



Generosity in Times of Crisis

Swedish Helping Behaviours During
the COVID-19 Pandemic

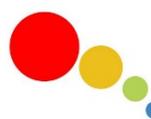
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We are a collaborative research group involving over 50 scholars from more than 20 countries led by Professor Pamala Wiepking from the Indiana University Lilly Family School of Philanthropy.

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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 1149 Swedes in late October and early November 2020 to understand how their generosity behaviours manifested and changed during the COVID-19 pandemic. By generosity we mean all forms of behaviour that people engage in with the intention of benefiting others (including people, animals, and environments).

Two key findings emerged:

1. Several new generosity behaviours emerged in response to the pandemic, including helping a friend in need and helping with everyday tasks.
2. The pandemic had a relatively limited effect on the more traditional expressions of generosity behaviour.

Managerial implications. Nonprofits may wish to:

- Consider that the generosity behaviour of volunteers and donors may be less affected by the crisis than their organisation is, so it may pay off to continue to reach out to them.
- Notice that the single most common reason for not practicing any generosity behaviour is not being offered an opportunity. Therefore, ensure there are opportunities to engage people.
- At the same time, also be careful to not to engage with more new volunteers or donors than can be handled, as people's generosity might erode if they are not included or appreciated enough.
- Consider that strict restrictions may limit opportunities to practice generosity behaviours, particularly in relation to volunteering. Create new ways for people to contribute or volunteer, such as online.

Policy implications. Governments and peak bodies may wish to:

- Realise that government policies may not be supported by growing generosity among the public, and are therefore needed in times of crisis. However also remember that Swedes may continue the similar levels of generosity compared with pre-pandemic levels.
- Recognise that the cost of wage subsidies and other crisis related financial supports could be a good investment, since the basic safety it provides promotes trust and generosity.
- Remember that claims about the positive effects of high generalised trust and volunteerism should be viewed cautiously in a time of crisis. Swedes did follow voluntary health advice such as social distancing, but not as much as other countries with similar regulations.
- Consider that light restrictions may signal a lack of emergency – and this may lead people to carry on as usual with their generosity behaviours.

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 behaviours manifested and changed during the COVID-19 pandemic?

We define generosity as all forms of behaviour that people engage in with the intention of benefiting others (including people, animals, and environments)¹. Generosity behaviours therefore include both formal and informal support. Examples of formal generosity behaviours are donating money to charities, volunteering for nonprofit organisations, or giving blood. Informal generosity behaviours 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 Swedish context and compare high-level findings to those from another nine countries where scholars also collected data about generosity during the pandemic: Australia, Austria, Finland, Germany, Iceland, Norway, Russia, South Korea 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 Sweden 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 eleven 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.

In Sweden, 1149 people completed an online survey about their generosity behaviours since the start of the pandemic. The survey was relatively short and most respondents could complete it in just a few minutes. The Swedish survey was a direct translation (from English to Swedish) of the international survey module created collectively for the project. Participants for the survey were recruited by professional data collectors Enkätfabriken (<https://enkatabriken.se>), using a panel managed by Norstat (<https://norstatgroup.com/>). Among the participants there were 533 men (46.4%) and 616 women (54.6%) and their ages ranged from 18 to 89 years ($M=49.12$, $SD=18.08$). The participants were asked how difficult it was for them to make ends meet financially and 83.4% responded with replies between “fairly easy” and “very easy”. 48.7% replied that they had completed at least some level of university education, which is just slightly higher than the national average (44%). A total of 2856 people were invited to take the survey and 1209 accepted, 61 of these did not complete the survey. The response rate was 42%.

3.2 Timing and COVID-19 Context

The Swedish survey was active from the 26th of October to the 3rd of November 2020. Sweden was at that time experiencing the early stages of the second wave of the pandemic, as the number of cases were increasing steadily, following a period of fewer cases during the summer and early autumn. The first Swedish case had been confirmed on the 31st of January and the number cases, hospitalisations and deaths were relatively high during the spring, for example much higher than in neighbouring Nordic countries. The total number of deaths due to Covid-19 in Sweden in late July 2021 was 14,655. The figure for Denmark at the same time was 2548, for Finland 982 and Norway 799 (Statista 2021). This difference is obviously not compensated for by the fact that Sweden has almost twice the population as each of these other three countries.

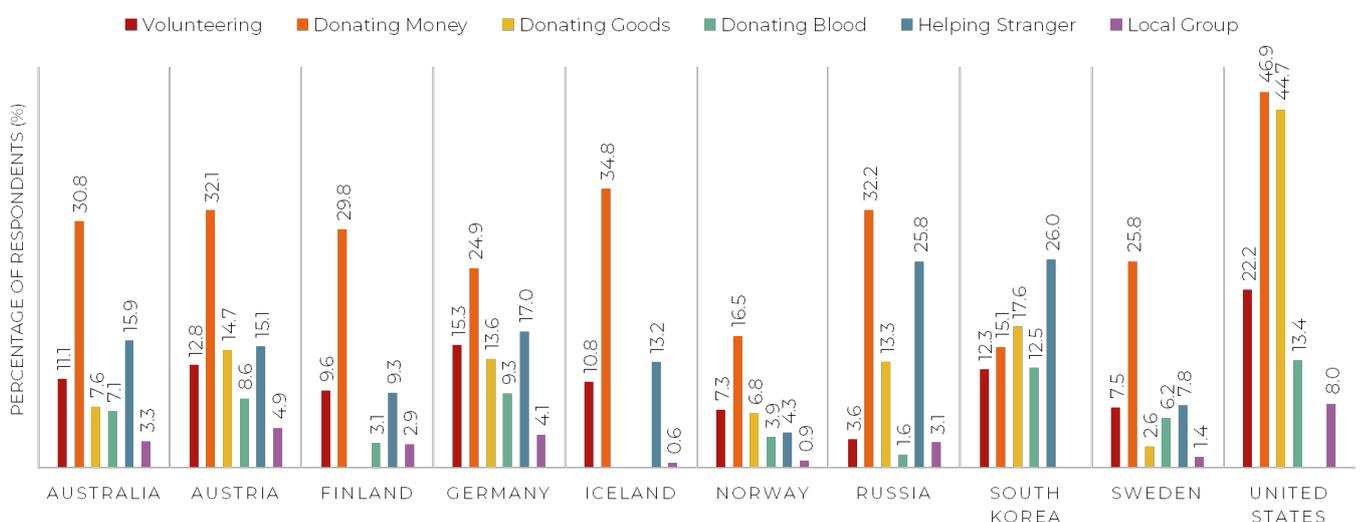
There were at the time of the data collection restrictions on the size of public and private gatherings (events, restaurants, travels). Sweden never implemented the type of “hard” lockdowns seen in most other countries in Europe. The Swedish policy instead relied on voluntary good behaviour and that people would trust public health agencies and follow recommendations for things like social distancing and hand sanitation. Among the motives for this strategy given by the government was that Swedes have a high level of trust in institutions and that people in general “act responsibly” (Regeringen, 2020). The recommendations were themselves less restrictive than in most other European countries, the first recommendation of face masks in public transportation by the Public Health Agency of Sweden went into effect as late as on the 7th of January 2021 (Folkhälsomyndigheten, 2020).

The economic impact of the pandemic was as severe in Sweden as in most other European countries, despite the limited restrictions and lack of a complete lockdown. A total of 135 000 people received notification of termination of employment between March 2020 and August 2021, most of these during the early stages of the pandemic (Ekonomifakta, 2021).

4. Global Comparison

As seen in Figure 1, manifestations of generosity behaviours varied across national contexts. We asked participants which generosity behaviours they had engaged in since the beginning of the pandemic. Some countries did not ask about all behaviours. In most countries, donating money was the most common generosity behaviour reported. This was also the case in Sweden, with volunteering and helping a stranger almost tied in second place. A natural point of reference are the neighbouring Nordic countries Finland and Norway, which are in many ways similar to Sweden (politically, economically, culturally). The numbers for volunteering are about the same in these countries, while there are more responses for donating money in Finland and Sweden than in Norway. In comparison to other countries, Russians and South Koreans were more likely to help strangers, and Americans were more likely to donate money, goods and volunteer time.

Figure 1. Generosity responses during pandemic

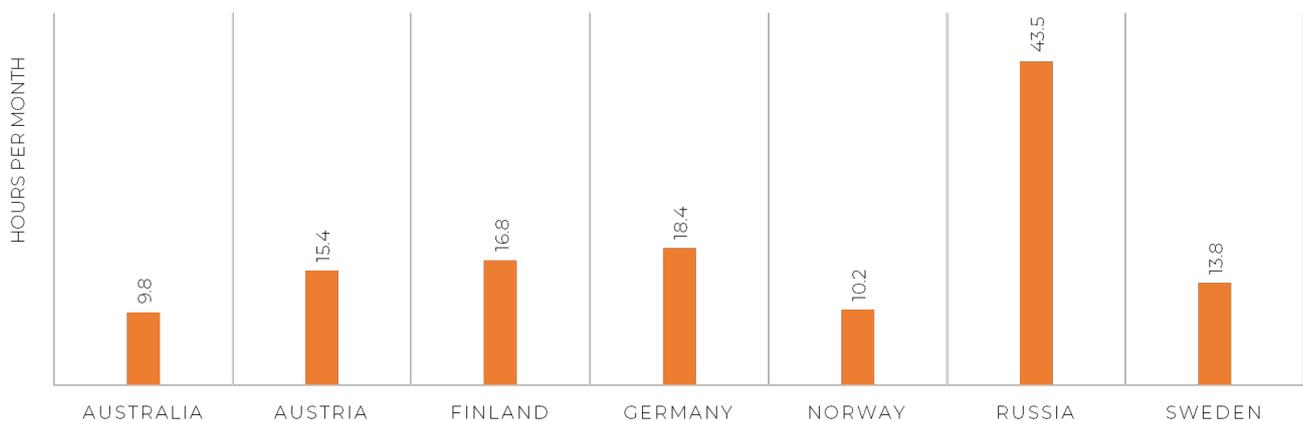


(No number = data not collected)

The extent of generosity behaviours varied significantly across nations. Respondents in different countries showed large differences in terms of the number of hours they volunteered each month² (see Figure 2). Swedes spent just under 14 hours a month volunteering during the pandemic, which is lower than in most countries in the comparison. The difference is relatively small, however, and the Swedish number is clearly comparable to those in Austria and Finland.

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.

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 Swedes responded to the COVID-19 crisis; how individuals came together to support those directly or indirectly affected by COVID-19. Below we consider the different forms of generosity behaviour that were common in Sweden during the pandemic and how these generosity behaviours changed during the pandemic. We then discuss a particular example of how generosity was manifested in Sweden during the crisis.

5.1 Generosity During COVID-19

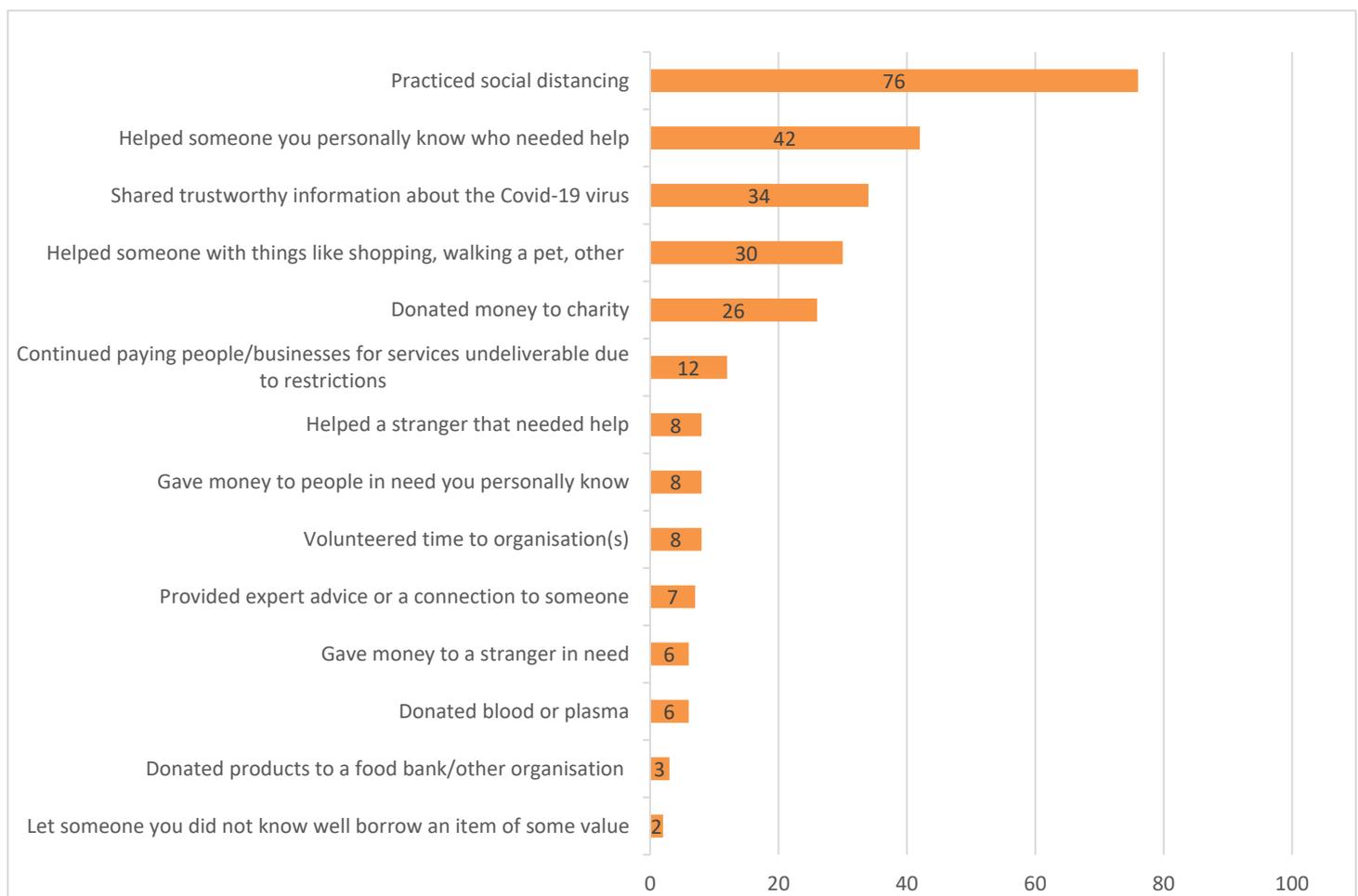
Sweden, more than most other countries, relied on positive behaviour as a complement or in many cases even replacement for stricter measures to contain the spread of the virus. Several of the generosity behaviours covered in this study could be seen as examples of such positive behaviours. With that in mind, how generous were the Swedes during the pandemic? The results are found in Figure 3.

The most common generosity behaviour was keeping social distancing, which 76% of the respondents said they had done. This is a high number but not an extreme number considering what a high-profile issue social distancing was. All the public health agencies, which Swedes are assumed to have high levels of trust in, recommended social distancing from the start and with great intensity, which raises questions as to why 24% did not practice social distancing. Relatively many performed different forms of informal helping, including sharing information about the virus.

Donating money to charity was the most common behaviour among the more traditional types of civic engagement. The pandemic had been active for 7-8 months at the time of the survey, which makes it somewhat surprising that only 26% had donated money since it began. Different studies typically estimate that 60-80% of all Swedes donate money in a normal year, which means that the number for the pandemic is a little low but not to the extreme (Vamstad, 2020). Volunteering also seems on the low side, with only 8% saying that they had volunteered time to an organisation. This is, of course, easier to explain as much of the volunteering in Sweden is normally performed in organisations that closed their activities during the pandemic, not least sports and leisure organisations.

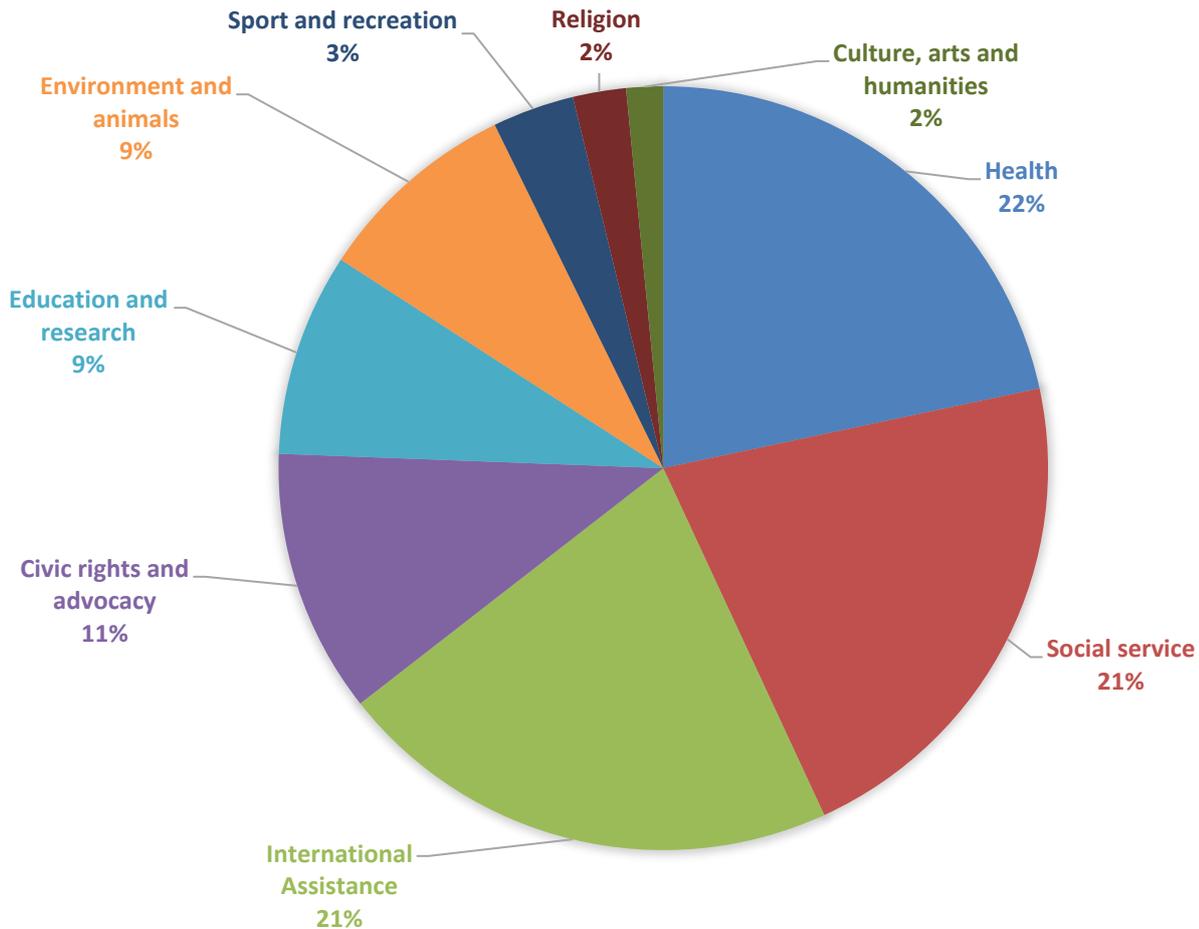
Among the least common generosity behaviours are giving money to a stranger (6%), donate products to food banks/other organisations (3%) and lending things of value (2%). Food banks are very rare in Sweden and it is also difficult to estimate how common these other behaviours normally are. For blood donations (6%), the number seems rather high, as only about 3% donate blood regularly in Sweden (GEBLOD.NU, 2021). Overall, Swedes engaged in various generosity behaviours during the pandemic. Only 8% stated that they practiced none of the behaviours, although that is perhaps not a very low number considering that they did not even practice social distancing. It could, in conclusion, not be said that the crisis led to an exceptional outpouring of generosity in Sweden, but also not to a radical reduction of it.

Figure 3. Incidence of different generosity behaviours, (percent)



Among the 26% that donated money to charity, amounts varied from 2 SEK (0,25 US\$) to 50000 SEK (\$5800). On average Swedes gave 2172 SEK (\$252) to charitable organisations and the most common donation amount was 500 SEK (\$58). These numbers are very similar to what you see under normal circumstances (Vamstad, 2020). Figure 4 shows how the total number of donations were distributed between different causes (each individual donor can give to several causes). The most donations went to organisations in the health area, closely followed by organisations dedicated to social service and international assistance. It is not surprising that a lot of donations go to health during a pandemic, especially considering that this category includes large organisations supporting medical research (cancer, heart/lung, dementia etc.) that have many loyal donors. It may seem more surprising that 21% of the donations went to international assistance, but this is in line with the normal giving patterns in Sweden, where international assistance has been the most popular cause for decades (Vamstad and von Essen, 2013). The most interesting result is the category social service. This is traditionally not a very significant cause in Swedish giving and these results may possibly indicate growing support for domestic social causes in Sweden during the pandemic.

Figure 4. Types of non-profit organisations donated to during pandemic, (percent)



Only a small number of people chose to start or join a community group during the pandemic, as seen in Figure 2. These responded to the pandemic in various ways, of which here are some examples, in the respondents' own words:

"Facebook-group for supporting people who are in quarantine"

"Helping elderly with grocery shopping and contacts with authorities, bank businesses and health care etc."

"My best friend and I started a Facebook group called "Handlingshjälpen Strömstad" [Shopping-aid Strömstad]. We collected contact to all who could help grocery shopping or do errands for sick or people in risk groups. I personally was the "switch board" as most called me who then passed along the request to someone in the group who could help."

"Football club that lost income from audience and that would not be able to continue without support from members."

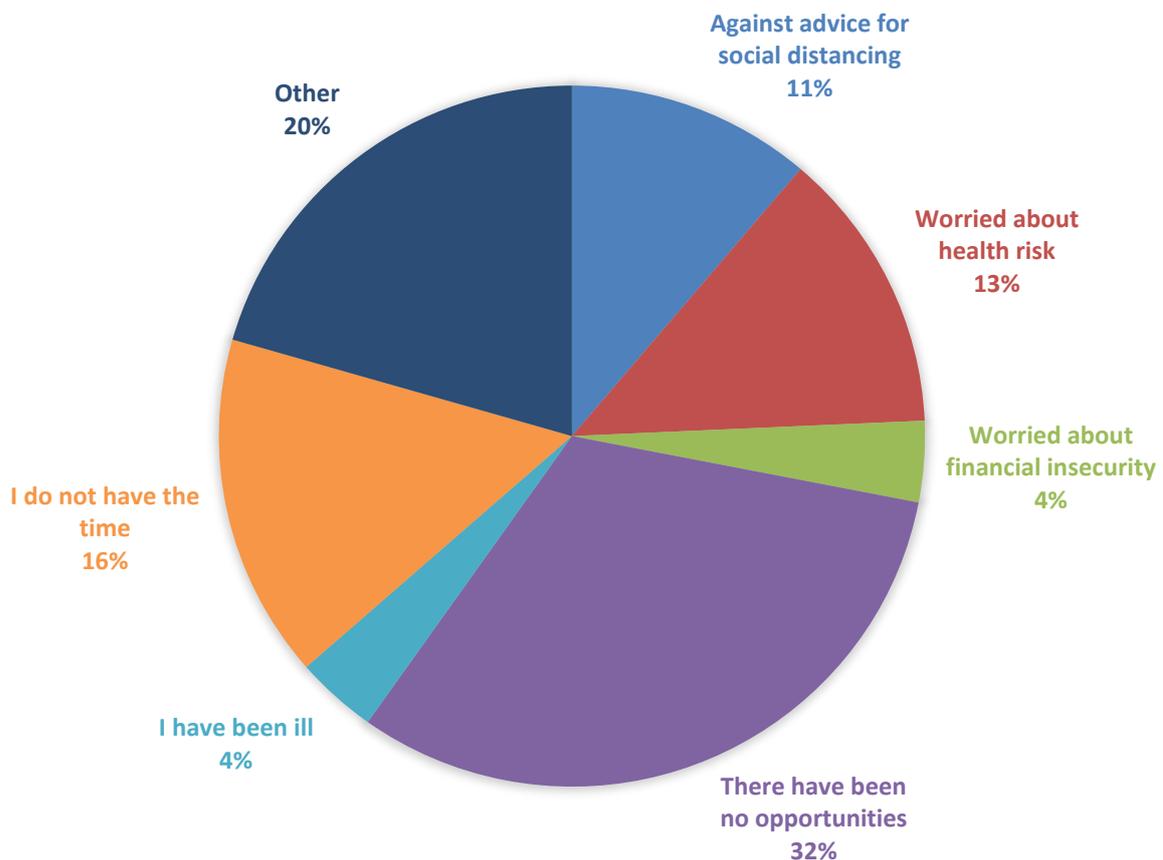
"Helping musicians collect money through online films and Swish (Swedish mobile payment system)."

"Production of protective materials for health care. Participated in production."

"I joined the Tenants' Association's support group but got no assignment. Also joined a Facebook group but got no assignment."

The respondents who stated that they had practiced none of the generosity behaviours were also a rather small group of 8%. These were offered some alternatives as reasons for not practicing any of the behaviours, and they could choose more than one. The results can be seen in Figure 5.

Figure 5. Stated reasons for no generosity behaviour, (percent)



The second most common reply was “other”. These respondents were asked to elaborate in text why they had not practiced any of the behaviours. The results showed that about a quarter of the text replies actually concerned being in a risk group in one way or the other, meaning that the number for “worried about health risk” is an underestimation. The other replies offered some insights into the type of considerations people make in regard to generosity behaviours. Here are some examples:

“I work at a secondary school, that says everything”

“I work at a grocery store so I am quite exposed and worry I may expose someone unknowingly”

“My husband has diabetes, I do not want to risk him getting ill”

“Why should I? We have the highest taxes in the world!”

“Not necessary”

5.2 Changes in Generosity

One thing shared by all generosity behaviours in the study is that they were more common in 2019 than during the pandemic, as seen in Figure 6. There is, however, no reason to conclude that the pandemic caused a dramatic drop in generosity, the 12 months of 2019 is simply a longer time period than the 7-8 months that the pandemic had lasted at the time of the survey. Instead the levels of generosity seem quite stable over the two periods, the pandemic neither increased nor decreased the generosity of Swedes. The number for donations of money, which seemed a little low compared to the normal numbers for Sweden, here appear more constant as respondents in this sample apparently donated less than average before the pandemic. It seems that the pandemic made neither more nor less people donate money, considering the difference in time periods.

The pandemic number for donations of blood and plasma seems a little high considering the shorter time period. A possible reason for this is that blood donors is a distinct group that give regularly, and that 7-8 months is long enough to have at least one appointment to donate.

That the level of generosity is relatively constant could possibly be explained by the relatively limited economic consequences for the groups of people typically most likely to display generosity behaviours. The hardest hit by unemployment were young, low income people in the service industry, and these people, for good reasons, traditionally score relatively low on most measurements of generosity behaviors. The middle-aged middle and upper class, with high education and stable jobs, are both generous volunteers and donors, and were mostly not affected economically by the pandemic (Vamstad, 2020). People in between these groups, in terms of job safety and generosity, also benefited from government subsidies that provided a steady income despite, for example, the halt of production in the manufacturing industry. Those, relatively few, who did change their generosity behaviour, mainly did it because of their own health status or because opportunities to volunteer disappeared, not for economic reasons. The 8% who said that they did not practice any generosity behaviour during the pandemic represent only 86 respondents, so it is difficult to analyse their stated reasons statistically. It is noteworthy, however, that only 4 out of these 86 said their lack of generosity had to do with financial insecurity.

Figure 6. Frequency of generosity behaviours during 2019 compared with 2020

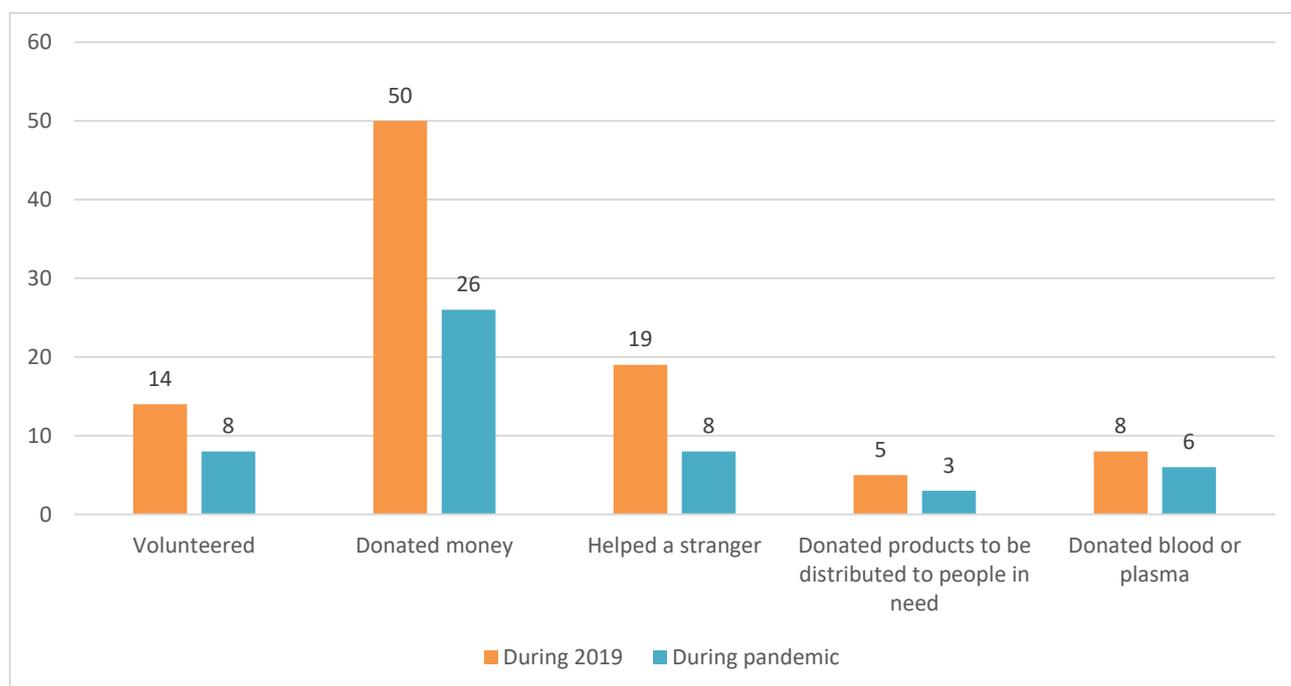
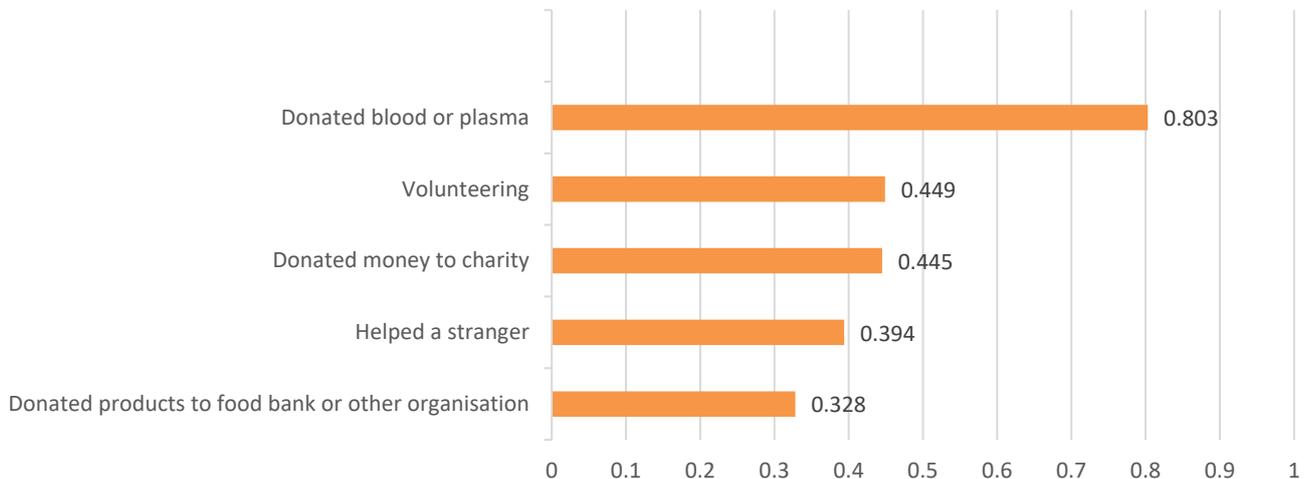


Figure 6 is rather limited in what it can say about changes in behaviour, both because of the different time frames but also because it represents aggregated data about the behaviour of a lot of people. One way to refine the analysis at least a little is to bring it down to the individual level and ask if the people practicing a particular behaviour during the pandemic also did it in 2019, and vice versa. This analysis, of course, also suffers from the difference in length of the periods but it might allow us to compare which generosity behaviours that are the most constant and which show the greatest difference before and during the pandemic.

Figure 7 shows the results from a simple correlation between behaviours in 2019 and during the pandemic. The value 1 would indicate that all the same people practiced the behaviour in both 2019 and before the pandemic, while 0 would say that none of the same people did the same things in during the two periods.

Figure 7. Correlations of generation behaviours before and during pandemic



5.3 Case Study

This report has so far focused on the generosity behaviour of individuals. Much of this generosity has been channelled through individual actions and new initiatives to meet the extraordinary challenges posed by the pandemic. It is important, however, to remember that much fundraising and voluntary work has, naturally, been organised by old, established civil society organisations. A good example of this is the “Good Neighbours” (*Goda grannar*) initiative that was founded and organised by the Swedish Union of Tenants, in response to the pandemic.



Good Neighbours Initiative Image: Knutsson (2020)

The Swedish Union of Tenants is a federative organisation founded in 1923 that organises 538,000 households at the local, regional and national level in Sweden. Its prominent role in the Swedish housing sector is almost unique in an international comparison and the organisation can offer a good infrastructure for volunteering and other generosity behaviour, even in a time of crisis (Rolf, 2020). The Good Neighbours programme was launched in March of 2020, at the beginning of the pandemic in Sweden. The main purpose of the programme is to connect volunteers with self-isolating people belonging to risk groups in their area.

The assistance that the volunteers provide takes many forms and initiatives vary somewhat between local sections of the union, but the most common assistance is now familiar tasks like grocery shopping and other simple errands. The programme is also intended to provide self-isolating individuals, mainly elderly people, with some safe social interaction. The Swedish Union of Tenants represents the interests of many members and therefore has a relatively large staff in place for communicating with them. They were therefore able to recruit 4500 volunteers in just a matter of about two weeks.

The, now former, head of the national organisation, Jonas Nyberg, expressed some of his thoughts about the importance of “Good Neighbours,” in the Union’s membership magazine. He pointed to the fact that tenants were harder hit by the pandemic than home owners, especially people with an immigrant background living in crowded living conditions, for example in some of the suburbs of Stockholm (Andersson 2020). This group has proven to be especially difficult for local authorities to reach with information about the pandemic and the voluntary assistance by Good Neighbours is therefore an important complement.

6. Conclusion

In this section, we briefly summarise the findings about Swedes' generosity behaviours during the COVID-19 pandemic and elaborate potential implications both for government policy and not-for-profit management.

6.1 Key Findings

There are two key findings from this report. Firstly, the generosity behaviours of Swedes changed during the crisis in the sense that the four most common generosity behaviours were, more or less, related to the pandemic. Helping a friend in need, and helping with everyday tasks, ranked high among the most common behaviour and even though Sweden has a strong tradition for such helping under normal circumstances, these behaviours stand out as important during the crisis.

Secondly, the traditional generosity behaviours did not change much at all, except for volunteering, which for very practical reasons went down as many organisations closed their normal activities. Other research indicates that many organisations faced serious challenges during the crisis, both economic challenges, and challenges like maintaining essential functions and avoiding spreading the disease. These findings indicate that the organisations' volunteers and donors were less affected by the crisis and that generosity behaviour was relatively resilient in this crisis.

6.2 Implications for Nonprofits

Results suggest that generosity behaviours are resilient and that people who practiced them before the crisis will continue to do so if given a reasonable chance. A crisis like this could also be an opportunity to involve new volunteers, considering the generosity shown through specifically covid-19 related behaviours.

During times of crisis nonprofits can:

- Consider that the generosity behaviour of volunteers and donors may be less affected by the crisis than their organisation is, so it may pay off to continue to reach out to them.
- Notice that the single most common reason for not practicing any generosity behaviour is not being offered an opportunity. Therefore, ensure there are opportunities to engage people.
- At the same time, also be careful to not to engage with more new volunteers or donors than can be handled, as people's generosity might erode if they are not included or appreciated enough.
- Consider that strict restrictions may limit opportunities to practice generosity behaviours, particularly in relation to volunteering. Create new ways for people to contribute or volunteer, such as online.

6.3 Implications for Government Policy

Results suggest that the call for positive, voluntary behaviour as a complement or, in some cases, replacement of hard restrictions and lockdowns, was not met by an increase in generosity behaviour. It is instead clear from the international comparison in this study that Sweden had less generosity behaviours compared with other countries that had much stricter regulations.

During times of crisis governments can:

- Realise that government policies may not be supported by growing generosity among the public, and are therefore needed in times of crisis. However also remember that Swedes may continue the similar levels of generosity compared with pre-pandemic levels.
- Recognise that the cost of wage subsidies and other crisis related financial supports could be a good investment, since the basic safety it provides promotes trust and generosity.
- Remember that claims about the positive effects of high generalised trust and volunteerism should be viewed cautiously in a time of crisis. Swedes did follow voluntary health advice such as social distancing, but not as much as other countries with regulations.
- Consider that light restrictions may signal a lack of emergency – and this may lead people to carry on as usual with their generosity behaviours.

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8. Appendix

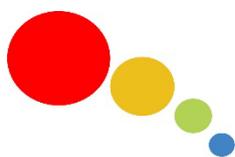
8.1 Notes

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



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