

How COVID-19 changed people's morals

March 24 2022

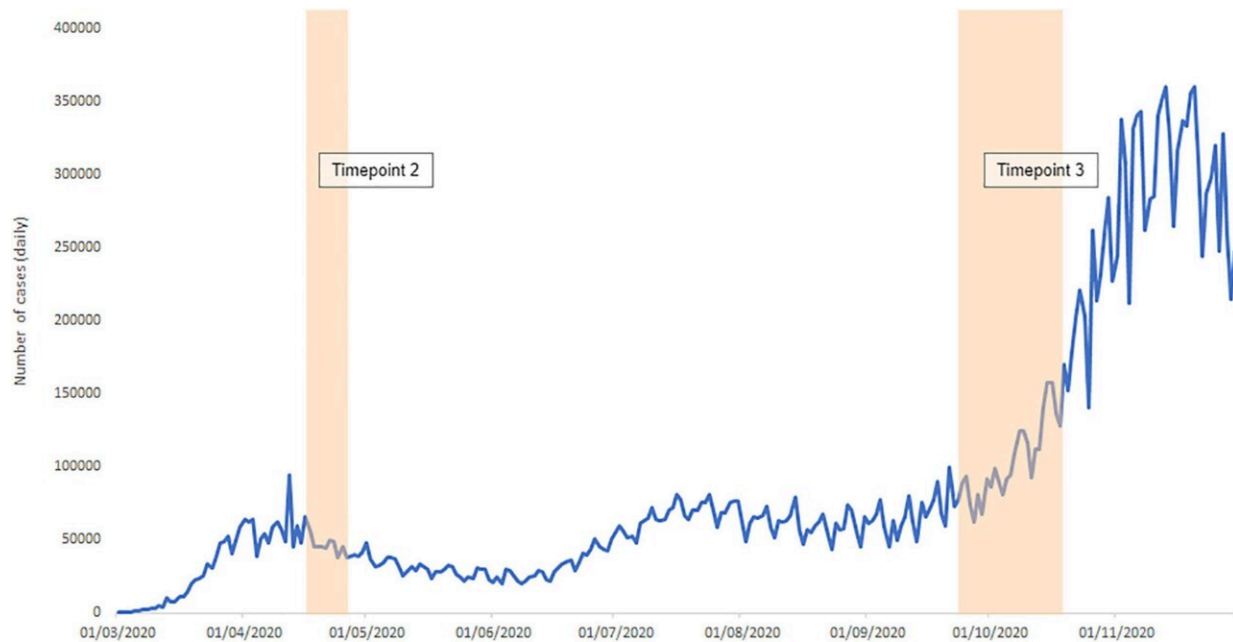


Figure 1. Timeline showing data collection intervals during the pandemic in the context of daily case rate (sum across sample countries-of-residence). Vertical shaded blocks represent data collection periods in 17th–26th April 2020 (timepoint 2) and 25th September–19th October 2020 (timepoint 3). Note that at timepoint 2, national or localized lockdowns were in place in the United Kingdom (60.2% of sample) and the majority of other countries-of-residence sampled. Two participants were resident in Hungary where localized recommendations were in place rather than lockdowns. At timepoint 3, all countries sampled were not in national lockdowns. COVID-19 data taken from COVID-19 Data Repository by the Center for Systems Science and Engineering (CSSE) at Johns Hopkins University. Cases are daily new confirmed cases of COVID-19 summed across the countries-of-residence sampled. Credit: *Frontiers in Psychology* (2022). DOI: 10.3389/fpsyg.2021.769177

A new study has found that people "moralized" anti-social and non-compliant behaviors associated with the pandemic, such as failing to social distance from others or meeting with a friend in a park.

Moralization refers to the process by which individuals assign judgment of what is considered to be "right" or "wrong" to certain actions or behaviors.

The study, published in *Frontiers in Psychology*, found that certain behaviors which were once considered a neutral issue, such as visiting elderly grandparents or meeting a friend outdoors for a coffee, were assigned moral weight during the [pandemic](#), meaning that people found such behaviors morally unacceptable.

Researchers from Keele University and the University of Reading also found that the moralization of pandemic-associated behaviors positively predicts compliance with government guidelines, suggesting that individuals who found these behaviors morally unacceptable were more likely to be following government recommendations.

This was discovered to be the case at two separate timepoints during the pandemic—in April 2020 during the first lockdown and in September/October 2020, a time when government guidelines had been somewhat "relaxed" after the first wave of COVID-19 cases.

The findings suggest that significant global changes and challenges are likely to affect people's judgements as to what they consider "right" and "wrong," and indicate a shift in the [moral principles](#) that guide people's decision-making.

Researchers also found that utilitarian preferences, which refer to the

ethical belief that a specific act is acceptable or unacceptable if it brings the greatest good to the largest number of people, did not change during the pandemic, despite individuals being required to make sacrifices for the wellbeing of global populations. This suggests that utilitarian preferences are not dependent on context.

The study, co-authored by Dr. Kathryn Francis of Keele University and Dr. Carolyn McNabb of the University of Reading, analyzed [survey data](#) from 83 participants at different timepoints to assess their response to a number of sacrificial moral dilemmas and scenarios.

Dr. Francis, Lecturer in Psychology at Keele University, said: "The health and societal impacts of the current COVID-19 pandemic have presented many ethical challenges and members of the public worldwide have been asked to make significant personal sacrifices for the greater benefit of those around them.

"This study highlights the impact of these conditions on moral decision-making; behaviors once considered normal and prosocial were judged as morally unacceptable, and this moralization was sustained even when [government guidelines](#) were being relaxed. How much individuals moralized these behaviors also predicted their adherence to government guidance demonstrating how strongly and quickly moralization can influence our behavior."

Co-author Dr. Carolyn McNabb of the University of Reading, who is now a Research Fellow at Cardiff University, added: "It was particularly interesting to observe the sustained impact of moralization on these behaviors. Even during the relaxation of social distancing measures, when government recommendations were less strict, the moralization of these behaviors persisted, and people continued to report social distancing and hygiene behaviors in line with previously recommended guidelines."

More information: Kathryn B. Francis and Carolyn B. McNabb, Moral Decision-Making During COVID-19: Moral Judgements, Moralisation, and Everyday Behaviour, *Frontiers in Psychology* (2022). DOI: [10.3389/fpsyg.2021.769177](https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.769177)

Provided by Keele University

Citation: How COVID-19 changed people's morals (2022, March 24) retrieved 27 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2022-03-covid-people-morals.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.