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Anti-coronavirus Measures: Large Majority Respects the Requirements

Heidelberg researchers interview citizens on acceptance of restrictions and their impact

The mandatory mask, social distancing, contact restrictions – the vast majority of people support the restrictions related to the coronavirus. Researchers from Heidelberg University have interviewed around 1,300 people online on how they perceive and cope with the measures to combat the coronavirus pandemic. Over 80 per cent of them stated that they have always, or at least mostly, kept to the requirements. There is also considerable acceptance of the curtailing of fundamental rights linked to the lockdown. However, a comparison of how interviewees assess social benefit and economic harm shows them to be much more critical. The readiness to be vaccinated – supposing that a vaccine will be available in future – seems to be surprisingly low. These and other results of the online survey are available for access on the internet.

The survey had a total of 1,351 participants, representative of the population by gender, age and education. It was carried out with the assistance of an online access panel and took place between 30 June and 7 July 2020. It is part of an interdisciplinary project at Heidelberg University's Marsilius Kolleg on "social self-empowerment". This is about the readiness to disregard formal or informal societal rules because the person concerned does not feel bound by them for higher, particularly moral reasons. The extent and causes of this readiness, its consequences and the action taken are being explored by psychologist Prof. Dr Peter Kirsch, jurist Prof. Dr Hanno Kube and political scientist Prof. Dr Reimut Zohlnhöfer.

Respecting the restrictions

In response to the question about respecting the restrictions, only a tiny minority of less than four per cent stated that they had never, or rarely, followed the rules on coronavirus. A notable factor here is the fear of the police or the public order office catching them in breach of the municipal ordinances and their having to take the consequences. Almost 60 per cent said that this would have been hard or very hard for them. There were, however, considerable differences between the federal states: such fear seems to have been particularly great in Bavaria, among others. "It is particularly plausible for Bavaria that the state-related variance on the question of how terrible it would have been to be caught is related to the toughness of punishment for offences. However, all in all this must be examined more closely," says political scientist Reimut Zohlnhöfer.

The statistical evaluations at least show: the greater the perceived likelihood of being caught committing an offence, and the worse this discovery was assessed to be, the more likely it was that the interviewees respected the restrictions. But other aspects play a role here too, the researchers explain – e.g. age, gender, satisfaction with democracy or party preference. The feeling of being able to influence policy-making oneself apparently also impacts on respect for the restrictions, Reimut Zohlnhöfer reports. If people took the view that they did not have any say

about what the government does, they tended, on average, to be less respectful of the coronavirus rules.

Protection of fundamental rights and separation of powers

Asked about the curtailing of fundamental rights related to the coronavirus measures, approximately three quarters – around 72 per cent of survey participants – were not worried. They accepted the temporary restriction of fundamental rights as justified on the whole, or even completely justified. “That does not mean, however, that protection of fundamental rights and separation of powers do not play a role in times of crisis,” says jurist Hanno Kube. A good 46 per cent of interviewees opposed the statement that the federal government should also be able to adopt wide-ranging measures without the approval of the federal parliament – even though just under 43 per cent would agree with such procedure. At the same time, a majority of just under 55 per cent trust that courts effectively protect the rights of citizens against overly wide-ranging restrictions.

Economic harm and measures for the future

The comparison between the social benefit and economic harm of the lockdown turned out to be much more critical. Over half of the interviewees – around 52 per cent – took the view that the harm was greater than the benefit. This might be connected with the risk assessment: the lower the estimated likelihood that a family member would be infected with the coronavirus, the more the negative impact on the economy loomed large in their assessment. The participants were cautious about future measures as well. While one third – around 32 per cent – had already installed the coronavirus warning app, a good 45 per cent considered it rather, or even very, improbable that they would still do so. The Heidelberg scientists assume that at least those who strongly reject the use of the app at present will stick to this position in future too. They account for about 30 per cent. “If we add in those who lack the technical preconditions, the dissemination of the app could cap at around 60 per cent of the population,” explains Reimut Zohlhöfer. The readiness to be vaccinated against COVID-19, should a vaccine be available in future, also seems surprisingly low. Only a bare 55 per cent stated that it was fairly, or very, likely they would do this.

Conspiracy theories

Another interesting point for the researchers – particularly from a psychological viewpoint – is the correlation between accepting and complying with anti-coronavirus measures and the tendency to believe in conspiracy theories. The greater the conspiracy mentality of those questioned, the less satisfied they were with the crisis management of the federal government, the less willing they were to install the Coronavirus warning app or be vaccinated, and the higher they estimated the economic harm in relation to social benefit. Psychology professor Peter Kirsch explains that interpersonal trust plays an important role here. “People who tend to believe in conspiracy theories are less able to trust their fellow human beings. And this trust likewise associates with the readiness to be vaccinated or to install the app. But we find the same correlations with respect to trust in public radio and the print media.”

The researchers will now thoroughly analyse the data in an initial evaluation of the survey. They want to find out what psychological and social factors influence the readiness to follow societal and state rules. The acceptance of the measures to contain the coronavirus pandemic is also

compared with supporting and attending Fridays for Future protests, on which data was likewise collected.

The work of the Marsilius Kolleg founded in 2007 focuses on bringing together selected researchers from different scientific cultures and promoting research-related dialogue between the humanities, law and social sciences, on the one hand, and the natural and life sciences, on the other. Furthermore, the Kolleg has set itself the goal of intensifying the dialogue between science and society with the aid of socially relevant research issues.

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www.marsilius-kolleg.uni-heidelberg.de/fellows/Publikationfellows2020.html

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