Trust under pressure

How crises shape people's willingness to follow public health rules

Trust can erode quickly during or after a crisis, especially when people feel the state failed or was unable to protect them. And the effects last.

Using evidence from the 1918 influenza in Switzerland, this study shows how people experienced the crises itself led some to comply with vaccination rules and others to resist them for more than a decade.

Findings

The same pandemic can create both resistance and compliance – depending on how close people are to the loss.

The study shows that **directly-exposed** families who personally lost someone to the flu tended to become **more cautious and compliant with public health measures**.

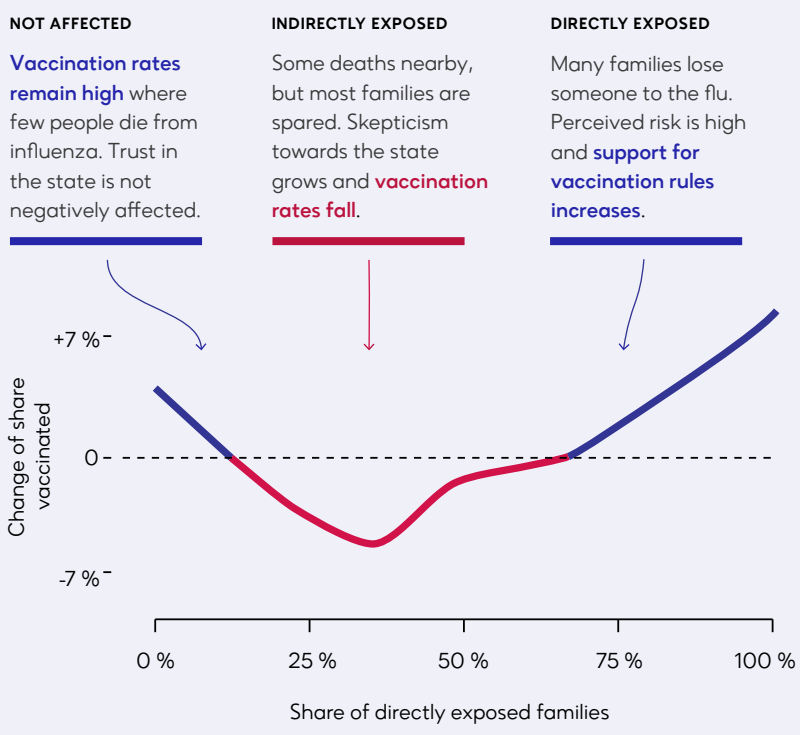
In contrast, **indirectly exposed** people observing the death of a neighbor who did not experience loss themselves became **more skeptical** of the state's ability to protect them, causing **opposition to state-induced health measures**.

U-shaped pattern of suffering

Both the least and the most affected communities show higher willingness to vaccinate, while those in the middle turn away.

To motivate widespread compliance based solely on personal experience, a pandemic would have to reach a far higher mortality level—one where most families are directly touched by loss.

The **COVID-19**'s estimated mortality rate was of around 0.3%. Devastating for many families as it was, this rate remained too low on its own to prompt a universal shift in behavior through direct experience alone.



The study

Christian Ochsner, Lukas Schmid
Pandemics' backlash: The effects of the 1918 influenza on health attitudes and behavior

Researchers looked back to the Spanish flu of 1918 and utilized the public voting system in Switzerland to measure shifts in health-related sentiments, i.e., in a popular vote in 1922 on mandatory smallpox vaccination for children. The study further analyzes shifts in vaccination behavior utilizing local and individual smallpox vaccination reports from 1905 to 1933. By comparing places that were hit harder by the flu with those that were less affected, the study explored how people's exposure to the health crisis of 1918 shaped their later willingness to support and follow government health policies.

Why does it matter?

Trust can erode quickly during or after a crisis, especially when people feel the state failed or was unable to protect them. The effects last: lower vaccination compliance persisted for about 12 years after the Spanish flu. Building or rebuilding trust isn't just about managing the immediate emergency it's about long term credibility.

The Takeaway

When a crisis hits, the state faces a no-win situation: act too forcefully and risk backlash, or act too weakly and lose credibility. Trust in public institutions depends not just on policy, but on how people experience the crisis itself and those effects can echo for a decade or more.

Societal and Political Shifts

Major health crises often trigger significant shifts in public trust and societal behavior, creating a complex relationship between citizens and state authorities. The erosion of trust occurs because communities may feel the government failed to protect their neighbors, leading to a long-term decline in institutional credibility. Such shifts can manifest politically through resistance to state-mandated policies and lower participation in public health initiatives, even for unrelated issues. Ultimately, these crises place institutions in a "no-win" situation where their reputation suffers simply because the event occurred on their watch, potentially opening the door for fringe figures and alternative viewpoints to gain mainstream influence and reshape the political climate.

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Read the full study