



## Informal Volunteers in Pandemics: Perception of Risk and Effectiveness of Digital Matching Platforms

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A pandemic represents a peculiar extraordinary condition. Nevertheless, issues around gauging the willingness of citizens to help in face of an emergency are quite similar to other crisis situations, such as natural disasters or man-provoked catastrophes.

How to coordinate spontaneous helping, harmonize the readiness with the actual needs, ensure the safety of all parties involved, avoid further damage? Informality challenges crisis management through absence of established procedures, mis-match and oversupply, information asymmetry.

The case of a Swiss mobile application used during COVID-19 pandemic to organize groceries delivery provides new understanding about the behaviour of informal volunteers in crises. This can contribute to the preparedness of volunteer support centres and local authorities.

[#volunteers](#) [#matching](#) [#COVID-19](#) [#emergency](#) [#safety](#)

Why are people willing to volunteer in a crisis situation? And what hinders the activation?

- **Empathy-altruism hypothesis.** The feeling of collective fate, empathy with victims, prongs pro-social behaviour. But fear of getting infected is a barrier. The study estimates the effect of the numbers of infected by COVID-19 on the numbers of voluntary actions of grocery deliveries during lock-down.
- **Appraisal-tendency framework.** Fear amplifies subjective risk estimate. Fear not only of getting infected, but also of not getting the right treatment. The study found that while initially an increase in the number of death cases positively influenced the readiness to volunteer, as death rates continued to rise, this trend exhibited a concave effect, ultimately reducing the propensity to volunteer, likely due to heightened perceptions of risk.
- **Health-belief model - Protection-motivation theory.** The severeness of threat enhances self-protection. In the case of COVID-19, getting in contact with other people presented a threat not only to the volunteer, but also to others of their household.

### Background

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### Context

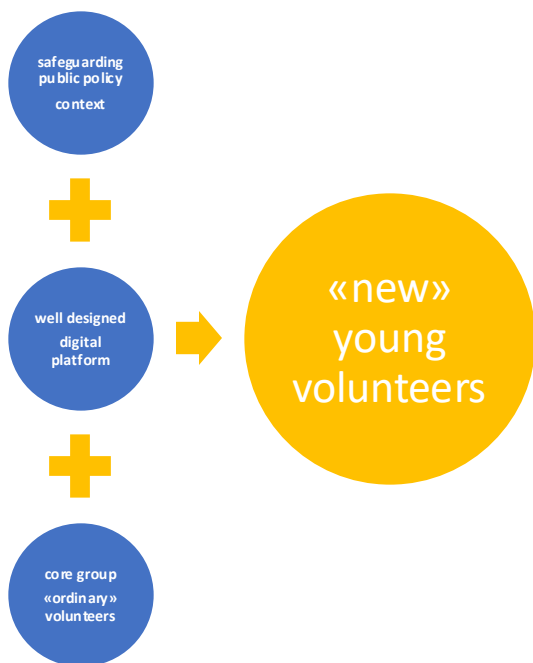


Yet, volunteers risked their health to help others: most of the requests for a grocery delivery on the phone app were met. What can we learn from this study?

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## Take aways & Learnings



- **Context matters.** A supportive and certain public policy framework in which volunteers can feel safeguarded mitigates the perception of risk and therefore encourages activation. In crises, it is important that spontaneous volunteers, who lack the protective function of an organization, can rely on the capacity of the public health system.
- **Adequately designed, digital platforms can be a good solution for matching the availability of volunteers to individual needs.** In this case, the request for grocery delivery was very precise, delimited in time and space. Volunteers themselves circumscribed the territory for which they were available and for every occurrence could decide whether to take up the task or not. This provided flexibility, respected the element of free will and permitted to assess the risk and harmonize voluntary action with personal circumstances on day-to-day basis.
- **A core group of volunteers makes a big number of tasks.** Volunteers that signed up first and made themselves available for larger areas were those that made many deliveries.
- **Who is most likely to spontaneously offer help in a risky situation? Volunteers.** A solid predictor of likeliness to volunteer is previous volunteering experience.
- **Who is most likely to volunteer in crisis for the first time? Younger people.** With respect to the outlier group of core volunteers who performed a large number of tasks, the average age of volunteers who did at least one delivery, is significantly lower.
- **Summer is hard.** The biggest mismatch between requests for groceries and deliveries was observed during summer months, although infection and death rates were much lower. Seasonality proved to be a stronger disincentive than the risk.

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