



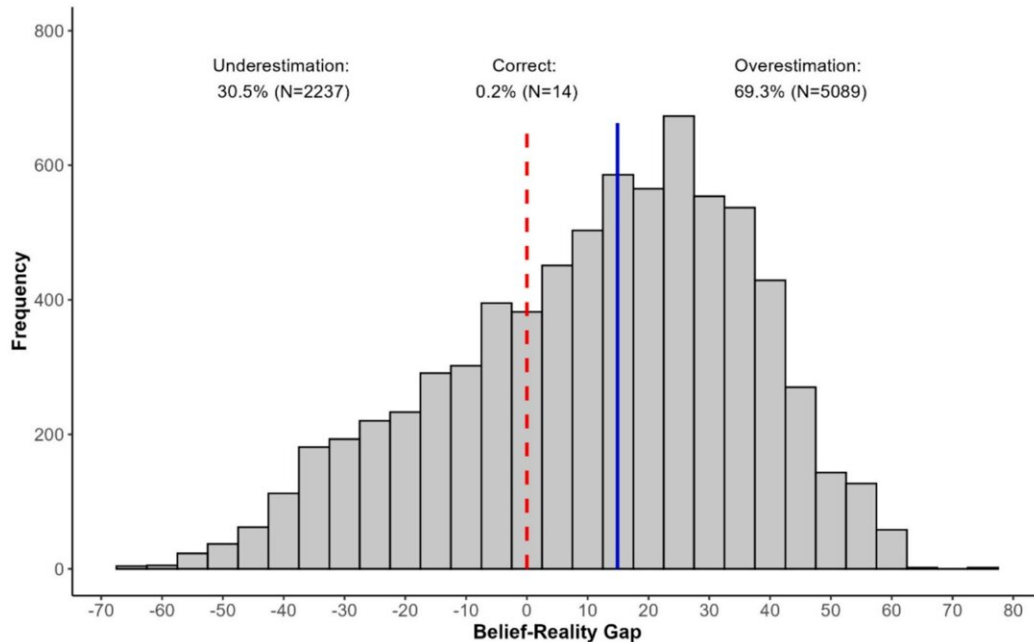
personal experiences of navigating the world, as well as by how strongly people believe others are likely to act honestly or dishonestly in everyday life.

A [recent study](#) by Norwegian scientists published in the *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* shows that we often overestimate others' dishonesty and that people are more honest than we think.

How did they arrive at this conclusion? The team set up four different studies:

- Study 1 combined data from 11 experiments and more than 8,000 participants to measure the extent to which people overestimate others' dishonesty.
- Study 2 tested whether correcting that belief made people more trusting.
- Study 3 focused on managers and examined whether their assumptions about dishonesty affected the rules they created.
- Study 4 asked whether giving managers accurate information changed how they felt about strict monitoring and control policies.

Researchers found that participants overestimated how much others cheat by nearly 14 percentage points. Nearly two-thirds of them assumed people were more dishonest than they actually were, and when told the facts, many people changed their behavior to be more trusting.



Distribution of the Belief-Behavior Gap (participant-level averages). Each point represents one participant. Credit: *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* (2026). DOI: 10.1016/j.jesp.2026.104904

## Which side does the honesty meter tip?

Humans make decisions based on what they believe to be true, not on actual facts. While those decisions may feel personal, their impact ripples far beyond the individual. When beliefs about human nature are wrong, the cost to society can be enormous. Being too trusting leaves people vulnerable, but being too cynical or anxious comes with its own costs.

Money and energy get poured into infrastructure, which the researchers call freedom-restrictive countermeasures, such as extra security cameras, locking up cheap everyday items in stores, or surveilling employees as though they can't be trusted to do their jobs.

The researchers noticed that, as a society that includes both people and businesses, we are moving toward a state of collective distrust. So they wanted to study whether there was an increase in dishonesty or whether people were just biased.

The large-scale study involving more than 8,000 people had two parts. Participants had the opportunity to anonymously lie for personal gain and were also asked to estimate the percentage of others who would lie or falsely report a correct guess in the same situation.

The results revealed a deep-seated [pessimistic bias](#) about human nature. Most people believed their peers were significantly less honest than they actually were.

In Study 2, participants were informed that 70% of people in Study 1 had behaved honestly. The researchers then tested whether giving people the facts about honesty would change their outlook. They found that cynicism is not a permanent state of mind; participants became more trusting after learning that most others were honest.

In Study 3, the team's survey found that managers are just as cynical as everyone else, and that this bias comes at a price. Managers who believed people were dishonest were much more likely to support freedom-restrictive rules, such as surveillance, monitoring and strict background checks.

Their moral pessimism didn't just shape how they viewed others, it also fueled their desire to control others. Study 4 followed the same pattern, informing managers of the true statistics of honesty. The information reduced their desire to control and surveil their employees.

The findings provide a clear view into how pessimistic beliefs about dishonesty shape people's expectations of others' honesty and policy

preferences in professional spaces. They also point to a hopeful conclusion: Correcting these misconceptions may help foster a more trusting and cooperative society.

**More information:** Jareef Martuza et al, Beliefs versus reality: People overestimate the actual dishonesty of others, *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* (2026). [DOI: 10.1016/j.jesp.2026.104904](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2026.104904)

© 2026 Science X Network

Citation: People are not as dishonest as we expect them to be, finds new study (2026, June 10) retrieved 13 June 2026 from <https://sciencex.com/news/2026-06-people-dishonest.html>

<p>This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.</p>
--