



COVID-19
Canada

THE END OF THE WORLD
AS WE KNOW IT?

RESEARCH REPORT NO. 5

WHEN CANADIANS DON'T COMPLY WITH GOVERNMENT
MEASURES: THE ROLE OF RELATIONAL CLOSENESS AND
TRUST

THIS RESEARCH REPORT IS INTENDED FOR
POLICY MAKERS AND THE GENERAL PUBLIC

THE PROJECT IS FINANCED BY THE CANADIAN
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Abstract

Canadians maintain less physical distancing when interacting with family members, friends, and even unfamiliar friends of a friend, than with strangers. The closer people feel to others, the more they trust them. More trust in close others is related to lower compliance, specifically in interactions with family and friends compared to strangers.

Table 1. Definitions of key concepts

Concepts	Definitions
Relational closeness	The degree to which people know and feel close to each other. For example, friends are closer than friends of a friend.
Adherence to governmental measures	(1) Maintain physical distancing (about 2 meters) from other people. (2) Wear a mask, and keep it on, while in public
Trust	The willingness to be vulnerable vis-à-vis another person based on the belief that the other person is reliable and does not intend to do harm



Research question

The provincial governments introduced measures to limit the spread of COVID-19 – specifically maintaining physical distancing of 2 meters from others and wearing a mask around others. Health based research has demonstrated that these governmental measures are essential for the protection of Canadians’ lives. When followed, these measures reduce the strain on the health-care system and helps protect vulnerable populations. But for the governmental measures to reduce the spread of the COVID-19 virus effectively, people must adhere to them when interacting with others.

While most Canadians report following the measures, infractions are still all too common; for example, social gatherings such as weddings and private parties have contributed to increases in infections throughout the crisis. It is important to understand the precise conditions that are associated with less adherence to government measures. For this research report we ask:

Are people less likely to follow government measures when interacting with close others compared to interaction with strangers? If so, is the higher “trust” people feel towards close others compared to strangers related to lower adherence?

To address these questions, we conducted an experiment. In the experiment we presented Canadians with the same social situation, systematically changing only the level of relational closeness ranging from the closest – one’s family, to friends, unfamiliar friends of one’s friend, and complete strangers. We asked participants about their intentions to adhere to government measures in the social situation and how much they trusted the other people in the situation.

Hypotheses

1. Canadians will adhere to (A) physical distancing and (B) mask wearing less in a social interaction with close others (family, friends) compared to a social interaction with strangers.
2. In a social interaction with close others (friends and family), Canadians will experience more trust which, in turn, will explain lower adherence to the (A) physical distancing measure and (B) mask wearing, compared to a social interaction with strangers.



Method

We conducted an experiment with 1,759 Canadians, who participated in a large-scale survey on their opinions and experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. For more details on the COVID-19 survey, please consult the technical report (de la Sablonnière et al., 2020).

To test whether the relational closeness between people influences adherence to government measures, we randomly divided the sample into 4 groups. We instructed participants in all 4 groups to imagine that they are attending a social event. The event was identical across all groups – an outdoor musical concert taking place under a tent in a park (see Table 3). We presented to all groups the same picture depicting a large tent in an outdoor location. But for each group we changed the relational closeness of the other people attending the concert: Group 1 were told that the other attendants are complete strangers; Group 2 were told that the attendants are friends of a friend; Group 3 were told that the attendants are their friends; and Group 4 were that the attendants are family members who do not live with the participant.

After reading about the event, we asked participants to rate their agreement with two statements about adherence to government measures:

- I will wear a mask and keep it on during the event.
- I will maintain a physical distance of 2 meters from others during the event.

We also asked participants how much they trusted the other people at the event.

Table 2. Methodological and demographic information






 Measurement time	 Sample Size	 % Women	 Mean age (range)	 Survey Dates
8	1759	50.1	51.17 (18-92)	August 17 - September 13 2020



Table 3. Examples of social event descriptions for Group 1 (Strangers) and Group 4 (Family)

Group 1: Social event with strangers	Group 4: Social event with family
<p>Imagine that you are walking through a public park. You are in no hurry today and you are a bit tired from walking when you see a group of musicians playing under a tent similar to the one in the picture below. You decide to go in and listen to a few songs. At the moment it looks like there are about 20 people under the tent, all seem to be under the age of 60.</p>	<p>Imagine that your cousin, a musician, has organized a concert to celebrate his birthday. The concert is in a park, under a tent similar to the one in the picture below. All the people there are your relatives (siblings, uncles/aunts, nieces, cousins). You can't stay for too long, but you decide to go in and listen to a few songs. At the moment it looks like there are about 20 people under the tent, all seem to be under the age of 60.</p>

Results

Hypothesis 1 (A) was confirmed: Compared to participants who read about interacting with strangers, those who read about a social event with family, with friends, and with friends of a friend reported that they would maintain less physical distancing.

Hypothesis 1 (B) was partly confirmed: Only participants who read about interacting with family reported that they would wear a mask less as compared to participants who read about interacting with strangers. As figure 2 illustrates, unlike physical distancing, adherence to wearing a mask was similar for participants who read about a social event with strangers and those who read about a social event with friends of a friend and with their friends.

However, it is important to note that the differences between the groups for hypothesis A and B are small, although significant. Therefore, we ought to remain careful when interpreting the results.

Hypothesis 2 (A) and (B) were confirmed: In social interactions with friends and family, participants experience more trust which, in turn, explains lower adherence to the physical distancing and the mask wearing measures compared to interactions with strangers. Yet, higher trust does not explain the lower adherence to the physical distancing and the mask wearing measures in interactions with a friend's friends compared to strangers.

Figure 1. Adherence to governmental measures under different relational closeness levels

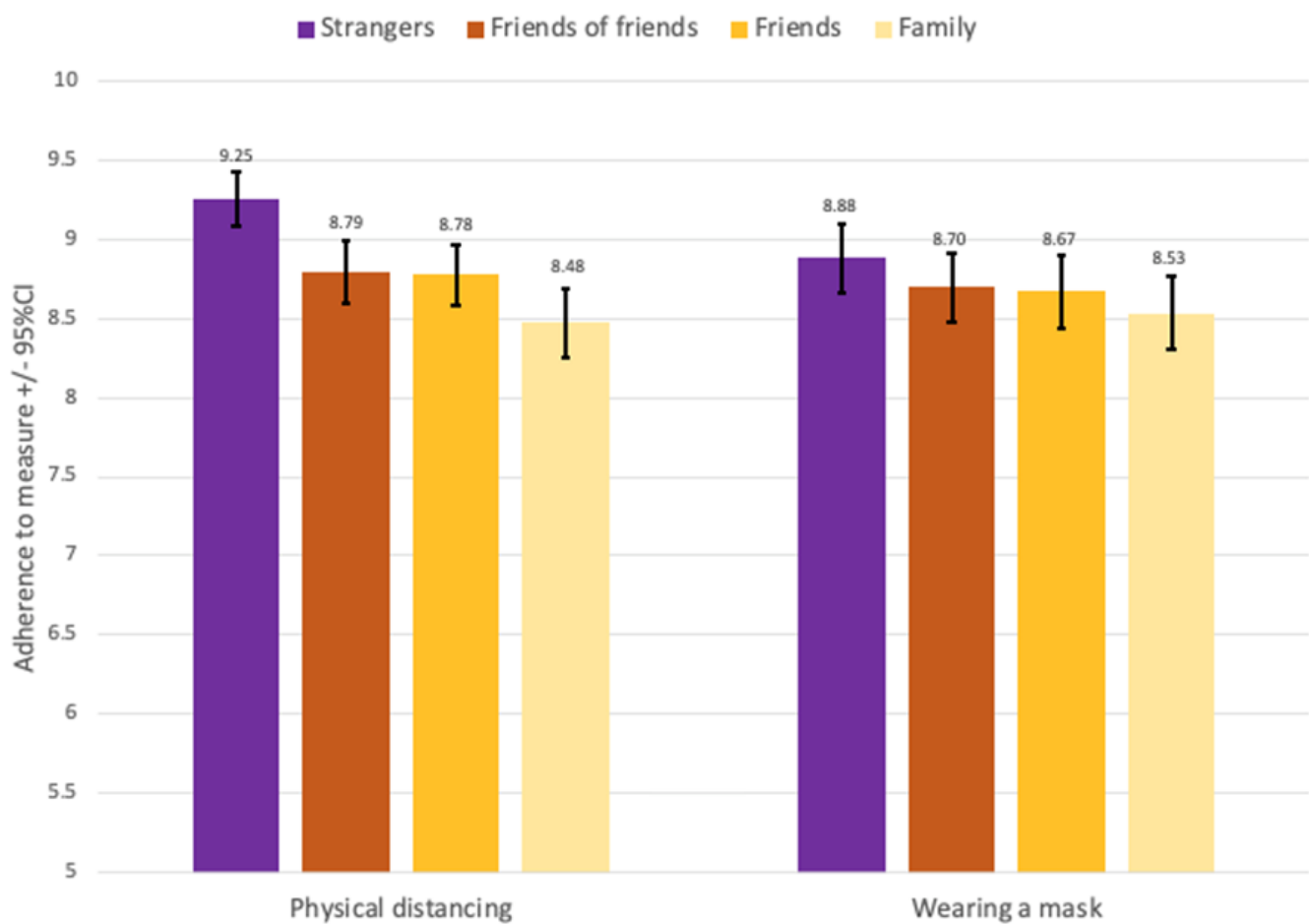
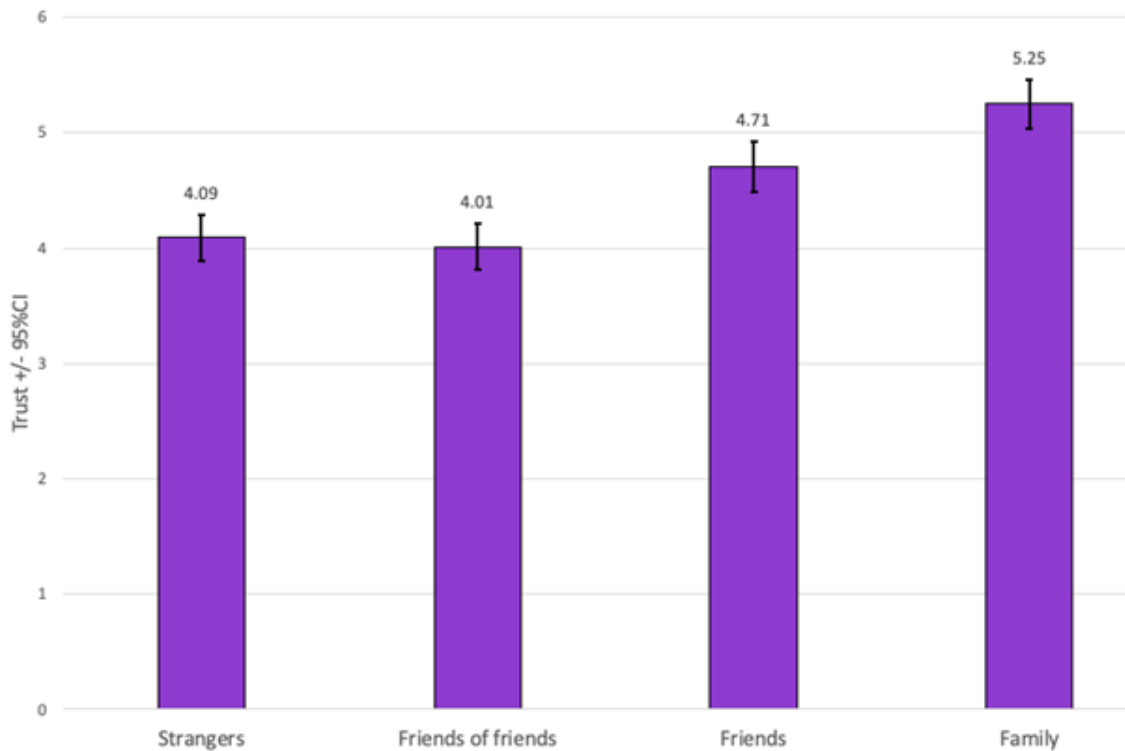


Figure 2. Trust levels under different relational closeness levels



Conclusions

Though overall adherence to government measures is generally high, in social interactions with close others (family and friends) people are less willing to follow measures than in social interactions with strangers. Further, in the same social situation, when unfamiliar people are presented as “friends of a friend”, people are less likely to adhere to the physical distancing measure than when simply presented as “strangers”. Less adherence to the physical distancing measure with “friends of a friend” is particularly important – it suggests that seeing strangers as connected to close others can lead to less adherence, contributing to infections and virus spread.

What’s more, these behaviors are, at least in part, related to how much people feel they can “trust” others around them. Greater trust towards friends and family members is associated with less adherence to measures. Why is this the case? We suggest that during a pandemic, trust can signal a potentially false feeling of safety, leading people to let their guards down and thus disregard governmental measures. Consequently, although people feel safer, they are in fact more at risk of getting infected and spreading the virus.

Recommendations

To promote Canadians' adherence to government measures, governments could:

1. Plan interventions promoting adherence to measures in social interactions with closer others such as family members and friends. In other words, interventions should target social situations that include friends and family gatherings such as parties in which adherence to preventive measures is likely to be lower.
2. To increase adherence in social situations that involve family members and friends, we recommend interventions that build on trust rather than on potential risk from close others. Indeed, presenting friends and relatives as sources of risk for infection could be counter-intuitive since it goes against people's tendency to trust their close others. Instead, interventions could present adherence to governmental measure as means to protect close others. This recommendation also gains support from research showing that protecting family members is an important motivator for adherence to health measures (Wang et al., 2021).
3. In order to increase adherence to measures when people attend social events with "friends of friends", remind Canadians that these interactions are not different from interactions with complete strangers.

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Reference

Wang, D., Marmo-Roman, S., Kruse, K., & Phanord, L. (2021). Compliance with preventative measures during the COVID-19 pandemic in the USA and Canada: Results from an online survey. *Social Work in Health Care*, 1-16. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00981389.2020.1871157>

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Director and founder of the Social Change and Identity Laboratory since 2005, Roxane studies the challenges people face when they are exposed to dramatic social change, such as the colonization that affected Canada's Aboriginal peoples or immigration.

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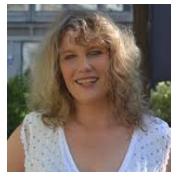
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