

# Fear of retaliation: Why we tend not to enforce social norms

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Imagine a group of travelers who witness two cases of littering at a train station. One person throws a coffee cup on the platform. Another person throws away not only a coffee cup, but an entire bag of trash. Who is more likely to be confronted and reprimanded by bystanders? Although throwing away a bag of trash is considered the bigger norm violation, this behavior does not elicit a stronger reaction in witnesses. That is the result of a study conducted by Bettina Rockenbach, Professor of Experimental and Behavioral Economics at the University of Cologne, Loukas Balafoutas (University of Innsbruck) and Nikos Nikiforakis (New York University Abu Dhabi). The research team investigated how people respond to large and small violations of social norms in public spaces.

The results of the study, "Altruistic punishment does not increase with the severity of norm violations in the field," are published in *Nature Communications*.

The study refutes the assumption that larger violations tend to be punished more severely than smaller offences. Rockenbach and her colleagues staged small violations (littering a [coffee cup](#)) and large violations (littering a coffee cup and bag of trash) at train stations in Germany and recorded how travelers responded in more than 800 trials. The implicit assumption was that bystanders would react more strongly if more garbage was littered, hence the norm violation was greater. This is a principle that has been widespread from the biblical "eye for an eye" to modern legal philosophy, which demands just punishment. It has also

been substantiated in laboratory experiments. However, the size of the violation did not affect the likelihood that the litterer would be reprimanded - nor did it affect the intensity of the reprimand.

Travelers have more negative emotions toward the larger violation and felt that it should be reprimanded more severely. Despite these emotional responses, however, the surveyed individuals admitted that they would be reluctant to confront or punish such violations in real-life settings.

The scientists explain this reluctance with the perceived risk of retaliation by the norm violator. The greater the norm violation, the greater the retaliation might be. Bystanders feared that in cases of a more severe social norm violation, the person's reaction would be stronger when confronted or reprimanded. The study shows that social self-regulation has its limits. Up to a certain point, we reprimand each other for bad behavior. But in cases of more extreme norm violations, social self-regulation no longer works and we need authorities, police and security personnel.

**More information:** Loukas Balafoutas et al, Altruistic punishment does not increase with the severity of norm violations in the field, *Nature Communications* (2016). [DOI: 10.1038/NCOMMS13327](https://doi.org/10.1038/NCOMMS13327)

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