

COVID-19 has a negative influence on prosocial behavior, finds study

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COVID-19 has particularly negative effects on people who come from economically weaker and less educated backgrounds, especially when we look at health, job security and education—this is shown by figures and

studies from recent months. How the coronavirus pandemic affects prosocial behavior, on the other hand, is still largely unknown. A group of economic researchers led by Matthias Sutter has now been able to show that prosocial behavior is also negatively affected by the pandemic. And here, too, it is primarily the socially weaker individuals who are affected.

An infection with the coronavirus within the [family](#) leads to a drastic reduction in prosocial behavior in adolescents from socioeconomically weaker families. This means that their willingness to trust other people, to cooperate with them or to help them decreases significantly. This finding is the result of a study conducted by the behavioral economist Matthias Sutter, who works at the Universities of Innsbruck and Cologne and at the Max Planck Institute for Research on Collective Goods in Bonn, in collaboration with a research team from the University of Lausanne and the Toulouse School of Economics.

Prosocial behavior is important for success on the job market

Before the COVID-19 [pandemic](#), the research team had initially begun, in a study, to investigate friendship networks among schoolchildren. To this end, they were able to collect 5,000 data sets in French high schools as early as the fall of 2019. The researchers then repeated their study during the pandemic with a smaller number of the same test subjects. In the process, they were able to establish an interesting correlation that had not been the focus of the actual study: "Prosociality was already lower among adolescents with low social status before the pandemic, and our data now show that COVID-19 infections in families widened the prosociality gap almost threefold between participants with higher social status and those with lower social status," says Sutter.

The economics researcher sees the relevance of this result primarily in the fact that prosocial behavior is a decisive factor in professional life. "Previous studies in behavioral economics provide clear evidence for the connection between prosocial behavior and [success](#) on the labor market. The importance of these soft skills ultimately stems from the fact that getting along well with one another is also what everyday working life is all about," explains Sutter.

While it is acknowledged that the coronavirus pandemic led to higher mortality rates and more frequent job losses in socioeconomically less advantaged households, the negative effects on prosocial behavior are only becoming apparent from the current study. "The presumption is that this trend will harm the affected young adults in the long run, resulting in additional disadvantages to them. This is an aspect that has so far received little attention in the public discussion," Matthias Sutter points out.

Four experiments to measure prosocial behavior

In total, during the first survey in the fall of 2019, the research team was able to collect data from 5,000 high-school students, aged between 15 and 17, from the three French cities of Nantes, Montpellier and Créteil. Contacting the same adolescents proved difficult in the second wave of data collection in May and June 2020, due to lockdowns and the associated homeschooling. Ultimately, 363 participants from the first wave took part in the experiments again. The researchers captured prosocial [behavior](#) using four different experiments that measured the ability to trust and cooperate, as well as the degrees of altruism and generosity.

More information: Camille Terrier et al, COVID-19 within families amplifies the prosociality gap between adolescents of high and low socioeconomic status, *PNAS* (2021). Available as a PDF at

www.pnas.org/content/pnas/118/...e2110891118.full.pdf

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