

Ask NUS economists

#MeToo shows power of social movements

Study finds that it became a force for change in behaviour

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Q Can social movements change behaviour or are they merely reflections of changes in society?

A Social scientists often study whether two phenomena are linked by causation, where one affects the other, or correlation, where they just tend to go together. Economists are especially interested in quantifying causal effects and the 2021 Nobel Memorial Prize in Economics was awarded for “the analysis of causal relationships”.

Take women’s right to vote. In many countries, this right followed women’s suffrage movements advocating for voting rights. However, it is difficult to establish if the right to vote was caused by the suffrage movements or if there were other factors, such as rising incomes, that led to both the right to vote and the social movements advocating for this right.

If such confounding factors are common, it is possible that most of the changes that are typically attributed to social movements would have occurred even without these movements.

In our research, we measured the causal effect of a recent prominent social movement, the #MeToo movement, and showed that it increased the reporting of sex crimes to the police. Even though about one in two women in the European Union and the United States experience sexual harassment or sexual violence, most cases are not reported to the police. Furthermore, sexual assaults are under-reported, compared with other assaults.

Our result shows that the MeToo movement helped tackle this important problem.

The MeToo movement went viral on Oct 15, 2017, when a tweet by American actor Alyssa Milano encouraged people who had been sexually harassed or assaulted to write “Me too” on social media. The movement quickly spread internationally and had a large impact on the discourse around sexual misconduct. However, it did not spread everywhere and some countries initially had weak or non-existent movements.

To ensure we were measuring the causal effect of the MeToo movement on the reporting of sex crimes, we make three comparisons. First, we compared the number of sex crimes reported before and after the MeToo movement started. Second, we compared the reporting of sex crimes and non-sex crimes. Finally, we compared countries that had strong MeToo movements with countries that had weak MeToo movements.

The technique is an extension of



Members of feminist organisations with a banner outside a court in Athens on Jan 12, 2022, where the trial of a Greek sailing coach, accused of raping a minor, took place a year after Olympic champion Sofia Bekatorou launched the #MeToo movement in Greece.
PHOTO: AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

the “difference-in-differences” method which was pioneered in Economics by Professor David Card, a 2021 Nobel Laureate. The idea is to find suitable comparison groups which were not affected by the MeToo movement.

These comparison groups are crucial for the purposes of establishing the causality of the movement. Suppose that the crime reporting increased around October 2017 just as the MeToo movement started. Such an increase could occur due to the movement or due to another event that happened around the same time. However, since we find an increase only in the reporting of sex crimes and only in the countries that had a strong MeToo movement, it is much more likely this was due to the MeToo movement and would not have occurred otherwise. In other words, the multiple comparisons allow us to isolate the causal effect of the MeToo movement from

potential confounding factors.

We used data from 31 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development countries, covering 88 per cent of the OECD population to study the effect of the MeToo movement. We collected quarterly data on crimes reported for each country and measured the strength of the MeToo movement based on Google search interest.

Using our three comparison groups, we found that the MeToo movement increased the number of sexual crimes reported by 10 per cent in the first six months of the movement. Our result suggests the effect is persistent, at least over the 15-month period of our study.

We estimate that in the 16 countries with strong MeToo movements in our data, 70,000 additional sex crimes were reported as a result of the movement during these 15 months. We also used more detailed data from the US to show

that the effect is present across socioeconomic and racial groups.

Our results confirm that the changes in reporting are not merely a reflection of changing norms in society but also that the movement had a direct impact on the behaviour of individuals.

Reporting more crimes to the police is only one effect of the movement. It is likely that the MeToo movement also changed other types of behaviour. Indeed, there are indications of an increased number of calls to helpline centres, more reports to university programmes and a higher share of victims discussing incidents with friends and family.

In addition to the increase in reporting, we find that the MeToo movement also increased the number of arrests for sexual assault. We study the effect on arrests in the US where detailed data is available. The increase in arrests is likely to prevent repeat offenders from committing

further crimes. Arrests may also deter potential future offenders that could have otherwise committed sex crimes. This result suggests that MeToo movement not only increased reporting, but may also have decreased sex crimes in the long-run.

Our paper shows that social movements can have important consequences. However, these consequences are not predetermined and hinge on the social movement bringing them about.

• Ro'ee Levy is a lecturer in the School of Economics at Tel Aviv University. Martin Mattsson is assistant professor in the department of economics at the National University of Singapore. This is a monthly series by the NUS department of economics. Each month, a panel will address a topical issue. If you have a burning question on economics, write to stopinion@sph.com.sg with “Ask NUS” in the subject field.