



Generosity in Times of Crisis

Austrian Helping Behaviors During
the COVID-19 Pandemic

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We are a collaborative research group involving over 50 scholars from more than 20 countries led by Professor Pamala Wiepking.

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1. Executive Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic has thrown the world into a health crisis that has had devastating effects on the global economy and public life in many countries. Little is known about how people have responded to two competing pressures caused by the crisis in many countries: increased community need coupled with decreased financial capacity to help others.

We surveyed 1,000 people living in Austria in August 2020 to understand how their generosity behaviors manifested and changed during the COVID-19 pandemic. By generosity we mean all forms of behavior that people engage in with the intention of benefiting others (including people, animals, and environments).

Three key findings emerged:

1. The proportion of the population engaged in informal volunteering has risen sharply. In the months following the pandemic, almost one in two adults helped an acquaintance, for example by going shopping for them. In pre-pandemic surveys, only about one-third of adults reported doing informal volunteer work.
2. One in four adults changed their involvement in donating money or volunteering for an organization during the pandemic. More likely to change their behavior were those who felt affected by the pandemic - those who perceived the pandemic as threatening tended to increase their engagement while those who perceived the pandemic as liberating tended to decrease it.
3. People who had volunteered or donated money to nonprofit organizations before the pandemic were more likely to change their generosity behavior than those who had not done so. Nearly one in two changed their engagement during the pandemic.

Managerial Implications. Nonprofits may wish to:

- Make specific offers to existing donors and volunteers on how they can help and in which (alternative) ways they can get involved. They are comparatively easy to mobilize, provided they are shown concrete opportunities for action.
- Raise public awareness of the needs of a nonprofit's target group and where the organization needs support. The lower the threshold and the less bureaucratic it is to get involved in the short term, and the more clearly the help needed is defined, the more people are prepared to get involved.
- Support individuals to coordinate private, informal help -mutual aid- so that people can better support people in their local community during in a crisis.

Policy Implications. Governments may wish to:

- Just like nonprofit organizations, governments can get more people involved in informal helping behavior if they support the coordination and use their reputation to increase trust in such initiatives.
- Governments should ensure a legal framework that enables and facilitates volunteering (in times of crisis) (e.g. insurance, compensation for employers if employee cannot show up due to volunteering...).

- Provide public funding instruments which enable nonprofits to use funding more flexibly. The fight against the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic has shown that such funding instruments reduce nonprofits' vulnerability and allow them to continue to provide their services even in times of crisis.

2. Introduction: COVID-19 and Public Generosity

In early 2020, the world was thrown into a health crisis that had devastating effects on the global economy and social life in many countries: the COVID-19 pandemic. At the time of writing (September 2021), more than 225 million people have contracted the virus globally and over 4.6 million people have died (Worldometer, 2021). By April 2020, more than 3.9 billion people from 90 countries – around half the world's population – were told by their governments to stay at home to slow the spread of the virus (Sandford, 2020). These restrictions had knock-on effects for people's social lives, as many people were separated from friends and family for long periods of time. Restricted movement (and associated dampened spending) also devastated many economies, with more than 225 million full-time jobs being lost from the global economy and unemployment rates skyrocketing in many countries (Hassan, 2021). In short, the COVID-19 pandemic has been a global crisis that has severely impacted social and economic life in many countries.

The pandemic has had two competing effects in relation to the provision of social support to communities in need. On the one hand, the crisis amplified need: many more families than usual found themselves in need of support due to sickness or unemployment, especially families from vulnerable communities. On the other hand, because the global economy was straining and many families were facing difficult times, nonprofits and social programs faced reduced flows of income and support (CAF, 2021). Yet little is known about how people responded to these twin pressures: did the pressures of the pandemic constrain generosity, or were people able to find ways to help each other regardless? The purpose of this report is to answer this overarching question:

How have generosity behaviors manifested and changed during the COVID-19 pandemic?

We define generosity as all forms of behavior that people engage in with the intention of benefiting others (including people, animals, and environments).¹ Generosity behaviors therefore include both formal and informal support. Examples of formal generosity behaviors are donating money to charities, volunteering for nonprofit organizations, or giving blood. Informal generosity behaviors include helping people they know, helping strangers, and participating in grassroots community groups.

To answer our research question, we formed a team of researchers working in eleven countries to collect data on the formal and informal generosity practices that emerged during the COVID-19 pandemic. Countries included in the research project were Australia, Austria, Finland, Germany, Iceland, Israel, Norway, Russia, South Korea, Sweden, and the United States.

Country reports will be available online at: www.globalgenerosityresearch.com. This series is part of a broader research initiative from “The Global Generosity Project” led by Professor Pamala Wiepking from the Indiana University Lilly Family School of Philanthropy in the United States.

In this report, we focus on the Austrian context however we include some high-level comparisons with nine other countries where the same data was collected: Australia, Finland, Germany, Iceland, Norway, Russia, South Korea, Sweden and the United States.

By understanding generosity responses to this particular crisis, we can learn more about how individuals and societies respond to crises in general. Such knowledge can be used to develop policies and practices that ensure Austria will be able to withstand future shocks while maintaining a thriving and harmonious social fabric. To this end, we include a summary of our key findings and recommendations for both nonprofits and government.

3. Research Method

3.1 Participants and Procedure

Data were collected in 10 countries during the second half of 2020 and early 2021, with at least 644 participants per country (range 644 – 5900). In many countries, efforts were made to generate a nationally representative sample of participants.

The Austrian data represent the resident population over the age of 18. Data of 1.000 individuals were collected via an online questionnaire from a sample recruited from a web panel, conducted by a market research company (Gallup). The data were weighted to correspond to the age and gender distribution within Austria, as well as the distribution of religious affiliation, size of community, highest level of education, and occupation. This weighted version of the data is used in reporting national findings (sections 4.1 and 4.2), but not in the global comparison, which instead reports unweighted data (section 3).

The sample consisted of people aged between 18 and 86 years old ($M=48$, $SD=16,8$). 49% of them were male, 51% female, and 0,1% other persons. About 60% have a partner who lives in the same household, 14% have a partner living in another household, and 26% do not have a partner. One third of respondents (32%) have children aged 18 and younger living in their household. More than two thirds (38%) of the respondents stated that they are able to make ends meet very easily, easily or fairly easily.

3.2 Timing and COVID-19 Context

The Austrian survey was active from 3. – 14. August 2020. At that time in Austria the worst of the early phase of the pandemic had passed. The first confirmed COVID-19 case was on February 25th and the Austrian Government enacted a nationwide lockdown for all schools, universities, kindergartens, restaurants, bars and all shops except groceries on March 13th.

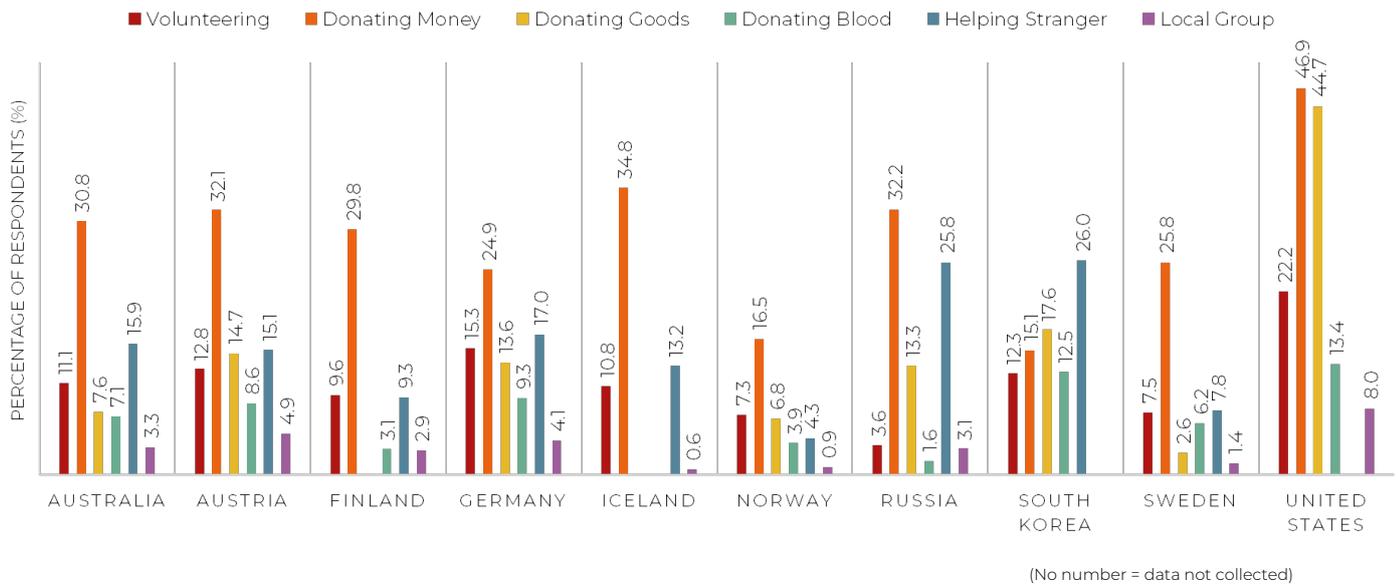
On March 15th, the parliament enacted a stay-at-home-order for one month. In total, more than 300,000 of the 8 million inhabitants lost their jobs in March 2020. The first relaxation of the measures came in mid-April, when small stores were allowed to reopen. Schools reopened in early May, but classes at all high schools and universities continued as distance learning until the end of the semester, i.e., until the end of June. Restaurants remained closed until mid-May, and hotels until the end of May.

The measures taken proved effective in containing the spread of the virus, and the number of new infections per day dropped from about 300-700 in March and early April to less than 100 per day at the end of April. They remained at this low level during May, June, and July. However, at the time of data collection in the first half of August, the beginning of a second COVID-19 wave was emerging. The number of new infections rose rapidly to well over 100 per day beginning around August 12. The first restrictions to contain a second wave of COVID-19 came into effect in mid-October, and the wave peaked in mid-November with more than 9,000 new infections per day (University of Vienna, 2021). At the time of data collection, however, the population was not yet aware of the renewed worsening of the situation.

4. Global Comparison

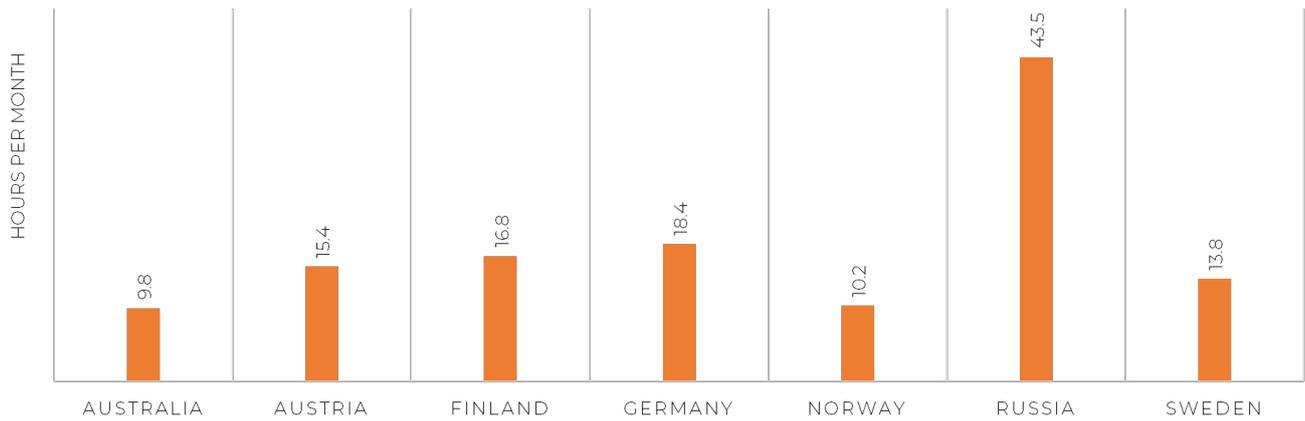
As seen in Figure 1, manifestations of generosity behaviors varied across national contexts. We asked participants which generosity behaviors they had engaged in since the beginning of the pandemic. Some countries did not ask about all behaviors. In most countries, donating money was the most common generosity behavior reported. This is also true of Austria. As in most of the other countries surveyed, around one third of all adults donated money.

Figure 1. Generosity responses during pandemic



A somewhat larger proportion than in many other countries, namely around one in eight adults, volunteered, donated goods or provided help to strangers. Likewise, the number of adults in Austria who formed local groups was comparatively high. 4.9% of all adults did so. This type of engagement was thus only more pronounced in the U.S. In comparison to other countries, Russians and South Koreans were more likely to help strangers, and Americans were more likely to donate money and goods and volunteer time.

The extent of generosity behaviors varied significantly across nations². Respondents in different countries showed large differences in terms of the number of hours they volunteered each month (see Figure 2). Adults in Austria spent an average of 15.4 hours per month in the period from March to May 2020, which is similar to the level in Germany and Finland. Compared to Russia, however, this level of engagement is very low. Of the hours volunteered per month (Figure 2), Russia stands out with 43.5 hours, about 2.5 times more hours than volunteers in Austria, Finland, Sweden and Germany. Yet Russia also had the lowest percentage of volunteers during the pandemic (Figure 1: 3.6%), compared with 22.2% of Americans, 15.3% of Germans and 12.8% Austrians. The relative low average number of volunteer hours in Austria could be explained, among other things, by the fact that a general stay-at-home order was in effect in Austria from mid-March to mid-April. During this period, but also afterwards, personal contacts were largely avoided, which is probably also reflected in the low number of hours of volunteer work. What is more, with schools and kindergartens closed, adults with younger children tended to have no time for volunteering.

Figure 2. Average number of hours per month spent volunteering during the COVID-19 pandemic

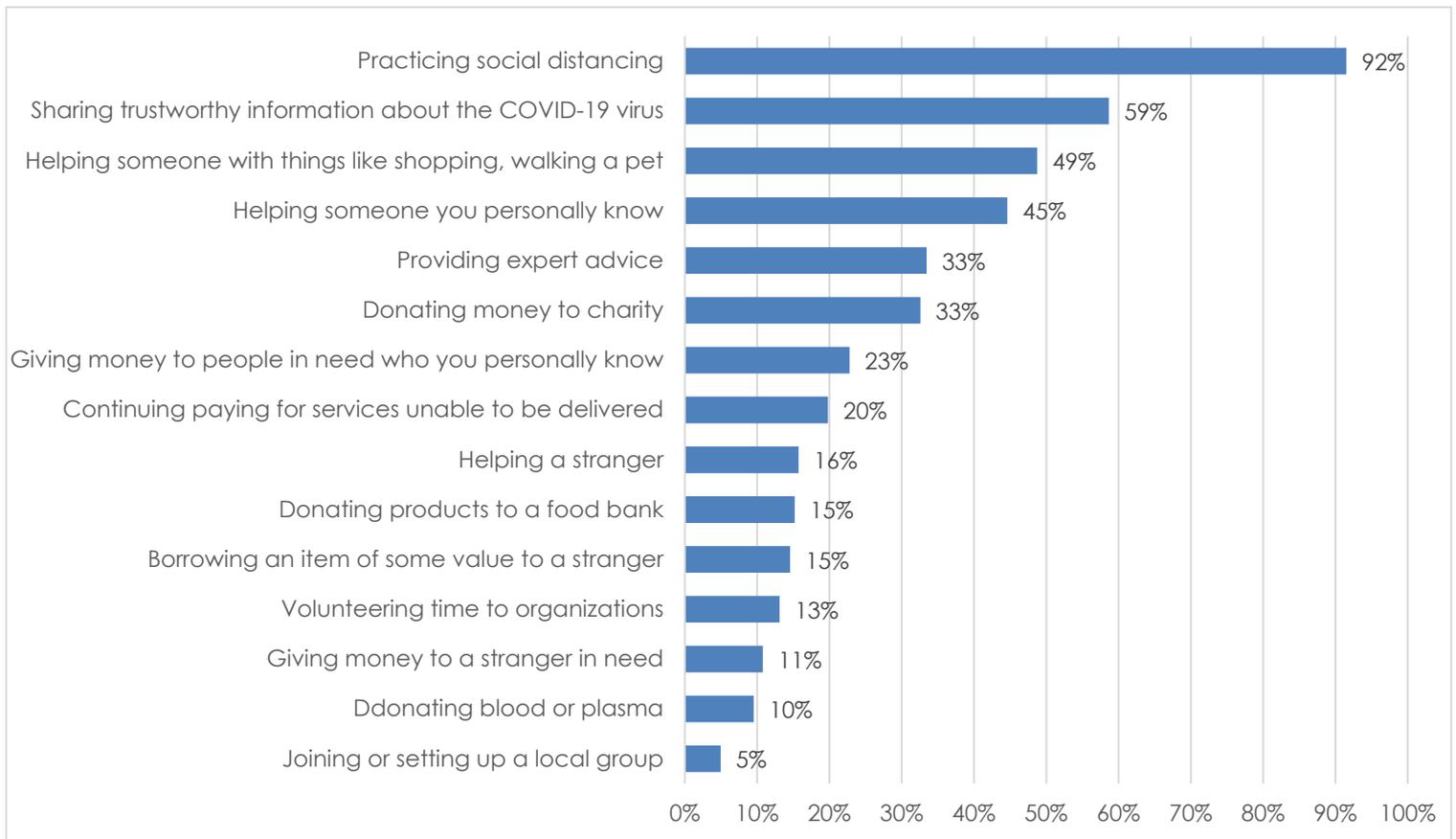
5. National Findings

The key purpose of this report is to examine how Austrians responded to the COVID-19 crisis; in particular, how individuals came together to help support those directly or indirectly affected by COVID-19. Below we consider the different forms of generosity behavior that were common in the Austria during the pandemic and how these generosity behaviors changed during the pandemic. We then discuss a particular example of how generosity manifested in Austria during the crisis.

5.1 Generosity During COVID-19

People in Austria showed incredible high levels of generosity behavior in the period following the outbreak of the pandemic. More than 90% practiced social distancing and almost 60% shared trustworthy information about the COVID-19 virus (see Figure 3).

Figure 3. Manifestations of generosity in Austria during the COVID-19 pandemic



What stands out most is that every second adult has done informal volunteer work by helping acquaintances, going shopping, or walking the dog for someone. Informal help provided to strangers was also widespread. 16% indicated that they helped a stranger, 15% that they borrowed an item of value to a stranger. A comparatively small proportion of adults, only 13%, volunteered for a nonprofit organization, known as formal volunteering.

Thus, there was more informal than formal volunteering, but there was also a comparatively large proportion of the population that donated money (informally) directly to those in need rather than (formally) to an organization. As can be seen from Figure 3, 33% of all adults donated money to an organization while 23% gave money directly to acquaintances in need and 11% to strangers in need.

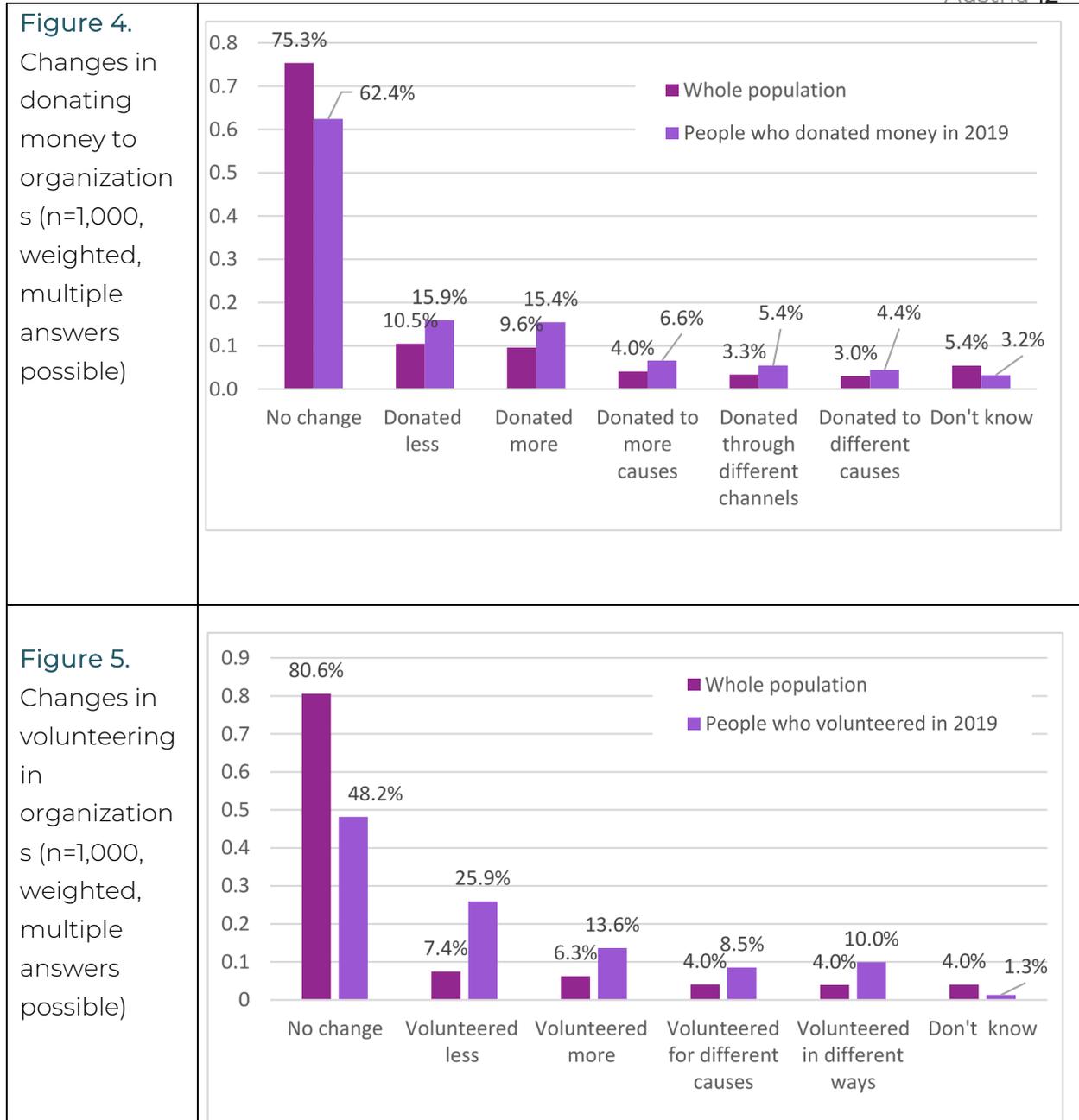
5.2 Changes in Generosity

How has the pandemic changed people's generosity? Data show that participation in informal volunteering increased after the outbreak of the pandemic, and it increased tremendously. From previous surveys in Austria we know that usually about 30% of the population engage in informal volunteering by helping neighbors, acquaintances or strangers (BMASK 2019). In the six months after the outbreak of the pandemic, however, almost 50% of the population engaged in helping others. Since the shorter reference period (March to August 2020) resulted in higher participation rates than in usual surveys covering a 12-month period, participation in informal volunteering has clearly increased.

As regards formal engagement, findings are less clear. We know from previous surveys in Austria that about two-thirds of the population donate money to an organization and about 30% volunteer for an organization (BMASK 2019, Neumayr/Schober 2012). In the period after the outbreak of the pandemic, the corresponding shares were much lower, almost half as high. Only 33% stated to engage in formal giving and only 13% stated to volunteer for a nonprofit organization. Whether this decline in numbers is due to the pandemic and accompanying measures or to the fact that the six-month reference period resulted in lower participation rates than in usual surveys, which cover 12 months, requires further investigation.

We did that in the next step. We asked people directly whether they changed their engagement after the COVID-19 outbreak. Figures 4 and 5 show that more than three-quarters of respondents have not changed their formal giving or volunteering behaviour (see pink columns). Of the remaining 25%, about 10% said they donated more and just as many said they donated less. Similarly, out of the 20% who stated that they had changed their volunteering behaviour, about equal numbers reported to volunteer more or less (7% each). The remainder engaged in other or multiple causes or changed channels or modes of engagement (e.g., online volunteering).

However, it is important to keep in mind that the majority of those 75% who said they did not change their involvement had not donated or volunteered before the pandemic - and did not do so afterwards. If we look only at those who were already engaged before the outbreak of the pandemic, we see much stronger changes in behaviour (see purple columns in Figures 4 and 5). More than 50% of those who volunteered before the pandemic and almost 40% of those who donated money before the pandemic have changed their behavior. Again, while roughly equal numbers donated more as well as less (15%), the percentage of those who volunteered less (26%) is much higher than those who volunteered more (14%). This is probably because many forms of volunteering simply could not be done due to the lockdown and orders to stay home.



What factors may explain why some people respond to the crisis by decreasing their engagement, others by increasing it, and still others by not changing at all? Multivariate analyses show that personal concern about COVID-19 has the greatest effect on changes in philanthropic behavior. Individuals who perceived the pandemic as very threatening as well as those who perceived the pandemic as very liberating were most likely to show a change in behavior. In contrast, respondents who reported being neither strongly positively nor strongly negatively affected were more likely not to have changed their behavior (Litofcenko et al. 2020). In terms of the direction of change, findings are somewhat counterintuitive. Those who were negatively affected and perceived the pandemic as threatening were more likely to increase their engagement. Exactly the opposite was done by those who were positively affected and perceived the pandemic as liberating; they tended to decrease their engagement. This finding is consistent with psychological research on how people cope with existential threats, stressing the important role of personal hardship for the development of compassion (Alonso-Ferres et al., 2020; Lim & DeSteno, 2016). Overall, it seems that personal suffering makes people more generous than higher levels of personal resources such as time and money.

Analyses also show that people under 30 were more likely to change their behavior compared to older people and that people with higher levels of education were more likely to increase their engagement. People with financial difficulties were more likely to decrease their donation behaviour, but not their engagement in formal volunteering (Litofcenko et al. 2020).

5.3 Case Study

The overwhelming engagement in informal helping behaviour was certainly also due to the numerous initiatives that were launched immediately after the outbreak of the pandemic. Especially in larger cities, there have been many initiatives to support other residents in apartment buildings who belong to the at-risk group, so that they do not have to leave their apartments if possible. Such initiatives have been coordinated by private individuals, non-profit organizations or even the government (see Figure 6). All called for "looking out for each other" and provided templates by means of which people could offer their help to their neighbors in the same apartment building in a simple and uncomplicated way.

The templates circulating on social media just had to be printed out, their name and phone numbers inserted, and then hung on the bulletin board in the apartment building. By these notices, residents offered to go shopping for elderly residents or residents at-risk. Many people felt directly called upon to help through these initiatives, and they also made it very easy to help. We know from research that 'being asked' is one of the most important explanations for whether someone engages or not (Andreoni/Payne 2003, Bryant et al. 2003, Neumayr/Handy 2019) .

<p>Caritas & Du #TeamNächstenliebe Wir schau'n aufeinander. teamnächstenliebe.at</p> <p>Brauchen Sie Hilfe oder gehören Sie zur Risikogruppe? Gerne unterstütze ich Sie.</p> <p>Mein Name ist _____</p> <p>Ich gehöre nicht zur Risikogruppe, deshalb möchte ich Ihnen gerne helfen, gesund zu bleiben. Gerne kann ich</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="radio"/> für Sie Einkaufen gehen. <input type="radio"/> für Sie mitkochen. <input type="radio"/> für Sie Medikamente besorgen. <input type="radio"/> für Sie etwas online bestellen bzw. liefern lassen. <input type="radio"/> _____ <input type="radio"/> _____ <p>Rufen Sie mich einfach an unter _____ oder schicken Sie mir ein E-Mail _____</p> <p>Helfen wir einander gut durch diese Krise. Gemeinsam schaffen wir das!</p> <p>#TeamNächstenliebe</p>	<p>LIFE RADIO HILFT CORONA-EINKAUFSHILFE</p> <p>HALLO LIEBE NACHBARN!</p> <p>Mein Name ist _____ Ich bin jung, ohne Vorerkrankungen und gehöre nicht zur CORONA-RISIKOGRUPPE.</p> <p>Falls Sie 60+ sind oder zur Risikogruppe gehören:</p> <p>LASSEN SIE MICH IHNEN HELFEN!!!!!!</p> <p>Ich erledige gerne Ihre Einkäufe, damit Sie nicht mehr als nötig vor die Tür gehen müssen.</p> <p>Hier ist meine Handynummer: _____</p> <p>Liebe Grüße! _____</p>	<p>Liebe Nachbarschaft, ich schau auf dich.</p> <p>An alle Bewohner, gerne biete ich allen NachbarInnen, die zur Risikogruppe gehören, meine Unterstützung an. Sollten Sie Hilfe brauchen, melden Sie sich bitte bei:</p> <p>Name: _____ Name: _____ Telefonnummer: _____ Telefonnummer: _____ Türnummer: _____ Türnummer: _____</p> <p><small>Bitte groß und leserlich schreiben</small></p> <p>Schau auf dich, schau auf mich.</p> <p>So schützen wir uns. = Bundesregierung</p>
<p>[Do you need help or belong to the at-risk group? I am happy to help you. My name is... I do not belong to the at risk-group and thus would like to help you to stay healthy. I am happy to</p>	<p>[Hi dear neighbours! My name is... I am young and do not belong to the at-risk group. In case you are 60+ or belong to the at-risk group, let me help you! I will be happy to do your</p>	<p>[Dear neighbors, I am looking after you. To all residents. I am happy to offer my support to all neighbors who belong to the at-risk group. Should you need help, please</p>

<i>do Just give me a call at ... or send me an email. Let's help each other get through the crisis well.]</i>	<i>shopping so you don't have to go out the door more than necessary.]</i>	<i>contact me at: Name:.... Phone number:.... Apartment number:....]</i>
Template issued by nonprofit organisation (Caritas Österreich, 2021)	Template issued by private radio station (Life Radio, 2021)	Template issued by government (BMDW, 2021)
Figure 6. Templates to offer informal help to neighbors		

6. Conclusion

In this section we briefly summarize the findings about Austrians' generosity behaviors during the COVID-19 pandemic and elaborate potential implications both for government policy and nonprofit management.

6.1 Key Findings

There are three key findings from this report. First, a much higher rate of people provided informal help to friends, relatives and strangers during than before the COVID-19 pandemic. In the months following the outbreak of COVID-19 in Austria, nearly one in two adult helped someone, for example with grocery shopping, walking a pet, or similar activities. Only about 30% of the population engaged in this way before the pandemic.

Second, a quarter of the population has changed their engagement in volunteering or in donating money to nonprofit organizations during the pandemic. However, this also means that three quarters of the population have not changed their giving or volunteering behavior despite the drastic crisis. Those most likely to change their behavior were those who felt affected by the pandemic. Somewhat counterintuitively, those who perceived the pandemic as threatening tended to increase their engagement while those who perceived the pandemic as liberating tended to decrease their engagement.

Third, people who had volunteered or donated money to nonprofit organizations before the pandemic were more likely to change their generosity behavior than those who had not done so. Just over half of this group changed their engagement. In terms of the direction of change, those who donated more money because of the pandemic and those who donated less money were about evenly balanced. In regards to volunteering, more people decreased than increased the number of hours they volunteered during the pandemic.

6.2 Implications for Nonprofits

Findings suggest that people who already volunteer for or donate money to a nonprofit organization are those most likely to adapt their involvement in times of change. In addition, findings show that the majority of the population is willing to help, provided they are called upon to take concrete action and they can offer their help as low-threshold and unbureaucratic as possible.

During times of crisis nonprofit organizations can:

- Make specific offers to existing donors and volunteers on how they can help and in which (alternative) ways they can get involved. They are comparatively easy to mobilize, provided they are shown concrete opportunities for action. It would be a pity to lose them just because the channels they have used so far no longer work (e.g. street collections or face-to-face volunteering)
- Raise public awareness of the needs of a nonprofit's target group and where the organization needs support. The lower the threshold and the less bureaucratic it is to get involved in the short term, and the more clearly the help needed is defined, the more people are prepared to get involved.
- Support individuals to coordinate private, informal help –mutual aid- so that people can better support people in their local community during a crisis. Data show that neighborhood support works very well. Organizations can get more people involved in informal helping behaviour if they can support the coordination of such initiatives and use their reputation to increase trust in such initiatives.

6.3 Implications for Government Policy

Results suggest that people are very happy to help informally as well as formally, provided they are motivated, coordinated and supported, and receive recognition for their commitment.

During times of crisis governments can:

- Just like organizations, governments can get more people involved in informal helping behavior if they support the coordination and use their reputation to increase trust in such initiatives. Informal neighborly assistance makes it possible for local help to be provided quickly in times of crisis. Public recognition of informal assistance can help improve the image of involvement and increase the participation of the population.
- The government should ensure a legal framework that enables and facilitates volunteering (in times of crisis) (e.g. insurance, compensation for employers if employee cannot show up due to volunteering,...).
- Provide public funding instruments which enable nonprofits to use funding more flexibly. The fight against the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic has shown that such funding instruments reduce nonprofits' vulnerability and allow them to continue to provide their services even in times of crisis.

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8. Appendix

8.1 Notes

1. A full overview of generosity behaviors can be found on the Open Science Framework (<https://osf.io/mznqu/>).
2. Due to unusual outliers, the data has been winsorized for two countries at the 99th (Australia) or 95th (Russia) percentile.



The Institute for Nonprofit Management at WU Vienna develops, disseminates, and teaches high-quality insights that address organizational challenges of nonprofit organizations, civic engagement, and the nonprofit sector. More information can be found here: <https://www.wu.ac.at/en/npo>

