

Health survey suggests targeting single men to counter new COVID-19 variants

February 27 2023, by Astrid Hopfensitz, H  l  ne Couprie and Sylvie Borau



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

It is almost three years since [the World Health Organization characterized the COVID-19 outbreak as a pandemic](#). Working at breakneck speed, scientists managed to produce effective vaccinations in record time. The subsequent mass production of vaccines and their

rollout by governments have enabled most of us to resume our daily lives, with the pandemic gradually receding in memory.

China, on the other hand, decided to stop publishing data on COVID cases and deaths altogether in December following anti-lockdown protests, claiming a ["decisive victory" against the virus](#) on 16 February. Yet, as tempting as it may be for governments to embrace propaganda, the truth is we are far from out of the woods and there remains substantial homework to do to prevent dangerous new variants from emerging.

Sampling 46,000 respondents, our research conducted at the beginning of the pandemic suggests public authorities could start off by shifting the focus away from protecting the most vulnerable to a somewhat less intuitive demographic: single men.

The protective role of marriage

Published in [the *Journal of Economic Psychology*](#) in October, our article zooms into how people around the world behaved during the COVID-19 pandemic. We show that one of the reasons for the higher vulnerability of single people is that they behave differently with respect to protective health measures like wearing a mask and physical distancing. These results can be observed in 67 different countries, independent of the local culture and health situation.

The [questionnaire](#) asked how often they were washing their hands; if they kept a [social distance](#) and if they had been physically isolating themselves. We also asked different questions to better understand their living conditions, personality, and behaviors.

Results showed that married men were indeed more likely to report adopting these protective behaviors than single men. This was observed

in countries where people on average reported being less concerned with protective measures, like Poland and the Netherlands, but also in those where people reported to take lots of precautions, like Colombia and Argentina. Although women were more careful than men across the world, [married women](#) also reported slightly higher concerns with protection against COVID-19 than single women.

Our finding that married people are more careful when it comes to [health risks](#) like COVID-19 is important. It can help governments understand which parts of the population take more risks than others and where to intervene. However, this observation does not yet answer the question whether married people are really different from single people. Other typical characteristics of marriage, like parenthood, might exaggerate the observed effect. However, further analyses confirmed the inherent role of marriage (and not parenthood or age) in driving the protective behavior against COVID-19.

Is it fear or caring for others?

Many governments sought to emphasize that protective health measures against COVID-19 not only benefited the individual, but the people coming into contact with them, especially the most vulnerable.

We thus wanted to investigate which motives lead married people to act more responsibly. Are they more fearful about their own health? Or are they more motivated to protect the whole society?

We asked participants about their perceived risks by measuring their beliefs about the COVID-19 infection risk in their country and their general optimism. We also asked about their social cooperativeness by measuring their levels of social belonging and moral identity.

Our analysis shows that beliefs about infection risks influence the

likelihood to adopt protective behaviors in the [total population](#), with no significant difference between single and married people, though. What drives the difference between single and married people is the stronger preoccupation for social approval and morality among married people.

In statistical terms we can say that the measures of prosocial attitudes explain 45% of the marriage gap in compliance with protective behaviors for men and 38% of the marriage gap for women.

We can thus conclude that the prosocial concerns of married people, particularly for men, are the main psychological drivers of their higher likelihood to protect themselves against COVID-19.

In sum, marriage is correlated with protecting yourself against COVID-19, particularly for men, across many countries, which can be linked to a stronger sense of social belonging and morality.

Recommendations

Public health campaigns in countries where the pandemic is still raging or where new variants are appearing, should consider targeting single men to foster their feelings of social belonging and prosocial values. Strengthening these values is especially important at a time when isolation and social distancing started to erode [social ties](#) and cooperation.

Including single men more in the social fabric, helping them to form stronger ties, these measures, usually not discussed, could contribute to improving compliance with protective health measures against COVID-19 and reduce the risk of spreading the virus.

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