

Press information

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When to downplay the severity of COVID-19 – ESMT Berlin study investigates how governments inform the public about a pandemic

Governments may be more likely to downplay the severity of COVID-19 in countries where there is a high level of economic disparity, finds new research from ESMT Berlin. The more unequal the disease's economic impact, the less the government may exaggerate the severity. The study shows that governments are more likely to downplay the severity of COVID-19 if they prefer to prioritize a healthy economy over public health. The opposite is true for governments who prioritize a healthy population over the economy, as they are more likely to exaggerate the severity of COVID-19.

The researchers, [Francis de Véricourt](#), professor of management science and director of the Center for Decisions, Models and Data ([DMD-Center](#)) at ESMT, [Huseyin Gurkan](#), assistant professor of management science at ESMT, and Shouqiang Wang, assistant professor of operations management at Naveen Jindal School of Management, investigated how policymakers induce public compliance throughout their communication. They developed an information design framework, which accounted for the health-economy trade-off faced by both governments and individuals, the diversity of socioeconomic status within the population, and the individual impact of social distancing.

From this model, the researchers found that as the disparity of socioeconomic status in a population increases, the government is more likely to misrepresent data and downplay the severity of the COVID-19 epidemic. The researchers also found that governments are completely transparent with the data and information they have when they equally value the economy and public health and are stuck in a balancing act between the two.

Francis de Véricourt says, “Lockdowns and confinement measures are the best, non-pharmaceutical way of slowing the spread of an epidemic. The impact of these restrictions, however, relies heavily on individual compliance, which political leaders and governmental agencies garner by disseminating information on the epidemic's severity. To be effective, this communication must take into account both the economic and health impacts of these measures, as well as the different reactions within the population that this information might trigger.”

The researchers state that the communication strategy of a government is incredibly important in ensuring that the citizens comply with whichever approach they take in terms of COVID-19 – whether that be an economy first or a public health first stance. In these instances, it can be incredibly easy for governments to hide, manipulate, or misrepresent specific data sets to skew people's views.

“Informing a population about an epidemic is challenging because different individuals weigh the trade-off between their wealth and health differently. This can cause huge differences in the level of compliance of each individual,” says Huseyin Gurkan. “Governments are faced with the tough task of ensuring maximum compliance while also ensuring the economy is as stable as possible. Each

government has a different priority level for these, hence causing some governments to downplay the risk of COVID-19 and some to exaggerate it.”

The findings of this study are particularly pertinent in identifying which strategies governments should take to achieve their goals in ensuring massive compliance to guidelines, even if these may be more focused on the economy as opposed to public health.

The whole paper can be downloaded [here](#).

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