

When Science Finds a Way

Trust in Science Miniseries, Episode 1 Does science have a trust problem?

Show notes

Episode description:

How much do people around the world trust in science? How has that trust changed since 2018?

In the first episode of our special mini-series on trust in science, Alisha Wainwright is joined by social researcher Dr Cary Funk and Dr Jerome Kim, Director General of the International Vaccine Institute, to explore new findings from the Wellcome Global Monitor 2026, the world's largest study on how people think and feel about science.

Together, they go beyond the headline figures to look at how levels of trust in science have changed over time, where it varies between regions, and why earning trust is essential if we want science to improve health for everyone.

Listen until the end for a behind-the-scenes look at what it took to collect and analyse responses from over 140,000 people across 140 countries.

Mentioned in this episode & further resources:

- The Wellcome Global Monitor – To access the key findings from the report, the full publication, an interactive data dashboard, and access to the data set, go to: wellcome.org/podcast/globalmonitor
- Earning public trust in science – To learn more about the work that Wellcome is doing on trust, go to: <https://wellcome.org/engagement-and-advocacy/engaging-people/trust-in-science>
- Ipsos - <https://www.ipsos.com/en-uk>
- Gallup World Poll - <https://www.gallup.com/home.aspx>

Transcript

Music starts 00:00

[00:00:00] **Alisha Wainwright:** How much do you trust science and scientists? And what about the people around you? Your friends, family, and community? How much do they trust science? And what can scientists and institutions do to make sure that they are worthy of trust? These questions matter because science has a potential to improve health and save lives.

I'm Alisha Wainwright, and this is When Science Finds A Way, the podcast about the science changing the world. In this episode, the first in a special mini-series on trust in science, we'll explore findings from the Wellcome Global Monitor 2026, one of the world's largest studies of public attitudes towards science, with responses from more than 140,000 people across 140 countries.

It found that gains in trust seen during the COVID-19 pandemic have not been sustained, but the picture is far from uniform. Levels of trust vary considerably between countries, communities, and demographic groups. So what shapes trust in science? Why does it differ from place to place? And what might help strengthen it? Joining me to explore these questions are two global health experts who have been working closely with the study and helping to make sense of what its findings might mean in practise.

[00:01:27] **Alisha Wainwright:** First up, Dr. Cary Funk, a leading researcher on public attitudes towards science, trust in scientific institutions, and science communication. Hi, Cary.

[00:01:38] **Cary Funk:** Thank you so much. I'm so happy to be here.

[00:01:41] **Alisha Wainwright:** Also joining me is Dr. Jerome Kim, Director General of the International Vaccine Institute based in Seoul, Korea, and an international expert on vaccine development.

[00:01:52] **Jerome Kim:** Hi, great to be here. Thank you.

[00:01:53] **Alisha Wainwright:** Cary, so why does it matter if people trust in science or not?

[00:01:57] **Cary Funk:** I think when we're asking about why do we care about trust in science, we often point to advances in science and technology as bringing, you know, bringing new innovations to how we live and how we work and how we play. But really, it's public trust that helps determine how much we're embracing those innovations and the degree to which we want to change as a society. So the science community looks at public trust as really helping to realise the benefits of scientific advances for society.

[00:02:37] **Jerome Kim:** It's easy to say, you know, I don't trust science or scientists. But in fact, we have implicit faith in technology. We get on an aeroplane expecting to, you know, take off in Seoul and arrive in New York in one piece. I mean, we have implicit faith in technology. We just don't realise that there's science that underpins all that technology.

So it's easy for someone to say, I don't believe in science. But in fact, all the other things we take for granted and people just don't realise the connection.

[00:03:06] **Alisha Wainwright:** That's a really good point. And Cary, why is it important that we understand trends in trust?

[00:03:13] **Cary Funk:** Yeah, I love that. I was thinking from a similar angle as Jerome. So, you know, I think that we know that trust plays an important role in really

determining the pace and scope of change in society from all those science and tech innovations and advances.

So we need a way to track and evaluate how people see science. And so that's what the Wellcome Global Monitor does. It's giving us a rare opportunity to understand global trust at the kind of widest, highest vantage point.

[00:03:47] **Alisha Wainwright:** So before we delve into the results of the Wellcome Global Monitor 2026, John-Arne Røttingen, CEO of Wellcome, tells us why Wellcome cares about trust in science and what the Wellcome Global Monitor wanted to achieve.

[00:04:01] **John-Arne Røttingen:** Trust in science is really mission critical to Wellcome Trust. Wellcome exists really to support science to improve the major health challenges facing everyone.

And trust in science is therefore a prerequisite because we don't believe people will really take on the science based solutions, the science based advice, the evidence without really trusting the underlying messages and the messengers. Wellcome Global Monitor is now in its third iteration. And for us, it is really key to understand how people think and feel around science and research internationally.

We saw a big change in attitudes and approach to science during the pandemic. We saw that scientific solutions were really key to help the world going through the pandemic and address it in the right way. At the same time, there was a lot of sentiments that were negative and concerned about science and scientific based public health advice.

And we need to understand this going forward. So actually following this over time is really crucial for Wellcome. We at Wellcome will make these data sets fully openly available.

We are strong believers in open science. We believe that the more we can analyse the same data, the more we will learn and really evolve our understanding. They are a snapshot in time now, but we will continue following this over years to come and therefore have a much better and stronger understanding of trust in science.

[00:05:34] **Alisha Wainwright:** Wow, the Wellcome Global Monitor really is just a huge piece of work. Later in the episode, we'll go behind the scenes to hear how the research is carried out. First, though, Cary, looking at the report itself, what stood out to you as a major headline?

[00:05:49] **Cary Funk:** I think, you know, just starting from that big picture, the Wellcome Global Monitor found in 2020 that levels of trust across most countries and regions had gone up.

Turns out that was kind of during the early phases of the coronavirus pandemic. And so since that time, this new Wellcome Global Monitor showing that trust has returned to levels on par with 2018 and in about five regions has actually dipped a bit below. So, you know, one thing the report is talking about a pressure on trust in science.

And I think that really reflects a kind of measured sense in the data that, you know, when you have a survey of 140 countries and territories, you know, you're likely to see some complexities and some nuances in the data. One area of concern is that the share globally of the people who have a strong level of trust in science has gone down. So, you know, in 2018, it was about 32 percent.

It's down about five percentage points to 27 percent in the 2025 survey. Big picture takeaway is that there's some areas of concern for the scientific community. One is that there's a downtick in the share of people globally who have a lot of trust in science, that kind of strong trust in science.

And even a cautious read of the data suggests that the share of people who have that kind of distrust, they're a smaller share overall, but it's an important share. And that that seems to have ticked up just a little bit. So those are kind of reasons for concern.

If you want to kind of think about what the data show, it's essentially telling us that there's been a global softening in trust in science.

[00:07:37] **Alisha Wainwright:** Gosh, I feel like when I hear that, I get a little sad. And I'm curious how you felt when you saw that there was a decline in some instances.

[00:07:44] **Cary Funk:** Well, I think it is a common reaction to have feelings about the data. And the thing is, I'm apparently the cold-hearted social scientist who's not going to have feelings. But I do think you need to have a kind of clear eye about the data so that you can do what you need to do to support trust in science. And that's the end goal. That's the most important part.

[00:08:08] **Alisha Wainwright:** That's fair and very level-headed of you. I wear my emotions on my sleeve, so I'll do it for you. And Jerome, I'm curious if you had any thoughts and feelings when you initially heard about this downward trend.

[00:08:24] **Jerome Kim:** It was really interesting to see a dislink between education and trust in science, because I've always assumed that the more educated you were, the more you would explicitly trust in science.

And I think that you start to see a kind of breakdown there. And it's interesting, and I think it actually is something that we should look into in greater depth. There are several doctors in the United States, including surgeon generals of different states, who do not believe in the efficacy of vaccines and vaccination.

So I think understanding why that is and where that's coming from, is it all politically driven, or is there some other basis for some of these beliefs? I mean, I really believe that we have to listen to people and not make judgments before we fully understand.

[00:09:14] **Alisha Wainwright:** And you're right, I mean, you're right to comment on the surprise that I felt thinking about what I would presume is that the more educated you are, the more likely you are to trust in science. But anecdotally, I have people in

my family who have a high education who don't necessarily have trust in science or the healthcare system.

So I can see real life examples of my assumption not being proven true. So there's definitely a lot to unpack there. And I think it's really eye opening.

And it's interesting to see that the gains and trust seen during the COVID-19 pandemic have not been sustained. That's a concerning finding. But like so much in science, the story is more nuanced.

And behind the headlines, there are some interesting details. So Jerome, are we seeing the same trends across all countries?

[00:10:12] **Jerome Kim:** Across regions, there appear to be differences. And, you know, for instance, the difference between East Asia, which seems to have more distrust than North America, which is interesting because when you look at East Asia, so that would be Japan, Korea, China, you see countries that are making progress in technology.

I think that it's a challenge to understand why we're seeing this. And so again, as an American looking at an East Asian context, I find that really fascinating. Even within Latin America, there's a tremendous amount of difference.

You have countries like Chile and Colombia, which are entering the OECD, so the high income country track. You have countries like Brazil, which are middle to upper middle income. And there are tremendous differences.

[00:11:06] **Cary Funk:** I think you're hitting on something that people talk about so much with surveys. I mean, one is that there's so much complexity on who we are, and that no pattern is exactly right for every single person in, you know, in the neighbourhood, let alone in the country, in the world. And there's so much differences, of course, across all these countries.

So what that means is the value from an effort like this is to kind of let some of those details slip away so that you can see the patterns. And that's, and I guess it can be hard to listen to because it's like, well, what about me? I'm unique, and I have all these separate patterns, and you do. But we learn something from kind of seeing what the big picture is, what people have in common across all these different cultural contexts.

So it's common to kind of have that tension as you're thinking about survey data. And then the second thing that you picked up, Jerome, is I think every good survey leads to new questions. So, you know, we have some first findings, and then that leads to lots more questions about what else could we understand about that.

So I think those are kind of common as we think about surveys like this.

[00:12:19] **Alisha Wainwright:** And Cary, what happens when we look below the country level? Are there clear differences between groups within countries?

[00:12:27] **Cary Funk:** The team at Wellcome did a deep analysis of this data. And so, you know, one of the kind of robust findings really was that people across

countries who are struggling financially, who describe their own financial situation as difficult or very difficult even, that group was the most likely to decline in trust.

So you're getting the biggest drop in trust among people who are kind of financially disadvantaged. And that kind of ties with another key pattern, which is that as people see other systems have kind of lower trust in governments and the health care system, that that also goes with low trust in science. So these are going hand in hand.

What that means is that it's creating a kind of social division in a society, that there's a wider difference between people who have more and have less over trust in science. And I think there's kind of two follow-up implications from that. And one is because it is such a robust pattern, it suggests to us that countries around the world, regardless of where you are, have work to do to kind of help shore up trust in science among those who are more financially disadvantaged.

And then I think the second implication is that, you know, it also just underscores that there are issues that aren't really regional, and they're not global north or global south. It's just a global issue.

[00:13:52] **Alisha Wainwright:** And also, just so I'm clear, it is how people feel and perceive their financial status, not necessarily a quantitative, I am literally struggling.

So it's more about how someone perceives their financial situation, right? Is that fair?

[00:14:09] **Cary Funk:** Yeah, yeah. Like most surveys, we rely on people to be the most accurate source of information about how you're doing. And so they describe their financial situation, and we're not asking them for, you know, sensitive information about their finances.

They use those measures because they do tend to line up with objective data about levels of income or something that, you know, people describe where they are in broad strokes, and it tends to line up with people who are better off and worse off.

[00:14:38] **Alisha Wainwright:** Yeah, just thinking about science, it just, it feels so vast, right? And I think, you know, talking about different points of advancement, like in technology and engineering, just listening to this, I'm struck by how much science there is in people's everyday lives, you know, particularly with health and healthcare. When I had some health challenges earlier this year, it felt almost like I was out of my depth, because it's not that I didn't trust what people were telling me.

But it's just that not everyone has the same philosophy on how to treat something, you know, for example. And so, you know, you kind of have to go back to your belief system. And in general, I very much trust in science.

But then when it became something just very specific, I was a bit more unsure. And that was surprising to me.

[00:15:37] **Cary Funk:** Of course, science is huge. But when you ask people about science and about what it brings to society, the first thing that comes to most people's minds is actually health and medical treatments. You know, it is one of the

primary ways that we experience science and the benefits of science in our lives directly. So as you pointed out, and then I would just tie that in because it's such a perfect story as it ties to the findings from the Wellcome Global Monitor, which really underscored how people's experiences with the healthcare system, with government, with other institutions is interconnected with how they think about science overall.

And that's, I think, an important point that we just we haven't paid enough attention to it in the scientific community, that trust in science is really rooted in that broader context.

[00:16:25] **Jerome Kim:** Yeah. And I think, you know, your personal experience with the healthcare system, either frustration or whether you were happy with the interaction, really does impact your perception of doctors and healthcare in general.

I mean, doctors actually and nurses take trust for granted. I think the survey actually pointed this out again, that doctors and scientists are among the professions that people trust the most, although trust is eroded. But that trust comes with a responsibility.

Trust is important. Because if a person trusts you, when you explain, they'll say, okay, so, you know, this scientist or this doctor has looked at the information and is faithfully reporting to me what he or she believes based on the data in the science. So I think, again, you're absolutely right.

All of these things affect the way people feel about science in real life. This is something that I think the Wellcome Global Monitor will help us to explore because that interface between us and technology and the science that underlies it is different in different parts of the world. And the attitude towards science and change is also different in different parts of the world.

You know, when we look at what's happening with funding in the United States for science, again, it's undermining one of the things that has driven innovation and technology and the economy. And is that also going to impact the way people perceive science? And will they perceive it more negatively, because the government is saying, you know, this is important, this is wrong, this was wrong, this, you know, we had the wrong emphasis on vaccines, and maybe we should be thinking about peptides or other things, you know. And so I think, you know, science is important, the interactions that we have is important, and support from the top is very important, because it gets to the way governments and people who have some faith in their governments, but maybe not so much, maybe less than their public officials, according to the survey, accomplish things for the benefit of everybody.

[00:18:30] **Alisha Wainwright:** This brings me to my final question for the both of you. Before we hear some of the detail of how this huge piece of work was carried out, the Wellcome Global Monitor 2026 offers some really useful insights, but data is no use if it just sits on a shelf, right? So earlier on, we heard that Wellcome will be making this data publicly available. So how might researchers and policymakers use this data?

[00:18:58] **Cary Funk:** The Wellcome Global Monitor is really a rare opportunity to look at public opinion at this scale.

I can't underscore that enough. There are no other surveys that have 140 countries and territories in them. It is so difficult to do a public opinion survey in multiple places at the same time.

So multiply that difficulty by 140, and so you know that this is a task that most people don't take on. And what a survey does in general, right, is it's kind of a check against your assumptions. You know, we love to look at ourselves and assume that that's how the rest of the world is.

But what the survey does is try to take a representative sample and say, how good was that assumption when you look at people overall? And that's what we're getting here is kind of a global version of that.

[00:19:49] **Jerome Kim:** And I think that the Wellcome commitment in this was really remarkable. Because, you know, now we're looking at, you know, how the world perceives science in countries that fund science and don't fund science, in countries that believe in vaccines or don't believe the effectiveness of vaccines.

And understanding what the differences are, I think is going to be really important. And maybe the first data are not going to tell us, but hopefully as the data set evolves, as new questions are asked, we'll get a finer understanding. Data is important.

But in the end, trust is earned. And trust is easily undermined by falsehood. And unfortunately, truth by itself is not going to reverse falsehood, is not going to restore trust.

And so we need to take a much more systematic approach, not only to data, but to the other factors that underlie trust.

[00:20:43] **Alisha Wainwright:** That is a great place to end this part of the podcast. Thanks to Dr. Jerome Kim and Dr. Cary Funk for joining me on this episode of When Science Finds A Way.

[00:21:00] **Alisha Wainwright:** The Wellcome Global Monitor 2026 gives us something incredibly valuable, a clearer picture of how trust in science is changing, and how people's experiences differ across countries and communities. It does not give us all the answers, and it does not point to a single global solution. What it does show is where trust is under pressure, and where deeper investigation is needed.

For researchers, policymakers, and civil society, that creates an opportunity to ask better local questions, listen to people who feel least well served, and test responses grounded in lived experience. Trust in science is shaped by people's circumstances, their experiences, and whether science feels relevant, fair, and beneficial in their lives. Understanding that is an important step towards ensuring that more people can benefit from scientific progress.

If you wish to explore the key findings of the Wellcome Global Monitor 2026, visit [wellcome.org slash podcast slash global monitor](https://wellcome.org/slash/podcast/slash/global-monitor). That's Wellcome with two L's. The link will also be in the show notes. There you'll find the key findings from the report,

the full publication, an interactive data dashboard, and access to the data set for further exploration.

[00:22:22] **Alisha Wainwright:** Before we end the episode, I thought it was worth going behind the scenes to explore what's involved with putting together the Wellcome Global Monitor and analysing this extraordinary set of data drawn from across 140 countries. The Wellcome Global Monitor is conducted as part of the research company Gallup's World Poll.

Dr. Rajesh Srinivasan leads the team that oversees the World Poll and told us how the data is gathered.

[00:22:52] **Rajesh Srinivasan:** My name is Rajesh Srinivasan. I'm the Director of Global Research at Gallup.

I oversee all the technical direction and implementation of the World Poll. The Wellcome module itself ran about eight to ten minutes long in most countries and was fairly easy to understand and respond to. The Gallup World Poll is intended to represent the voice of 98% of the adult population, and we collect the data using the mode that is most appropriate for providing the voice.

In developing countries, it is usually face-to-face, and in more developed countries, it is telephone. Lately, we've been testing online. Our process involves designing the right questions, ensuring people are able to understand those questions, translating them, making sure it is appropriate, it's relevant, and comprehension is adequate, and ensuring we are giving voice to every possible individual adult in the country, which means drawing a representative sample across the country that covers the remote rural areas, urban areas, slums, you name it.

We administer these surveys, which are designed based on having interactions with expert groups who help figure out the simplest way we can ask questions around that topic or subject area. In each country, interviewers face pretty unique challenges. For example, in some places, they would have to take a small motorcycle, you know, behind somebody to get to the remote village because that is the only transportation available.

There's no public transportation available. In Indonesia, for example, there are multiple islands that we have to cover, and some of them are by flight, but others are by boat. Once they reach a particular selected area, there is a very fixed protocol that the interviewers have to follow.

This is our best approximation of randomly selecting households that requires starting at a random place, random house, and then skipping every three households and moving forward. So, if they encounter a refusal, a door slammed in their face, then they know that what they need to do is to go to the household three doors away, so that we are providing some sort of dispersion within the area. It's called the random route method, and it's widely used in developmental work and international cross-cultural work, and that has been the standard that Gallup has been implementing for the last 20 years.

[00:25:36] **Alisha Wainwright:** Dr. Rajesh Srinivasan from Gallup. Now, once all this data has been collected, the next step is to analyse it. That job falls to another research company, Ipsos.

Let's hear from Spencer Rutherford about some of the challenges and benefits of having this huge data set and what's next for the research team.

[00:25:58] **Spencer Rutherford:** My name is Spencer Rutherford. I'm an Associate Director with Ipsos, largely focussing on global health.

I work closely with Gallup and Wellcome and the rest of the team here at Ipsos to help analyse and report on the data. This was one of the largest data sets, essentially, that we've ever worked with. It was in 140 countries, and then we also had data from previous years, so from 2018 and 2020 as well, which brought the sample size up to about 340,000 people.

So, it's a really massive, very rich data set, which had lots of challenges that we had to deal with. The benefit of this study, specifically, was that we had quite a range of countries to choose from, including the countries in Sub-Saharan Africa, Northern Africa, the Middle East, Central Asia. It allows us to really look at this topic in a much broader lens across lots of different types of countries and cultures.

The longitudinal data was extremely exciting. I think that was the part that really got us quite excited when we saw the trends in data and how trust in science changed between the three waves. We started initially by looking at what variables were most associated with changes in trust in science, and we found lots of things to play with.

What we honed in on at the end of the day and in the report was a report that very much focusses on some of these regional and country differences, as well as the focus on these different socioeconomic indicators and how that is very much associated with different levels of trust in science. The next step of this research is going to be qualitative, so we're going to be focused on sort of understanding why do certain people with certain attitudes or from different demographics trust science less, or why do they trust it more, and that will be the purpose of the next phase of this research.

[00:27:39] **Alisha Wainwright:** My thanks to Dr. Rajesh Srinivasan and Spencer Rutherford.

[00:27:45] **Alisha Wainwright:** The Wellcome Global Monitor really has been a huge undertaking by so many people right across the world. It is a rich dataset that's being made available to all. A reminder again, if you wish to explore the key findings of the Wellcome Global Monitor 2026, visit [wellcome.org slash podcast slash global monitor](https://wellcome.org/podcast/global-monitor).

[00:28:10] **Alisha Wainwright:** That brings us to the end of this episode, the first in this special mini-series on trust in science. In later episodes of this mini-series, we're going to explore trustworthy scientific practise and the ways that power, politics, and participation are important in shaping trust. Those will be released over the next two weeks, so be sure to subscribe to When Science Finds A Way wherever you get your podcasts so you don't miss out.

When Science Finds A Way is a Bengo Media production for Wellcome, a global charitable foundation that supports science to solve the urgent health challenges facing everyone.