

How countries handled the pandemic and impacts on mental health: Study

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A global study on countries' responses to the pandemic finds there have been worse mental health trajectories in countries that attempted to control COVID-19 transmission with stricter public health restrictions,

such as Canada, than those which tried to suppress or eliminate COVID-19 transmission. Findings of the international research team, led by Simon Fraser University psychology associate professor Lara Aknin, have been published in *The Lancet Public Health*.

Researchers combined daily policy stringency data from the [Oxford COVID-19 Government Response Tracker](#) with psychological distress scores and life evaluations captured in the Imperial College London-YouGov [COVID-19 Behaviour Tracker Global Survey](#).

The survey data was collected from 15 countries between April 2020 and June 2021. Countries were grouped into two categories: those that sought to eliminate COVID-19 transmission and those that aimed to mitigate or reduce the spread of the virus within the country.

Eliminator countries include Australia, Japan, Singapore, and South Korea. Mitigator countries include Canada, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Italy, Netherlands, Norway, Spain, Sweden, and the U.K.

Eliminator countries such as South Korea and Japan implemented early and targeted actions, such as international travel restrictions, which resulted in lower levels of COVID-19 infections, fewer deaths and less negative mental health impacts compared to mitigator countries.

Mitigator countries such as Canada, France and the U.K. were less strict about travel and relied more on physical distancing, gathering restrictions and stay-at-home requirements. These measures restricted [social connections](#) and were associated with greater psychological distress, lower life evaluations and a lower opinion of the government compared to people living in eliminator countries.

"Governmental responses to the COVID-19 pandemic have been widely debated," says Aknin. "At first sight, it may seem that eliminator

countries implemented much harsher strategies than other countries because of their widely reported international travel bans. But, in reality, people within these borders enjoyed more freedom and less restrictive domestic containment measures overall than citizens in mitigator [countries](#)."

Aknin is also an editor of the annual [World Happiness Report](#), which ranked Canada as 15th in the world for [life satisfaction](#), falling gradually in the rankings from 5th place in 2010.

Lessons for the future

The authors note that effective policies to contain the pandemic must be accompanied by strategies and resources to address the adverse impacts on [mental health](#).

For future pandemics, the researchers suggest governments could prioritize policies that reduce virus transmission but impose fewer restrictions on [daily life](#), such as restricting domestic travel instead of restricting gatherings.

They suggest an elimination strategy, with timely use of testing and contact tracing could minimize deaths without requiring more restrictive policy measures to contain viral spread.

More information: Lara B Aknin et al, Policy stringency and mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic: a longitudinal analysis of data from 15 countries, *The Lancet Public Health* (2022). [DOI: 10.1016/S2468-2667\(22\)00060-3](#)

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