



## The Compassion Fade Effect: Does Showing Fewer or More Beneficiaries Increase Donations?

Dominik S. Meier – Center for Philanthropy Studies, University of Basel, Switzerland; The Gradel Institute of Charity, New College, University of Oxford, UK

Previous research suggests that donors give more to smaller beneficiary groups when exposed to a single donation request but prefer larger groups when comparing multiple requests. However, these findings come from laboratory studies, raising questions about their applicability in real-world fundraising.

How does the number of people in a photo impact fundraising success on the GoFundMe crowdfunding platform?

This study finds that fundraisers can influence donor behavior by manipulating the number of beneficiaries portrayed in photos. Showing a single beneficiary may be more effective when donors see only one request, while showing five to six beneficiaries may increase donations when multiple campaigns are compared.

[#fundraising](#) [#crowdfunding](#) [#compassionfadeeffect](#) [#identifiedvictimeffect](#)

### Background & Context



- **The compassion fade effect means fewer victims receive more help.** Laboratory experiments showed that as the number of beneficiaries increases, donations tend to decrease. People feel a stronger emotional connection to a single victim than a larger group of beneficiaries.
- According to the **affective bias perspective**, individuals trigger stronger emotions because processing information about one beneficiary is easier than multiple ones. Donors' cognitive limitations – such as difficulty identifying more than four elements – weaken emotional responses and reduce donations.
- According to the **motivated choice perspective**, individuals trigger stronger emotions because people may deliberately limit their compassion to avoid emotional or financial overload. Donating to a larger group can feel overwhelming or less effective, leading donors to give less.
- Compassion fade appeared in experiments where participants saw only one donation request. However, when multiple donation requests were compared, participants preferred larger groups. This raises an important question for fundraisers: should they feature **fewer or more beneficiaries** in photos to maximize donations? This study addresses this question using **unique real-world data** from the GoFundMe crowdfunding platform.

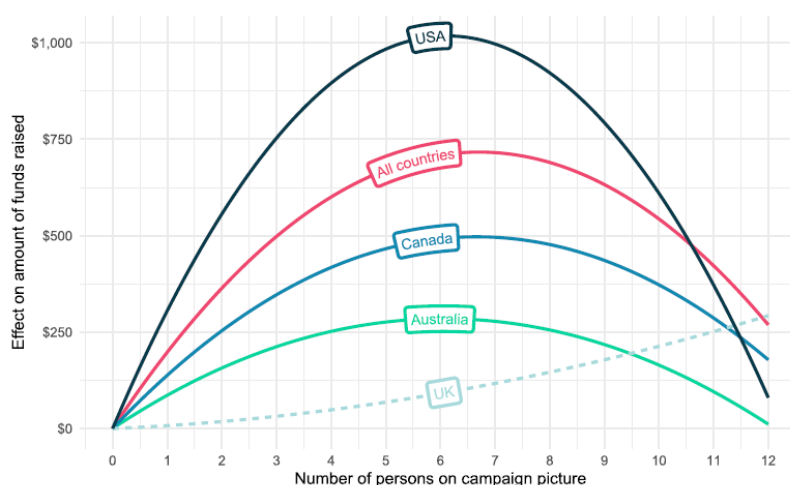
# ERNOP Research Note

Academic articles on philanthropy through a practitioner lens

## Take aways & Learnings



- Descriptive statistics: The author analyzed nearly **30,000 GoFundMe projects** to explore how the number of people in a photo impacts fundraising success in a setting where donors can compare multiple donation requests. On average, projects raised around \$3,500 and received 46 donations, with an average donation of \$72. Project profile pictures typically featured 4 - 5 people, whereas 9% displayed more than 12. Most profile pictures showed happy or neutral facial expressions.
- Results: Projects with **more people in their profile photos received slightly more donations and higher donation amounts**, but the effects were modest and nonlinear. Each additional person increased the number of donations by about 1%, the total funds raised by approximately \$25, and the average donation by around \$0.50. However, giving peaked at six individuals before declining, suggesting that a **moderate group size encourages donations**, while excessively large groups may reduce donor engagement.
- Limitation: Crowdfunding is often considered "**friend-funding**," where **many donors give upon direct request without browsing other projects**. The author used social media shares and web traffic data to approximate the number of donors who donated without seeing other campaigns. However, this approach is an estimation, meaning the **results may slightly underestimate the effect of beneficiary group size on donations**.
- Take away: When **donors see only one donation request, showing a single beneficiary is more effective** due to the compassion fade effect. However, in settings where **donors compare multiple requests, showing several beneficiaries (around five to six people) tends to attract more donations**.



ERNOP Research Notes provide easy-to-read, practice-oriented summaries of academic articles on philanthropy and are written by practitioner experts. This ERNOP Research Note 2025/11 is published in June 2025 and has been written by Vuk Vuković from KU Leuven. More information can be found at [www.ernop.eu](http://www.ernop.eu).