

Fighting pandemics with enhanced risk communication in Germany: Messages, compliance, and vulnerability

Survey

To understand how members of the public responded to the COVID pandemic and to official government communication about the pandemic, we ran an online survey with a nationally-representative sample (based on age, sex, education, and income) in five European countries (Germany, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland, UK). The survey was administered by the panel provider Qualtrics. It ran from 1 April – 4 May 2021, and had a total sample size of 4,206, with approximately 840 from each country.

Risk perceptions

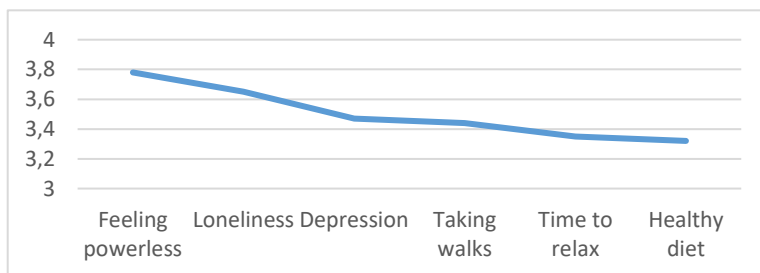
Risk perceptions are conditioned in part by societal response to and societal communication about COVID. We measured several types of risk perceptions; in general, risk was viewed as higher in Germany, compared to the other four countries:

- Overall personal health risk – average of 3.00 on a scale of 1-5, meaning a *moderate* risk); lower perceived risk than Sweden (3.11); higher than UK (2.84), Norway (2.65), and Switzerland (2.51)
- Risk more people will become ill here compared to other countries – 3.31 average (meaning between *moderate* and *significant* risk); higher than UK (3.24), Sweden (3.18), Switzerland (2.93), and Norway (2.60)
- Risk health services will be overstretched – 3.94 average; lower than Sweden (4.20); higher than UK (3.67), Switzerland (3.33), and Norway (3.31)
- Risk of deep economic crisis – 3.76 average; lower than UK (3.86); higher than Switzerland (3.24), Sweden (3.18), and Norway (2.95)
- Risk of loss of trust in public authorities – 3.99 average; higher than Sweden (3.60), Switzerland (3.53), UK (3.52), and Norway (3.16)
- Risk of lack of community feeling and solidarity – 3.78 average; higher than Sweden (3.61), Switzerland (3.38), UK (3.17), and Norway (3.17)



Pandemic effects on everyday life

We asked the survey respondents if certain feelings, emotions, and activities became more or less prevalent for them in the time following the onset of the COVID pandemic. A sampling appears below. In Germany, negative emotions increased and mental health declined, but some positive activities also became more frequent on average. All scores below are on a 1-5 scale – much less, somewhat less, little to no change, somewhat more, much more; therefore, an average score over 3.00 indicates an increase from pre-COVID, whilst an average under 3.00 indicates a decrease.



- Feeling tired (3.43 average – 39% experience this more during COVID, 7% experience it less)
- Loneliness (3.65 – 46% more, 5% less)
- Depression (3.47 – 34% more, 6% less)
- Anxiety (3.44 – 36% more, 7% less)
- Feeling powerless (3.78 – 52% more, 5% less)
- Quality sleep (2.90 – 19% more, 26% less)

- Practicing outdoor sports (2.87 – 19% more, 22% less)
- Time for hobbies (3.16 – 33% more, 20% less)
- Taking walks outside (3.44 – 44% more, 14% less)
- Time to relax (3.35 – 40% more, 13% less)
- Having a healthy diet (3.32 – 33% more, 9% less)
- Concern about other global threats, such as climate change (3.29 – 32% more, 12% less)

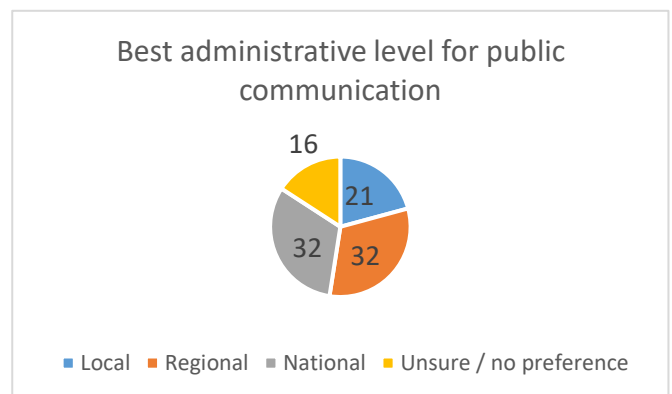
Behavioural responses to specific COVID restrictions

Our survey questioned members of the public about a wide range of actions that could reduce exposure to COVID. Some of these asked explicitly about the extent to which people followed government requirements. Whilst social desirability may have somewhat affected responses, this was an anonymous online survey. The scale was 1-5 – never, rarely, occasionally, most of the time, always.

- Keeping the required social distance (4.14 average, meaning between most of the time and always – 87% responded either most of the time or always)
 - This correlated with less depression, and more time to relax, healthy diet, and global concern
- Observing gathering restrictions when with other people (4.01 – 73% most of the time or always)
 - Correlation with less tired, less depression, less feeling powerless, and more time to relax
- Observing the required isolation period when having symptoms (4.35 – 83% most of the time or always)
 - Correlation with less depression; more time for hobbies, to relax, healthier diet, and global concern

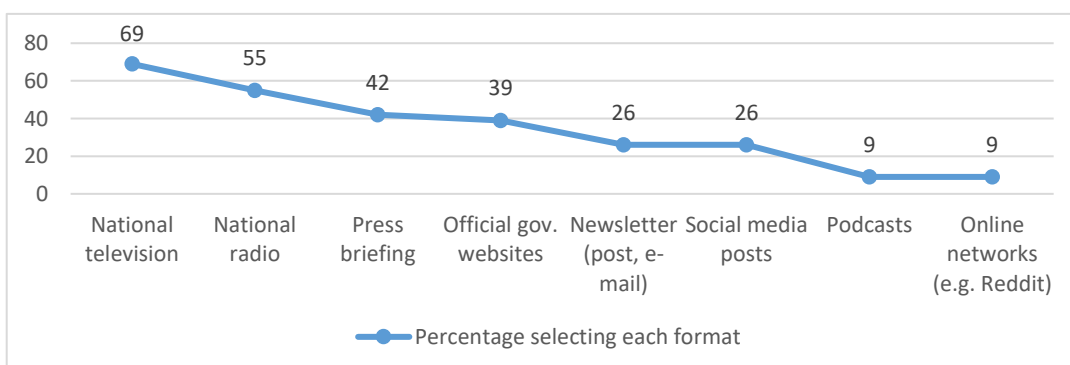
Risk Communication

We asked a number of questions about public consumption of and attitudes towards government risk communication over the first thirteen months of the pandemic (through April 2021). Germans sought information from official authorities, on average, less than respondents from all four other countries (2.67 average on a scale of 1-6, meaning between *less than once per week* and *weekly*).



Most Germans felt the government met their needs by providing the right amount of useful information about COVID (41%, vs 26% not enough, 17% no useful information provided whatsoever 7% too much, 9% overloaded with information). In comparison to other countries, Germany was lower than all four for perceived message clarity and message consistency. It was below the scale mid-point for both (between ‘not very’ clear/consistent and ‘somewhat’ clear/consistent):

- Messages were clear and easy to understand (1-5 scale: not at all clear, not very clear, somewhat clear, very clear, extremely clear) – Germany (2.70 average), UK (3.06), Switzerland (2.99), Norway (2.88), Sweden (2.85)
- Authorities were consistent in instructions to the public (1-5 scale: not at all consistent to extremely consistent) – Germany (2.48), Norway (2.74), UK (2.72), Switzerland (2.68), Sweden (2.53)



We asked what formats authorities should use to communicate about COVID; respondents could select as many as they found relevant (see right).