Compliance with COVID-19 social-distancing measures in Italy: The role of expectations and duration

Guglielmo Briscese (University of Chicago) gubri@uchicago.edu
Nicola Lacetera (University of Toronto) nicola.lacetera@utoronto.ca
Mario Macis (Johns Hopkins University) mmacis@jhu.edu
Mirco Tonin (Free University of Bozen-Bolzano) mirco.tonin@unibz.it

Abstract:

We study how intentions to comply with the self-isolation restrictions introduced in Italy to mitigate the COVID-19 epidemic respond to the length of their possible extension. Based on a survey of a representative sample of Italian residents (N=894), we find that respondents are more likely to express the intention to reduce, and less willing to increase their self-isolation effort if negatively surprised by a given hypothetical extension, i.e. if the extension is longer than what they expected. These intentions are stronger among respondents who reported high compliance with the isolation prescriptions. In a context where individual compliance has collective benefits, but full enforcement is costly and controversial, communication and persuasion have a fundamental role. Our findings provide insights to public authorities on how to manage people’s expectations in public health emergencies that require prolonged lockdown measures. We will continue to monitor people’s responses as measures are extended.

Working paper: http://www.nber.org/papers/w26916

Data description: We collaborated with one of the most well-established market research firms in Italy to collect data from a survey on a nationally representative sample of 894 respondents over the period 18-20 March 2020. Respondents fill the surveys online or respond to questions via an online computer-assisted telephone interview (CATI) software. We are currently collecting data through other waves.

Ethics: The study received approval by the Research Ethics Board of the University of Toronto (Protocol #00039165) and by the Homewood Institutional Review Board of Johns Hopkins University (Protocol #HIRB00010962).

JEL Codes: C42, D91, H12, H41, I12

Keywords: COVID-19, behavioral change, expectations, compliance, social distancing