

Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic and Nationwide Lockdown on Trust, Attitudes towards Government, and Wellbeing

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Introduction

In countries where citizen surveillance and control is limited, the success of lockdown to reduce COVID-19 depends on a complicated voluntary process of information processing and institutional compliance. Specifically, individuals and communities need to trust and adhere to advice from scientists, politicians, and law enforcement, while ignoring disinformation and conspiracy theories. It is possible, however, that the pandemic itself (and subsequent lockdown) not only relies on, but may change, the extent to which people trust institutions.

Study

To assess the psychological effects of lockdown during the COVID-19 pandemic, this paper utilises data from the New Zealand Attitudes and Values Study (NZAVS), a longitudinal national probability panel survey. The rolling nature of NZAVS data collection meant that 1,003 New Zealanders answered the survey during the first 18 days of lockdown. We compare their responses with those of a control sample who completed the NZAVS late in 2019 (before the pandemic emerged), using clinically validated measures to analyse the immediate effects of the lockdown on how participants felt about the nation, the government, and their own lives.



On the one hand, people facing a shared external threat might reflexively increase their trust in institutions partly because they have few other options. The source model of group threat suggests that when groups (e.g. nations) face external threats, they respond by tightening ingroup ties. Consistent with this idea, panel data shows that societal trust increases following natural disasters, perhaps due to the shared need to work together as a society to overcome the disaster. On the other hand, people often respond to threatening events with suspicion, developing conspiracy theories about their nature and cause.

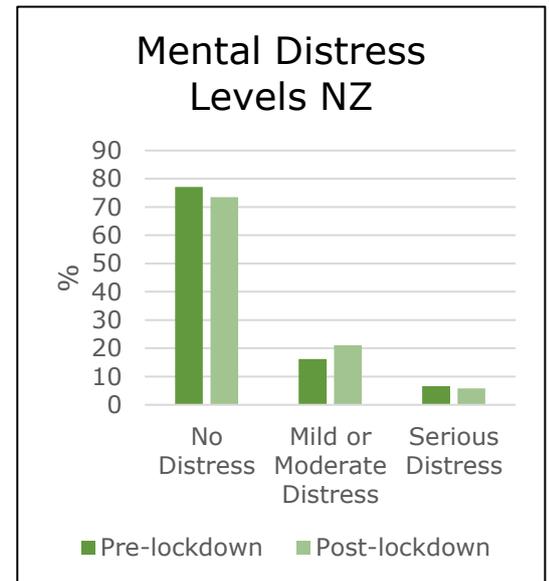
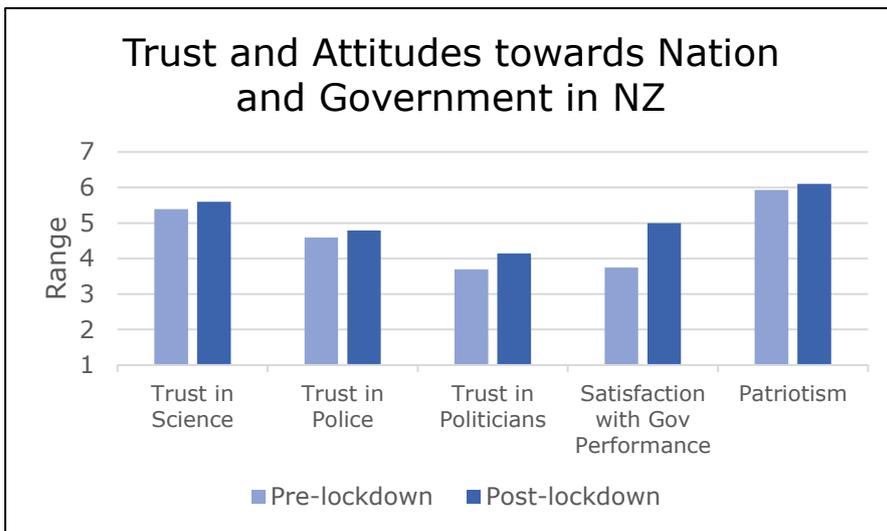
Key Research Contributions:

Analyses the immediate effects in New Zealand of the COVID-19 pandemic and nationwide lockdown on:

- Levels of institutional trust
- Attitudes towards the nation & government
- Health and wellbeing

It also considers the implications of the results for other nations.

The lived reality of watching the pandemic unfold, coupled with social isolation and financial insecurity resulting from the lockdown, are also likely to affect people's mental and physical health. A large related body of research reveals that living through community-wide disasters (e.g. natural disasters, war, fires, terrorist attacks) results in immediate risk to people's mental and physical health and social relationships. Rapid research from China confirms relatively high levels of anxiety and depression as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. These initial findings are consistent with the high levels of fear and anxiety in the wake of the 2003 global SARS outbreak.



Findings

When compared to a pre-lockdown group, in the early stages of the nationwide lockdown in New Zealand:

- People reported increased trust in politicians and police, increased satisfaction with the government's performance, and increased patriotism, as well as (when compared to the previous year) increases in national identification.
- There were no effects on broad satisfaction with the economy, although decreases in satisfaction with business were observed compared to a year earlier.
- Satisfaction with access to healthcare and general social conditions did not decrease, indicating that the unprecedented restrictions were not immediately affecting participants' perceptions of society.
- Relative to the pre-lockdown group, the post-lockdown group reported significantly greater trust in science, and lower belief in conspiracy theories (albeit non-significantly).
- There were no significant differences for rumination, felt belongingness, & perceived social support.
- There were no differences in reported satisfaction with life, standard of living, future security, personal relationships, and health.
- There was one potentially positive effect, namely that participants in lockdown reported slightly less fatigue than they did the previous year.
- The post-lockdown group reported a small increase in psychological distress.
- People in lockdown reported a greater sense of community than did those pre-lockdown.

Key Policy Implications:

- Under conditions of a strong and cohesive national response, people are likely to lean on and trust their politicians, scientists, police, and communities
- Compliance with leaders is more likely when they build a shared social identity and are seen as acting for the collective interest to foster engaged followership
- A strong national response to COVID-19, bolstering national attachment, may serve to promote adherence to lockdown and health guidelines
- Early intervention to promote societal and psychological health are important, as there may be a cost in mental wellbeing

To find out more about this research, please visit: www.nzavs.auckland.ac.nz

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Adapted with assistance from Sarah Hendrica Bickerton and Suzanne Woodward, PPI