# RESEARCH INSIGHTS

**IDB**

## Public Sector Employee Behavior and Attitudes during a Pandemic

New data on public sector employees from 18 Latin American countries shed light on the role of trust in the performance of government agencies. An original survey conducted during the first COVID-19 wave includes randomized experiments with pandemic-related treatments.

Individual-level trust in coworkers, other public employees, and citizens is positively related to performance-enhancing behaviors and policy attitudes.

High-trust and low-trust respondents report different assessments of their main work constraints. Also, they draw different inferences and prefer different policy responses when exposed to data-based framing treatments about social distancing outcomes in their countries.

## CONTEXT

Public policies are implemented by a multitude of government agencies, staffed by public sector employees. The behaviors and attitudes of public employees are critical for the performance of government agencies. In a region with low interpersonal trust, we must ask whether trust among public employees influences their behaviors and attitudes. This question took on new meaning during the COVID-19 pandemic when public services such as health care and economic assistance came under severe strain. Studying the pandemic shock can reveal how public employee trust affects views on workplace constraints and attitudes toward social distancing policies.

## PROJECT

We designed an original online survey and disseminated it to public sector employees in 18 Latin American countries in June 2020, when Latin America was experiencing its first wave of the pandemic. The salience of the new policy environment permits the implementation of two randomized survey experiments that register reactions to pandemic-related treatments. We document how individual-level trust in coworkers, other public employees, and citizens is related to performance-enhancing behaviors, such as cooperation and information-sharing, and policy attitudes, such as openness to technological innovations in public service delivery, and perceptions of workplace constraints on agency mission.

**Key Concept**

### POLICY ATTITUDES

A disposition of support or opposition by the public employee toward a policy adopted by the government.

## RESULTS

High-trust public employees have a more positive view of cooperation with coworkers on team projects and other shared tasks and are more likely to rely on information obtained from coworkers. Similarly, high-trust employees are more supportive of online delivery of public services and report a higher level of effectiveness of their government agency for the year before the pandemic. As civil service systems vary in the region, one question is whether the strong positive associations between trust in peers and productive workplace behaviors and attitudes are driven by respondents working in merit-based systems, or those that are more politicized. Our data indicate the latter to be the case, suggesting that trust within government agencies is more critical in politicized systems where it is typically lacking.

When we examine work constraints, we find that high-trust respondents are more concerned with lack of staff and less concerned with low professional quality of staff or lack of cooperation among staff. Using randomized framing treatments to identify the effect of the pandemic, the estimates show that the pandemic raised concerns among all public employees about inadequate IT resources, while it lowered concerns about the low quality of staff, particularly among the low-trust respondents, increasing agreement with high-trust respondents that budgetary constraints had become more important. We also find a gap between high-trust and low-trust respondents in how they react to a negative framing of social distancing in their country that suggests that it had been low relative to other countries. Respondents with low trust in coworkers are more likely to react to this scenario by assigning responsibility for the (bad) outcome to the government. In addition, they are more supportive of strengthening the level of government enforcement of social distancing.

### Key Concept

### TREATMENT EFFECT

The average difference in an outcome of interest between a treatment group and a comparison or control group.

## POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The behaviors and attitudes of public sector employees affect the performance of government agencies, and it is therefore important for public managers to pay attention to the factors that determine public employee behaviors—in particular, trust in the workplace.

Trust can spur motivation to increase performance-enhancing effort, as the employee has confidence that their efforts will be recognized and rewarded. Public managers can develop confidential workplace surveys that identify the main determinants of trust among their employees, and they can implement strategies to act on that information. For example, in our data being a female employee is associated with low trust levels, suggesting that workplace discrimination may be a driver of mistrust in coworkers. Another trust-related factor is having a work-provided laptop computer, suggesting a policy of providing the necessary resources and infrastructure for enhancing public employees' productivity.

Important links between trust and public employee behavior are weaker in civil service systems with merit-based hiring. This suggest that trust issues are particularly salient in settings lacking a professionalized public sector workforce. Countries that rely less on merit-based hiring should consider adopting this system, as it can raise trust levels among their public employees and lead to performance-enhancing behaviors such as cooperation, information-sharing, and openness to innovation.

## IDB RESEARCH ON TRUST

This project was carried out at the IDB Research Department with data collected in collaboration with the CoPLAC-MfDR Network (Community of Practice for Latin America and the Caribbean – Management for Development Results).

## Figure 1. Public Employee Trust by Subregion
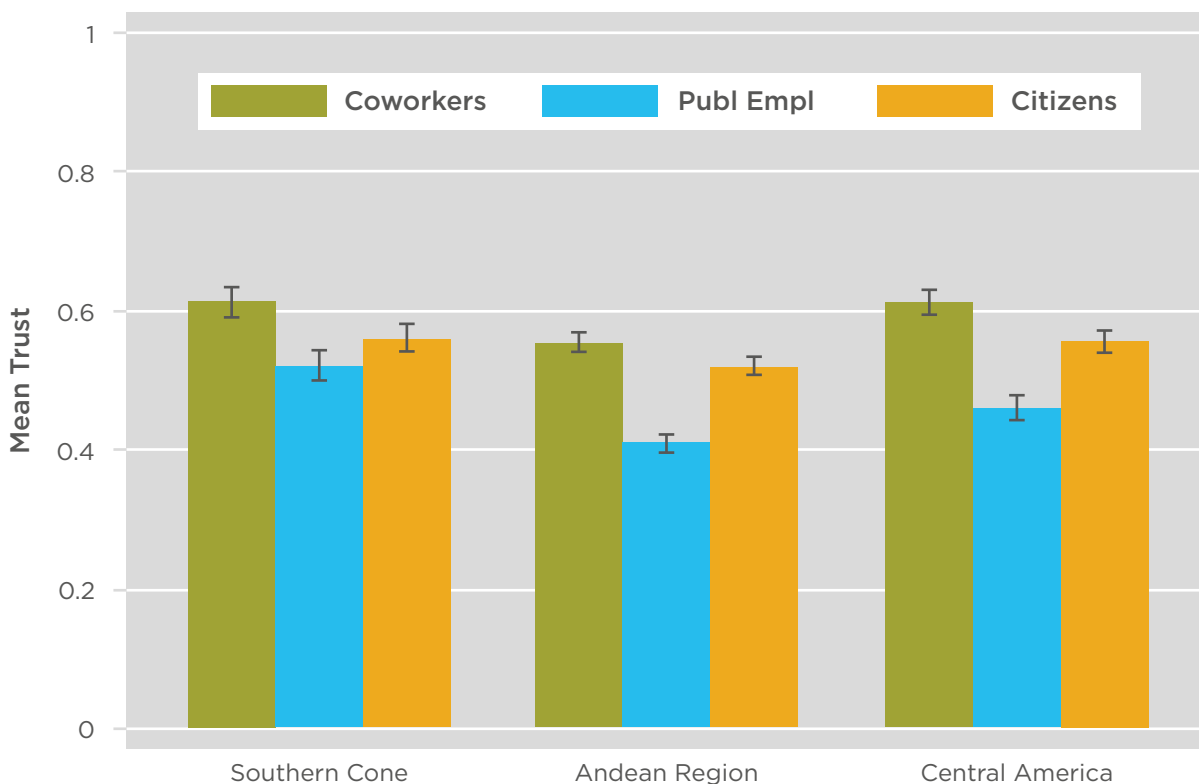


*Notes:* Graph shows for each subregion the percentage of respondents to the 2020 IDB Public Sector Survey who report trusting persons in the three groups. Ranges at the top of the bars are 95% confidence intervals.

Key Concept

**EMPLOYEE TRUST**

An action whereby an employee voluntarily places something of value at the disposal of another person, e.g., coworker, with no enforceable commitment from that person.

**FULL STUDY**

Keefer, P., S. Perilla, and R. Vlaicu. 2021. "Trust, Collaboration, and Policy Attitudes in the Public Sector."

## DEPARTMENT OF RESEARCH AND CHIEF ECONOMIST

The Department of Research and Chief Economist generates new ideas to enrich the knowledge base that supports the policy agenda of the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) and its member countries for achieving sustainable and equitable development in the region. To maximize the impact of its research, the Research Department carries out activities that serve as inputs to other IDB departments, governments, the academic community and public opinion in the region.