

More economic worries mean less caution about COVID-19

November 9 2020



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Workers experiencing job and financial insecurity are less likely to follow the CDC's guidelines for COVID-19, such as physical distancing, limiting trips from home and washing hands, according to a Washington State University study.

The researchers, who surveyed 745 workers in 43 states, also found that state unemployment benefits and COVID-19 policies affected the connection between [economic concerns](#) and compliance with COVID-19 precautions.

The study shows that a scarcity mindset can play a role in how well people are able to focus on responding to the pandemic, said Tahira Probst, a WSU psychology professor and lead author in the study published recently online in the *Journal of Applied Psychology*.

"We all have a finite set of resources at our disposal, whether it's money, time or [social support](#), and individuals who have fewer of those resources appear less able to enact the CDC-recommended guidelines," said Probst. "The extent to which economic stressors will impact that behavior is in part a function of where we live. Having a fall back, a strong safety net to catch you, seemed to help mitigate the risk factors of job insecurity that was otherwise associated with less adherence to the guidelines."

In states with lower unemployment benefits, job insecurity was associated with a 7% decline in compliance with COVID-19 prevention behaviors.

State-imposed COVID-19 mandates also had a positive effect on compliance but seemed to primarily benefit the financially secure workers more. In states that had fewer restrictions on behavior that could spread the disease, workers were less likely to follow the CDC's recommendations, whether the respondents were financially secure or insecure.

However, in states with a stronger response, including measures such as stay-at-home orders and shutting down non-essential businesses, financially secure employees had 13% higher enactment of the prevention behaviors compared to workers who felt more financially insecure.

These differences could have significant public health ramifications, the authors argue, since research suggests that even modest reductions in social contacts among adults can reduce infection and eventual death rates.

"It's important to acknowledge as a society that there are certain segments of the population, namely the economically secure, that are better equipped to follow the CDC recommendations to prevent the spread of COVID-19," said Probst. "This is a red flag since precarious work and financial strain can also co-occur with other COVID-19 risk factors and pre-existing health disparities."

The researchers recruited survey participants using Amazon's Mechanical Turk, an online crowdsourcing platform. The authors acknowledge that the demographics of that sample skewed more male, 62%, and more college-educated, 68%, than the general U.S. population which is about 50% male and 35% college-educated. However, using the platform did allow the researchers to survey groups of workers representing most states in the U.S. The respondents' median household income of \$50,000-\$59,000 was also close to that of the United States'

median of \$60,293.

The data for this study were collected in April, the month after the World Health Organization officially declared the pandemic on March 11. Probst and her colleagues are continuing to follow up with this survey group every 1-2 months to collect a total of seven waves of survey data. The researchers are looking to see if the disparities related to economic stress and protective behaviors translate into greater COVID-19 infection rates.

More information: Tahira M. Probst et al, Economic stressors and the enactment of CDC-recommended COVID-19 prevention behaviors: The impact of state-level context., *Journal of Applied Psychology* (2020).
[DOI: 10.1037/apl0000797](https://doi.org/10.1037/apl0000797)

Provided by Washington State University

Citation: More economic worries mean less caution about COVID-19 (2020, November 9)
retrieved 26 April 2024 from
<https://medicalxpress.com/news/2020-11-economic-caution-covid-.html>

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