

Ticket inspections may reduce honesty: A study on bus passengers in Lyon

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Ticket inspection on public transport can prompt law-abiding people to behave dishonestly once they have gotten off the bus, according to a study published in *The Economic Journal*. The study was written by three

experimental economists: Fabio Galeotti and Marie Claire Villeval of The French National Centre for Scientific Research (CNRS) in the Groupe d'Analyse et de Théorie Economique Lyon St-Etienne (GATE), and Valeria Maggian from Ca' Foscari University of Venice.

In order to study the 'side effects' of ticket [inspection](#), researchers designed and carried out a complex large-scale study on [public transport](#) and in the streets of Lyon, France. During typical weekdays and avoiding rush hours, research assistants and professional actors/actresses, in pairs, got onto a bus or tram.

The research assistants took note of the passengers who, after getting on board, validated their ticket and of those who did not, in a context in which ticket validation was compulsory. The research assistant and the actor/[actress](#) both got off at the same stop of the targeted passenger and, once on the street, the actor/actress pretend to find a €5 [banknote](#) on the ground, and call the attention of the targeted passenger by asking whether he or she had lost the banknote. In total, the researchers tested 708 individuals.

"One third of the passengers who had validated their ticket subsequently claimed ownership of the banknote. Surprisingly, that percentage jumped to 50% if a team of ticket inspectors had previously controlled the people on the bus" says Valeria Maggian, professor of experimental economics at Ca' Foscari. "This indicates that inspections can influence our perception of how widespread dishonest behavior in society is. In other words, the more ticket inspectors get on board, the more passengers perceive that there are dishonest people around. In fact, a plausible explanation is that honest people claimed ownership of the €5 banknote in an effort to conform to prevailing dishonesty, with a negative unexpected consequence or spillover effect."

This study is the first to show that ticket inspections can affect the

honesty of passengers in their everyday life. In fact, among the passengers who had not validated their ticket, 53% claimed ownership of the banknote without ticket inspection, while 67% did so after ticket inspection. Among the passengers who had validated their ticket, 32% claimed ownership of the banknote without ticket inspection, while 51% did so after ticket inspection.

"This study does not recommend eliminating inspections," Maggian states "but it indicates that sanctioning dishonest behavior in public might not be the best way to discourage such behavior. Other actions might be more effective, such as more discrete inspections carried out in smaller groups and in civilian clothing. It is important that actions that are meant to encourage honest behavior do not end up promoting dishonesty. In order to study the effects of a policy, in fact, we need to look beyond a specific situation."

The study was conducted in the most realistic way possible and the people who participated were not aware that their behavior was being monitored. Research assistants and actors/actresses carried out their tasks without knowing what the aim of the project was, in order to avoid their being influenced. Moreover, the actors/actresses were selected by means of special auditions organized by an acting school in Lyon. The credibility of the actors' and actresses' performance in the banknote scene was evaluated via video by 20 people. The two female actresses and two male actors were selected in order to ensure a similar performance (across conditions), so that the individual actor's or actresses' style would not influence the target passenger's response.

Once they had gotten off the bus or tram, the actors/actresses pretended to be engaged in a phone conversation. On the one hand, this was meant to minimize interactions that might compromise the experiment; on the other hand, this allowed the actors/actresses to record her voice when asking the passenger about the €5 banknote. The recordings were then

submitted to another group of people who were asked to predict whether the targeted passenger would accept or refuse the €5 banknote. This final step in the experiment revealed that the tone of voice used by the actors/actresses did not influence the target [passenger](#)'s choice.

More information: Fabio Galeotti et al, Fraud Deterrence Institutions Reduce Intrinsic Honesty, *The Economic Journal* (2021). [DOI: 10.1093/ej/ueab018](#)

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