

Volunteers receiving government aid while unemployed face scrutiny, bias from public

September 28 2020



Credit: Pixabay/CC0 Public Domain

With the worldwide spike in unemployment caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, many people may turn to volunteerism as a way to pass their newly found free time. But new research suggests that volunteers who also receive government aid are often judged negatively as "wasting time" that could be used to find paid employment.

"We found that aid recipients are scrutinized to a greater extent than those who are working, including the underemployed, with observers demonstrating a strong bias toward believing that aid recipients should be using their time to pursue employment opportunities above all else," said Jenny Olson, an assistant professor of marketing at the Indiana University Kelley School of Business and corresponding author of the research forthcoming in the *International Journal of Research in Marketing*. "This is beyond education, personal leisure, and spending time with family and friends.

"As a result, they are given less latitude in how they use their time, and can even be seen as more moral for choosing not to engage in [prosocial behaviors](#), when such behaviors take time away from gaining paid employment," Olson added. "The simple act of volunteering among aid recipients—versus not mentioning volunteering—not only shapes judgments of the individual aid recipients, but this information can also impact views toward federal tax policy more broadly."

Although volunteering is a positive activity that partially combats the negative stereotype of a welfare beneficiary, Olson and her colleagues found that it also sparks anger among observing consumers, with aid recipients being perceived as being "less moral for choosing to volunteer." Factors that minimize these judgments include being perceived as taking strides toward gaining employment via education and being perceived as unable to work.

Other co-authors of the paper, "How Income Shapes Moral Judgments of Prosocial Behavior," are Andrea Morales of Arizona State University, Brent McFerran of Simon Fraser University in Canada and Darren Dahl of the University of British Columbia. The research was supported in part by grants from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

According to a 2019 report from the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, public spending on government assistance averaged more than 20 percent across 36 countries in 2018. Many countries—including those in Asia, Europe, and the Americas—have seen a rise in the number of people receiving benefits over the years, a total now reaching into the billions.

The extent to which the welfare state is supported depends, in no small part, on public sentiment. Previous research has shown that support for government spending on welfare programs is directly related to how the voting public perceives the beneficiaries. This is the first paper to document a link between prosocial behavior and support for federal spending on welfare programs.

"Given that individuals perceive opportunity costs for their own time, it stands to reason that they perceive them for others as well," Olson said. "Because government programs are supported by 'their' [taxpayer dollars](#), observers often feel justified in suggesting how aid recipients spend their time."

The research shows that consumers prefer different patterns of tax redistribution as a function of viewing aid recipients making nonfinancial choices. Specifically, consumers support allocating fewer tax dollars toward supporting government assistance programs after hearing about an aid recipient who volunteers his time.

Researchers conducted nine studies across three countries. They randomly presented participants with scenarios about hypothetical aid recipients and asked them to offer judgment about how the recipients used their time, such as engaging in volunteer activities or sending out resumes. Participants were asked how they viewed target individuals on a morality index and how they felt about them emotionally.

More information: Jenny G. Olson et al, How income shapes moral judgments of prosocial behavior, *International Journal of Research in Marketing* (2020). [DOI: 10.1016/j.ijresmar.2020.07.001](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijresmar.2020.07.001)

Provided by Indiana University

Citation: Volunteers receiving government aid while unemployed face scrutiny, bias from public (2020, September 28) retrieved 17 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2020-09-volunteers-aid-unemployed-scrutiny-bias.html>

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.