

# Who wants to be a billionaire? Most don't—which is good news for the planet

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A new study, published in *Nature Sustainability*, busts the long-held economic belief that humans are all motivated to want more and more, which could have important implications for sustainability policies.

A founding economic principle that everyone is motivated by "unlimited

wants," stuck on a consumerist treadmill and striving to accumulate as much [wealth](#) as they can, is untrue, say the authors of a new study.

The long-held economic belief that people have unlimited wants has permeated economic thinking and [government policies](#) and has shaped much of modern society, including advertising and consumerism.

But belief in this principle has also had dire consequences for the health of the planet. Striving to continually increase individual wealth, and pursuing unending economic growth, has come at a heavy cost. As wealth has increased, so too has resource use and pollution.

Up until now, researchers have struggled to find appropriate ways to decouple [economic growth](#) from damaging economic principles. Now though, a new study led by psychologists at the universities of Bath, Bath Spa and Exeter challenges the idea that unlimited wants are human nature, which could have important implications for the planet.

Across nearly 8,000 people from 33 countries spanning six continents, they surveyed how much money people wanted to achieve their "absolutely ideal life." In 86% of countries most people thought they could achieve this with US \$10 million or less, and in some countries as little as \$1 million.

While these figures may still sound like a lot, when considering that they represent a person's ideal wealth across their whole life, they are relatively moderate. Expressed differently, the wealth of the world's single richest person, at over \$200 billion, is enough for more than two hundred thousand people to achieve their "absolutely ideal lives."

The researchers collected responses about ideal wealth from individuals in countries across all inhabited continents, including countries rarely used in cross-cultural psychology such as Saudi Arabia, Uganda, Tunisia,

Nicaragua, and Vietnam. People with unlimited wants were identified in every country, but they were always in the minority.

They found that those with unlimited wants tended to be younger and city-dwellers, who placed more value on success, power, and independence. Unlimited wants were also more common in countries with greater acceptance of inequality and in countries that are more collectivistic: focused more on group than individual responsibilities and outcomes.

For example, Indonesia, which is considered more collectivistic and accepting of inequality, had the most people with unlimited wants whilst the more individualistic and equality-concerned U.K. had fewer. However, there were anomalies like China, where few people had unlimited wants despite high cultural collectivism and acceptance of inequality.

Lead researcher, Dr. Paul Bain from the Department of Psychology at the University of Bath (U.K.) explained: "The ideology of unlimited wants, when portrayed as [human nature](#), can create [social pressure](#) for people to buy more than they actually want.

"Discovering that most people's ideal lives are actually quite moderate could make it socially easier for people to behave in ways that are more aligned with what makes them genuinely happy and to support stronger policies to help safeguard the planet."

Co-author, Dr. Renata Bongiorno of Bath Spa University and also the University of Exeter, added: "The findings are a stark reminder that the majority view is not necessarily reflected in policies that allow the accumulation of excessive amounts of wealth by a small number of individuals.

"If most people are striving for wealth that is limited, policies that support people's more limited wants, such as a wealth tax to fund sustainability initiatives, might be more popular than is often portrayed."

**More information:** Evidence from 33 countries challenges the assumption of unlimited wants, *Nature Sustainability* (2022). DOI: 10.1038/s41893-022-00902-y , [www.nature.com/articles/s41893-022-00902-y](https://www.nature.com/articles/s41893-022-00902-y)

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