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IQ tests offer limited value but global rankings still fascinate



The global ranking of countries based on IQ tests has been debunked as pseudoscience at best and as a vehicle for racist ideology at worst but many people's fascination with them has yet to wane.

One of the latest **surveys** comes from CEOWorld, a magazine that sternly says it is "written strictly" for CEOs, high net worth individuals, and the like. Japan and five other far eastern Asian countries top its list, the UK comes in 20th place, and there are no African countries in between.

IQ tests were "designed for learning disabilities, and given that it is not too needed there... it ends up selecting for exam-takers, paper shufflers, obedient IYIs (intellectuals yet idiots), ill adapted for 'real life'," wrote Nassim Nicholas Taleb, mathematical statistician and author, on the Medium online platform.

In CEOWorld's list, the highest African ranking country is Mauritius in 80th place, followed by Libya at 115th.

The magazine does include this caveat, saying "IQ is just one measure of cognitive ability and may not capture all aspects of human intelligence. A country's average IQ does not conclusively determine its citizens' potential or capabilities."

Tests of memory and mathematical and linguistic abilities

IQ tests aim to measure cognitive ability through standardised tests of memory and mathematical and linguistic abilities. Those countries that score highest not only have good educational systems, as the magazine says, but access to nutrition, health and other social services that ensure a population's development.

Intelligence tests have undergone mathematical refinements since the first **Binet-Simon test** was developed in 1905 by the Frenchmen Alfred Binet and Théodore Simon.

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Around the middle of the last century, such tests were pounced on by eugenicists aiming to prove that ethnicity and other characteristics could explain low intelligence, mental illnesses and other deficiencies.

Japan also tops the IQ rankings by the World Population Review but perhaps more interestingly Belarus is number 7. The review is one of several outlets that were criticised for publishing the work of psychologist Richard Lynn, who died in 2023 and was a professor at the University of Ulster as well as president of the Pioneer Fund, created in 1937 by Nazi sympathisers in the US to support "race betterment" and "race realism".

Scientists have called for Lynn's work to be retracted by respected journals because his papers are cited and used by those who believe Western civilisation is under threat by "inferior races".

IQ has been rising worldwide

Intelligence measurements have shown that IQ has been rising worldwide since the middle of the 20th century, mostly in the Brics - Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa. It is no accident that these countries have made rapid economic advancements with some accompanying socio-economic benefits for their populations.

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Rises in IQ measured over the last century have stalled, likely due to the limits of the human brain, **wrote** Franck Ramus, senior scientist at the Cognitive Sciences and

Psycholinguistics Laboratory at the Ecole Normale Supérieure in Paris.

He rejected the work of academics suggesting there has been a recent decline in intelligence as “riddled with methodological biases and dubious extrapolations.”

A “moral panic” was being misattributed to causes as varied as exposure to screens, endocrine disruptors and the deterioration of education, he said.

“Although these factors can have a negative impact on some people, both children and adults, none of them seems to cause a decline in IQ on a more global scale,” he wrote in Polytechnique Insights.

The perils of IQ tests

There are some environmental factors that appear more clearly to be affecting children’s IQ. A US government **report** published in August said fluoride in drinking water at twice the recommended limit is linked with lower IQ in children.

The report summarises a review of studies conducted in Canada, China, India, Iran, Pakistan, and Mexico. It did not try to quantify how many IQ points might be lost but some of the studies reviewed suggested IQ was 2 to 5 points lower in children who had higher exposure.

Lead pollution is definitely linked to harm. Previous exposure to leaded gasoline lowered the IQ of about half the population of the US, according to estimates published in the journal Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences in 2022.

Focused on people born before 1996, which was the year before the US banned leaded petrol, it found lead exposure cost an average of 2.6 points per person.



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IQ measurements have featured in the US presidential campaign with Donald Trump, who is of a generation exposed to lead, claiming more than once to have “aced” a cognitive test. He also described his rival Kamala Harris as “low IQ”.

Vladimir Putin’s Russia is also using claims around intelligence in its propaganda war over Ukraine. Russian propagandists have spread the claim on social media that Ukrainians aged 12-18 have the lowest intelligence among EU member states and candidates.

Citing a fake study supposedly measuring the IQ scores of teenagers, Ukraine’s poor ranking was attributed to the rejection of its Soviet heritage in the education system.

The perils of IQ tests look set to stay around for a while.