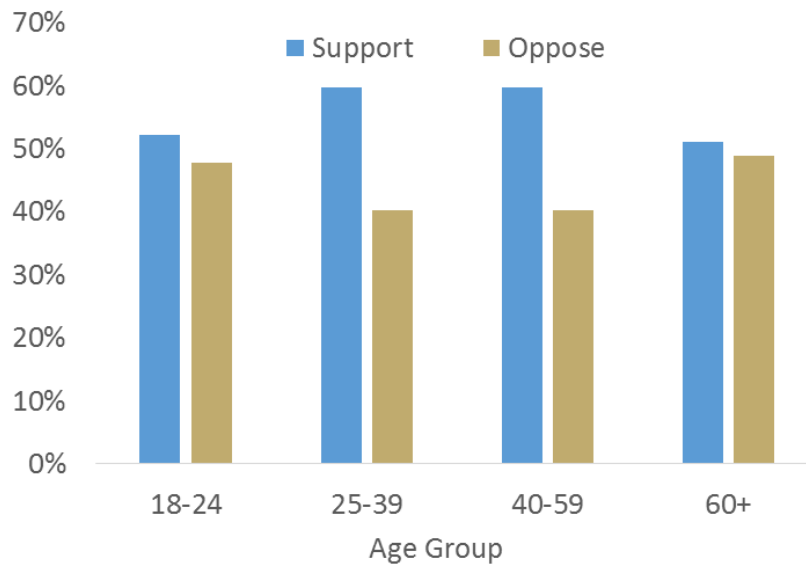


N=931

4.3 YouGov: age differences

Figure 8 shows responses to the YouGov survey question 'Would you support or oppose increasing the current top rate of income tax from 45% to 60% for income over £120,000 a year?' by responder age group.² All age groups showed more support than opposition for this statement, but the two middle age groups were most in favour of a tax increase for higher earners (i.e. those aged between 25 and 59 years). The difference in attitude among age groups is statistically significant, $\chi^2(3; N=1804)=17.01$, $p<.001$.)

Figure 8: YouGov: support for increase in tax rate for higher earners by age group, UK



N=1804

5 THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN RESPONDER GENDER AND ATTITUDES

For the Oxfam survey, there were no significant differences between men and women in the extent to which they are concerned about either type of income/wealth gap (in their own country or around the world). Similarly, for the ISSP, there were no significant differences between men and women in terms of their agreement with the statement that ‘income differences are too large’ or that ‘the government should reduce inequalities’. In the YouGov survey, slightly more men than women were in favour of increasing the top rate of tax, but this difference was eliminated when the ‘Don’t know’ responders were removed, such that 55% of men and 57% of women were in favour.

6 TYPE OF COMMUNITY

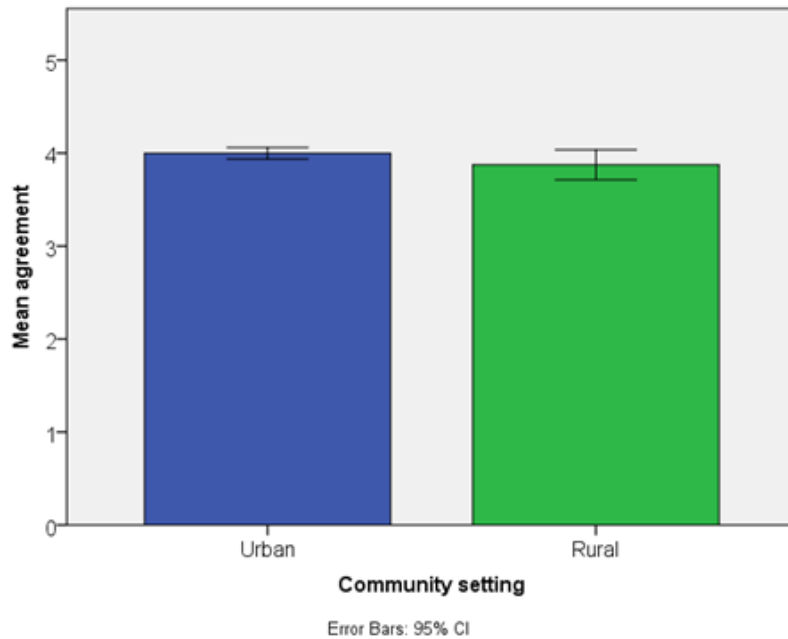
ISSP participants were asked to state which type of community they lived in, with their responses categorized into ‘urban’ or ‘rural’.

Box 4: A note about the relationship between ISSP responders’ type of community and income

For ISSP responders, subjective wealth is significantly higher for rural-dwellers than for urban-dwellers. Therefore, differences in attitude by type of community should be interpreted with caution, since they could reflect income differences rather than differences by type of community *per se*.

Figure 9 shows that those living in urban settings were significantly more likely to agree that ‘government should reduce income differences’: (independent samples $t(922)=3.68$, $p<.001$.) It is possible that this difference is due to urban-dwellers’ lower subjective wealth.

Figure 9 ISSP: agreement that ‘government should reduce income differences’ by type of community, UK



N=924

7 THE RELATIVE IMPACT OF DEMOGRAPHIC VARIABLES ON CONCERN ABOUT INEQUALITY

For the Oxfam survey, the data do not meet the assumptions necessary to conduct a linear regression analysis. However, comparison of the *F* statistics indicates that income has a greater impact on equality attitudes than age.

For the ISSP data, multiple linear regression analyses tested the relative impact on attitudes of four demographic variables: age, sex, type of community, and subjective wealth. With ‘income differences are too large’ as the outcome variable, subjective wealth has the greatest impact (lower wealth is associated with more egalitarian views), followed by age (older people are more egalitarian), while the other two variables do not have a significant impact when age and income are already included in the model. With ‘the government should reduce income differences’ as the outcome variable, subjective wealth has the greatest impact (again, lower wealth is associated with greater egalitarianism), followed by type of community (rural-dwellers are more egalitarian than urban-dwellers), while age and sex do not have a significant impact.

Recommendations for campaigners

- Become familiar with these types of data sources and use quantitative evidence in an informed way, as well as to track changes in attitudes over time.
- Invest resources and time in understanding how respondent characteristics interact with attitudes, and how survey features may contribute to producing different results.
- Customize campaign messages more directly to the socioeconomic variables that suggest likely support for Oxfam’s messages.
- Be open to researching people’s assumptions on the estimates of the size of the gap between rich and poor people, whether their perceptions are accurate, and what role this understanding plays in supporting redistribution.

References

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YouGov (2014). Omnibus survey. Results of inequality questions available at http://cdn.yougov.com/cumulus_uploads/document/7khrab9pwx/YG-Archive-140429-Income-Tax.pdf

Notes

- 1 See for example, S. Kiatpongsan and M.I. Norton. (2014). How Much (More) Should CEOs Make? A Universal Desire for More Equal Pay. *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 2014 9: 587. DOI: 10.1177/1745691614549773 http://www.hbs.edu/faculty/Publication%20Files/kiatpongsan%20norton%202014_f02b004a-c2de-4358-9811-ea273d372af7.pdf
- 2 'Not sure' responders are removed.
- 3 'Don't know' responders are removed.

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