

Are happier people more compliant? Evidence from lockdowns

*What makes people more likely to comply with a lockdown? **Christian Krekel (LSE), Sarah Swanke (LSE), Jan-Emmanuel De Neve (Oxford University) and Daisy Fancourt (UCL)** drew on large-scale surveys and found that happiness predicts compliance, over and beyond a wide range of people's other observable characteristics. Older and less healthy people seem to be predominantly motivated by risk-avoidance, whereas the motivations of younger ones seem more mixed. People are less likely to follow the rules if they were unhappy.*

Around the world, governments introduce either partial or full lockdowns to contain the spread of Covid-19, asking their citizens to adhere to unprecedented measures restricting their personal freedoms. As the legal enforcement of wide-ranging lockdowns through policing is practically impossible, governments must rely on citizens' compliance.



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It is not entirely clear what, in the current situation, motivates compliance. Motivations could range from risk-avoidance (avoiding health risk to oneself or to one's family and friends, or avoiding legal risk from not complying with recommendations) to pro-social behaviour (helping unknown third parties or the system as a whole), among others. Although non-compliance entails personal risks, many governments appealed to individuals' pro-sociality. For example, during most of the UK lockdown, the government's appeal was "Stay at Home, Protect the NHS, Save Lives", which is a pro-social appeal in a loss aversion framing. What is more, these motivations may vary, and may vary even within the same individual over time. Studying what determines compliance is, therefore, key to designing policies to contain the pandemic.

In our paper, we found that people's happiness – regardless of whether it is measured as life evaluation or satisfaction, positive or negative affect (emotional distress), or how worthwhile things in life feel – is predictive of their compliance. We found suggestive evidence that high-risk individuals (who are typically older and less healthy) are predominantly motivated by risk-avoidance, whereas motivations of younger and healthier individuals are less clear and probably dependent on context. Ketki Sheth and Greg C Wright (2020), using a sample of university students, found that [neither risk nor social preferences or pre-existing health conditions are predictive of compliance](#).

The motivations of younger and healthier people, therefore, remain an important area for future research.

We found that negative affect is associated with less compliance, a finding that is interesting against the background of reactance bias (the tendency to do the opposite of what one is told), rebelliousness, and surging protests against lockdown measures observed in many countries.

There are several limitations to this paper. Although we employed three large-scale, cross-sectional and longitudinal surveys covering about 119,000 individuals from 35 countries, each of them is likely to under-represent the most reluctant non-compliers (they are unlikely to participate in surveys in the first place). Besides this issue of external validity, we were unable to formally claim causality. Finally, our data are not detailed enough to identify the specific mechanisms by which happiness raises compliance. This is an important area for future research, especially for younger and healthier individuals. That said, future data collection efforts should include measures of happiness and compliance alongside specific measures for mechanisms.

Our findings matter at a practical level: for individuals, they highlight the importance of being aware of the role that one's own mood plays for one's behaviour. For policy, there are both direct and indirect implications: policy-makers could directly device interventions aimed at raising wellbeing during lockdowns – targeting, in particular, population groups at risk of low wellbeing. Indirectly, policy-makers could target policies and policy communication more precisely to match underlying motivations for compliance, be they risk avoidance or pro-social.

More generally, our findings show that there is a positive correlation between happiness and compliance behaviour, so a stronger focus on wellbeing in policymaking could help increase compliance with some of the toughest measures of our time.

This post represents the views of the authors and not those of the COVID-19 blog, nor LSE. It is an edited excerpt from [Are Happier People More Compliant? Global Evidence from Three Large-Scale Surveys During COVID-19 Lockdowns](#).