

New Zealanders' attitudes changed after pandemic lockdown

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In the first few weeks of the lockdown of New Zealand in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, residents reported a slight increase in mental distress but higher levels of confidence in the government, science and the police, as well as greater patriotism, according to research published by the American Psychological Association.

"Our results suggest that, under the conditions of a strong and cohesive national response, people are more likely to lean on and trust their politicians, scientists, police and communities and ultimately more likely to comply with the lockdown and health guidelines," said Chris Sibley, Ph.D., a professor at the University of Auckland and lead author of the study published in the journal *American Psychologist*. "The absence of such a response, however, may provide fertile ground for division, lack of adherence to guidelines and [conspiracy theories](#)."

Sibley and his colleagues analyzed data from the New Zealand Attitudes and Values Study, a 20-year longitudinal survey of social attitudes, personality and health outcomes of more than 60,000 New Zealanders. The study was in the process of collecting its latest wave of data when the country went into lockdown, and more than 1,100 of the participants answered the questions in the 18 days afterward.

Researchers compared those responses to the same number of people of similar demographic and lifestyle variables, such as age, gender, ethnicity, mental health diagnosis and smoking behavior, who responded before the lockdown.

"We found that people in the pandemic lockdown group reported higher trust in science, politicians and police and higher levels of patriotism, compared to the pre-lockdown group," said Sibley. "We also found that in the days following the lockdown, people also reported slightly higher levels of psychological [distress](#)."

In the pre-lockdown group, 77.1% of participants reported no distress, 16.2% reported moderate distress and 6.6% reported serious distress. In the post-[lockdown](#) group 73.5% reported no distress, 21.1% reported moderate distress and 5.8% reported serious distress.

"Countries around the world are implementing measures to fight

COVID-19, and their efforts will be enhanced by understanding the psychological effects of the pandemic, lockdowns and social distancing," said Sibley. "In the case of New Zealand, a strong national response appeared to correspond with an increase in trust, not only for our governmental institutions, but also science, which may have helped with compliance to guidelines that helped us beat the virus."

The country only had a little more than 100 confirmed cases in late March when the government decided to go to level 4 of its COVID-19 threat system, the highest level, where only essential work and grocery store and medical trips were allowed. New Zealand currently has fewer than 1,200 confirmed cases and 22 deaths, with no new confirmed cases since May 22. Cafes, [movie theaters](#) and restaurants have already been allowed to reopen.

"We hope that as the dust settles and governments and their communities review this global event, these results, along with others reported by other researchers in other countries, will inform a plan for what to do in the event of the next global crisis," said Sibley. "For example, we should anticipate that well-being will deteriorate and build mechanisms to provide support for those most affected."

More information: "Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic and Nationwide Lockdown on Trust, Attitudes Towards Government, and Wellbeing," *American Psychologist* (2020).

Provided by American Psychological Association

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