RESEARCH INSIGHTS

IDB

Unintended Byproducts of News Coverage about Noncompliance: A Social Norms Exploration

- Social norms used in communications can help/ hurt compliance with public health guidelines. In Mexico, a survey experiment was conducted to explore the knowledge-behavior gap in social distancing noncompliance.

- Despite believing that attending social gatherings is inappropriate, communicating to a person that friends are highly likely to attend the party increases the probability of generalizing others' attendance and possibly their own.

- Believing that it is appropriate to attend a party during COVID-19—and knowing that most friends will go—does not make one more likely to guess that a person will attend that party than if one believed it was not appropriate to attend the party. This represents a contradiction.

CONTEXT

Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020, knowledge on how infection could be prevented has increased significantly. Social distancing and avoiding indoor gatherings have emerged as some of the most powerful and effective preventive behaviors. Yet, despite the strength of the evidence on the dangers of close social contact, many people have continued to gather with friends and participate in social events which help the virus to spread. The problem does not appear to be one of information or credibility, as survey evidence shows that most people agree that social gatherings ought to be avoided.

PROJECT

This project, conducted in Mexico in the summer of 2020, explored one potential explanation for this knowledge-behavior gap: the impact of social norms. It aimed to examine what kind of norms might make people deviate from public guidelines by conducting a survey experiment on more than 23,000 individuals in Mexico. The experiment consists of a vignette that depicts a fictional individual, *Mariana*, who has been invited to attend a friend's birthday gathering and must decide whether to attend. After this initial description, the vignette varied according to four different conditions that randomized the descriptive and prescriptive expectations prompts.

RESULTS

1. The results indicate that social norms significantly impact people's beliefs about *Mariana* attending a social gathering.

2. Deviating in any way from the social norm scenario where people "believe that is not appropriate to attend a social gathering" and only "few people will attend" increases people's beliefs that *Mariana* will attend the social gathering by 25% on average.

3. The scenario where "most friends will attend the gathering" despite "believing that is not appropriate to attend the social gathering" increases the predicted probability that *Mariana* will attend the social gathering by 33%.

4. The probability of responding that *Mariana* will attend the social gathering increases for respondents who report having attended a party themselves.

5. Older participants, those who perceived that their neighbors follow social norms, and females were less likely to believe that *Mariana* was going to attend to the social gathering.

Key Concept

OPTIMISM BIAS
Makes us underestimate the probability of negative events and overestimate the probability of positive events. Participants in a party might underestimate the risk of getting sick as a result of attending.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

1. This study's results suggest that social norms can be leveraged to increase voluntary compliance with public health guidelines.

2. When using social norm-based information campaigns to encourage social distancing behavior, the use of descriptive and prescriptive social norms appears to be necessary to increase social distancing compliance.

3. Highlighting that others are not complying is likely to reduce compliance, which could be an unintended byproduct of news coverage about noncompliance.

4. Politicization of the guidelines, and active, public repudiations of norms, can also lead to further erosion of compliance.
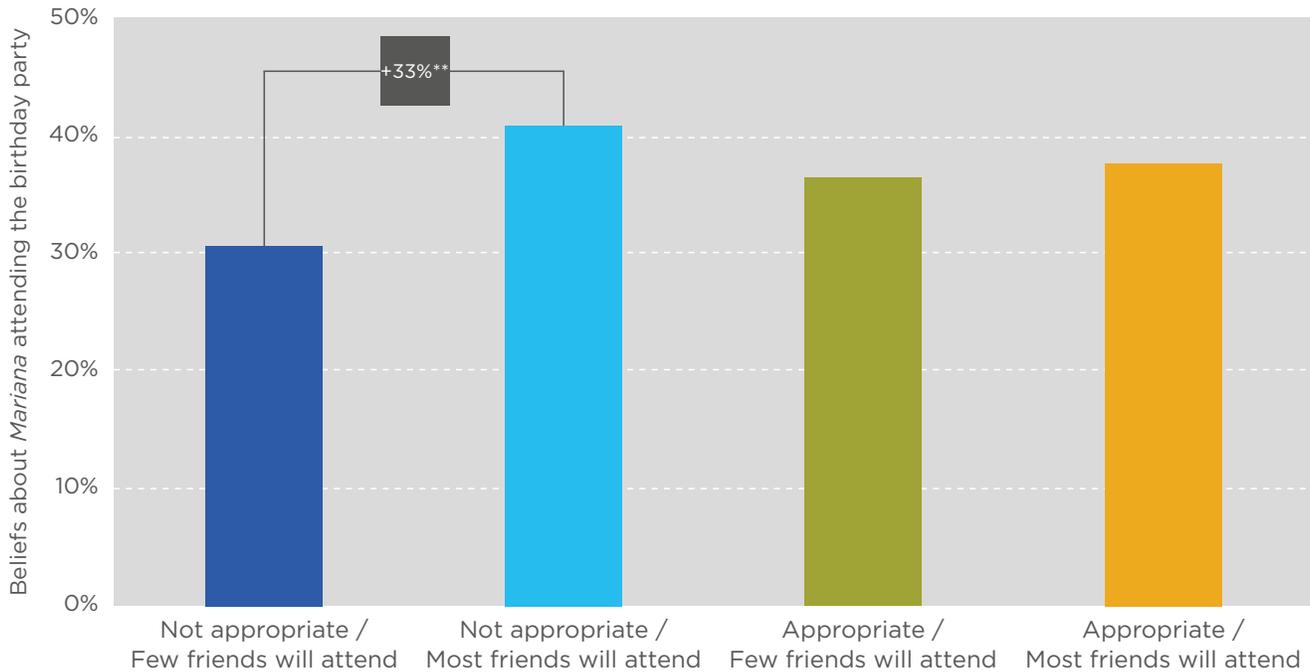
Key Concept

SOCIAL NORMS
The unwritten rules governing behavior within a society. A distinction is drawn between **descriptive norms**, which describe the way in which individuals tend to behave (for example, "most people comply with social distancing guidelines"), and **prescriptive norms**, which establish what is considered acceptable or desired behavior, independent of how individuals actually behave ("It is everyone's responsibility to reduce social contacts").

Figure 1. There are negative implications from deviating from the perfect social norm scenario

*, **, and *** denote statistical significance at the 10, 5 and 1 percent level, respectively, in regard to T1.

IDB BEHAVIORAL ECONOMICS GROUP

At the IDB, we leverage behavioral insights across projects, country dialogue, and policy design to improve educational outcomes, increase personal savings, improve public health, and promote greater tax compliance, among many other fields. The IDB Behavioral Economics Group drives these efforts, positioning the IDB as a thought leader while improving lives in Latin America and the Caribbean.

FULL STUDY

Martínez Villarreal, D., C. Parilli, C. Scartascini, and A. Simpser. 2021. *"Let's (Not) Get Together! The Role of Social Norms in Social Distancing during COVID-19."*

This study was also published in PLOS ONE.

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.