

The impact of lockdown drives us to make poorer choices

March 8 2021, by Cristina Sáez



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Lockdown and other restrictions imposed to control the COVID-19 pandemic have had unseen negative effects on the cognitive capacity and mental health of the population. A study led by the UOC's research group Open Evidence, in collaboration with international universities and BDI Schlseinger Group Market Research, has gauged the impact of the

measures taken during the first and second waves of the virus on citizens of three European Union countries. The study concludes that the shock produced by the situation has reduced people's cognitive capacity, leading them to take more risks, despite the risk of contagion, and make poorer choices, including a tendency to be less altruistic and the desire to punish others.

The study, published in the open access journal *Scientific Reports*, published by Nature, analyses the relationship between the negative impact of pandemic control measures and people's cognitive functioning and risk, time and social preferences.

The sample consisted of nearly 5,000 volunteers from Spain, Italy and the United Kingdom—three countries criticized for their poor management of the pandemic, where [lockdown](#) has had a greater impact on their populations than in other European states. The participants were asked to respond to questionnaires during the first and second waves of the pandemic.

In the first of the two questionnaires, the researchers collected data on levels of exposure to four types of impacts during lockdown: occupational, health, [mental health](#), and stress. In the second, they measured the cognitive function of the volunteers, as well as a series of parameters related to risk, decision-making, altruism, and reciprocity, among others.

"We wanted to explore the impact of lockdown and other COVID-19-related restrictions on people's lives and how this affected their decision-making," explained Francisco Lupiáñez, professor of Information and Communication Sciences and member of Open Evidence.

The results of the study show that those who were more exposed to the

consequences of the effects of lockdown also experienced more diminished [cognitive capacity](#), made riskier decisions, and suffered reduced civic-mindedness.

"People's impaired decision-making abilities were impaired, and their reactions were not those we might have expected," said the researcher. "Instead of being more careful because they were in a pandemic, they were taking risks, because they couldn't take it any more." As for their relations with others, "they wanted, for example, those who did not wear masks or evaded restrictions to be punished, even though they themselves were more likely to make riskier choices."

According to Lupiáñez, "very difficult choices were made without taking into account the social cost involved. They only took into account a single, short-term perspective. And now we know that four out of ten people were at risk of suffering a mental health-related illness as a result of the shock produced by this pandemic. All this will have implications in the medium term."

Another of the effects identified by the authors of this paper is that, under the shock of the pandemic, people tended to want immediate benefits and made on-the-spot decisions, some of them momentous, such as deciding to move from the city to a rural setting. "These were decisions in which the cost-benefit assessment was highly conditioned by the pandemic. It seemed as if the world was coming to an end and people preferred to benefit today, immediately, without thinking about tomorrow," said Lupiáñez.

According to the authors, their conclusions have important implications in terms of public health. The current [pandemic](#) and the various mitigation strategies, such as lockdowns, have had significant detrimental consequences in terms of occupational and health impacts. It is important, they say, that these be taken into account in "designing

better responses and communication campaigns for future pandemics."

More information: Francesco Bogliacino et al, Negative shocks predict change in cognitive function and preferences: assessing the negative affect and stress hypothesis, *Scientific Reports* (2021). [DOI: 10.1038/s41598-021-83089-0](https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-021-83089-0)

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