

People with more empathy more likely to support international sharing of COVID-19 vaccines, study shows

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People with more empathy and cosmopolitan beliefs are more likely to support the international sharing of coronavirus vaccines, a new study

shows.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, many residents of high-income countries were eligible for COVID-19 vaccine boosters, while many residents of lower-income countries had not yet received a first dose.

Researchers analyzed the levels and predictors of international vaccine solidarity through a survey of around 2,000 German adults in the autumn of 2021. They measured their preferences for sharing [vaccine supplies](#) internationally versus using that supply as boosters for the domestic population.

Almost half—48 percent—prioritized giving doses to citizens in less developed countries. A third of respondents preferred to use available doses as boosters domestically, and a fifth of respondents (19 percent) did not report a preference.

Respondents were asked: "Coping with the COVID-19 pandemic requires difficult decisions. By the end of September, about 64 percent of people eligible for vaccination had been vaccinated at least once. What do you think is the more important priority now for the use of Germany's vaccine stocks: offering a third vaccine dose ('booster vaccination') to people in Germany or giving vaccine stocks for first and second vaccine doses to less developed countries?"

The survey was fielded when the number of daily COVID-19 cases was decreasing, but before the omicron variant was discovered. The supply of booster shots was still limited both within Germany and much more so globally. Booster shots were only available to larger groups of the population later in Germany.

Relative to SPD (Social Democrats) supporters, respondents who identified with the conservative CDU showed less support for

international vaccine solidarity. Individuals who identified with the Green Party showed more support for dose sharing.

The study was carried out by Florian Stoeckel, Paula Szewach, Jason Reifler and Jack Thompson, from the University of Exeter, Sabrina Stöckli, from the University of Bern and University of Zurich, Matthew Barnfield from the University of Essex, Joseph B. Phillips from the University of Kent, Benjamin Lyons from the University of Utah, Vittorio Mérola from Durham University

Dr. Stoeckel said, "We found that a plurality prefer sharing doses of the COVID-19 vaccine internationally over keeping them in the host country. This highlights that politicians might have some room to maneuver and fulfill international vaccine sharing pledges."

"Our result is particularly noteworthy given that international vaccine sharing, at the time of the survey, was not a prominent part of public discourse, which was mostly focused on national vaccine uptake. It is also important to note that almost one in five respondents had no view, leaving room for opinions to crystallize. There seems to be potential for more international vaccine sharing and for communication that increases the salience of the issue, which could mobilize further support."

Those who scored higher on empathy and those who support domestic redistribution were more inclined to support redistributing vaccines internationally. To the extent that German citizens think about vaccine solidarity, they treated it like a typical foreign aid issue.

Older respondents—the group most at risk to COVID-19—did not consistently show less support for [vaccine](#) solidarity, researchers have found.

Dr. Stoeckel said, "We found there is substantial public [support](#) among

citizens to share doses internationally at least when infection rates are at a modest level and falling. The COVID-19 pandemic is hopefully over, but international inequality when it comes to access to [medical supplies](#) is an ongoing global challenge. We hope to contribute to the discussion on ways how these challenges can be addressed."

The study is published in the journal *PLOS ONE*.

More information: Florian Stoeckel et al, Correlates of support for international vaccine solidarity during the COVID-19 pandemic: Cross-sectional survey evidence from Germany, *PLOS ONE* (2023). [DOI: 10.1371/journal.pone.0287257](#)

Provided by University of Exeter

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