Title
Promoting social distancing in a pandemic: Beyond the good intentions

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Abstract
Reminders to promote social distancing have been ubiquitous throughout the COVID-19 crisis, but little is known about their effectiveness. Existing studies find positive impacts on intentions to comply, but no evidence exists of actual behavioural change. We conduct a randomised controlled trial with a large representative sample of Danish residents, who receive different versions of a reminder to stay home as much as possible at the height of the crisis. We are the first to measure impacts on both intentions to comply and on realised actions in the following days (i.e., whether the person does stay home). We find that the reminder significantly increases people’s intentions to stay home when it emphasises the consequences of non-compliance for the respondent or his/her family, while it has not impact when the emphasis is on other people or the country as a whole. Changes in intentions, however, translate into weaker changes in actions that are not statistically significant. This is consistent with the existence of important intention-to-action gaps. Only people who are in relatively poor health are significantly more likely to stay home after receiving the reminder with an emphasis on personal and family risks. This shows that while reminders may be useful to protect groups at risk by increasing their own compliance with social distancing, such a tool is unable to change the behaviour of those who face limited personal risks but could spread the disease.

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Data description
We conducted a pre-registered randomised controlled trial with a large sample of Danish residents (close to 1% of the entire population between the age of 18 and 69). We exposed different groups to different variations of a recommendation to “stay home as much as possible” and we tested the impact of the treatment on respondents’ intentions to stay home, as well as on their realised behaviour (i.e., whether they did stay home). The study was conducted between March 25 and April 7, 2020. The different reminders were randomised within a representative sample of 29,756 Danish residents between the age of 18 and 69 across Denmark. Statistics Denmark (the national statistical office) carried out the randomisation and delivered the treatment. Respondents were contacted via e-Boks - the official system of communication used by public authorities in Denmark, which is akin to a personal email account. Those who agreed to participate landed on a dedicated webpage where they were shown the treatment and then answered a short questionnaire. Control subjects only saw the questions. Respondents who completed the first questionnaire received a second one in the coming days. While the first questionnaire asked about intentions to stay home the following day, the second one asked whether the respondent did stay home the day before. This allows us to study intention-to-action gaps in treatment effects.

The experiment was pre-registered in the AEA RCT Registry (ID: AEARCTR-0005582): https://www.socialscienceregistry.org/trials/5582.

JEL classification: C93, D90, D91, I12.

Keywords: COVID-19, Social distancing, Reminders, Messaging, Framing, RCT.