

Friendly and Open Societies Supercharged the Early Spread of COVID-19

September 15, 2020



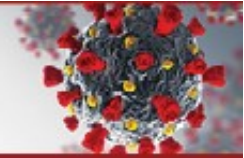
The case to “flatten the curve” is bolstered by new data showing a connection between social openness and the initial rapid spread of COVID-19.

The speed at which [COVID-19](#) initially spread across the globe was alarming. Many biological and sociological factors fueled these [startling infection rates](#), but certain countries seemed more susceptible to early widespread infections than others. New research published as a fast-track article in the journal [Psychological Science](#) singles out one powerful factor fueling the initial spread of the virus, a cultural characteristic known as relational mobility—a measurement of social openness, or the opportunity people have to interact with others of their choosing. The new findings show a direct correlation between each country’s social openness and its rates of both confirmed cases of COVID-19 and related deaths during an early period of countrywide outbreaks.

“Cultures that are shown to have a high level of relational mobility may be paying the price by enduring a faster spread of COVID-19,” said Cristina E. Salvador, a psychological scientist at the University of Michigan and lead author of the paper. “These countries must find a way to fight against COVID-19 and other potential disease outbreaks without compromising their ideals of freedom and liberty.”

The researchers analyzed how fast COVID-19 cases and deaths spread during the initial 30-day period after each country had at least one death and 100 cases. They then examined whether this spread was greater for countries high (vs. low) in relational mobility, as determined from a 2018 Facebook survey of 16,939 people from 39 countries. To isolate the impact of relational mobility, Salvador and her colleagues took into account countries' demographic factors, such as population density, population size, median age, and GDP, and cultural factors, such as individualism and the rigidity with which social norms are enforced. These findings underscore the need for social distancing to “flatten the curve,” especially in countries that value social openness.

Visit APS's main COVID-19 page for more psychological science research and insights.



###

Reference: Salvador, C. E., Berg, M. K., Yu, Q., San Martin, A., & Kitayama, S. (2020) Relational mobility predicts faster spread of COVID-19: A 39-country study. *Psychological Science*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0956797620958118>