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Policy brief

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Engagement with local religious leaders to combat COVID-19 in Pakistan



In brief

- COVID-19 remains a threat for the Pakistani economy and health care system. In this environment, congregational prayers, including obligatory Friday prayers, present significant risks for transmission of the virus if not managed properly.
- This policy brief measures the impact of one-on-one engagement with local religious leadership on the compliance of public health measures such as wearing masks.
- Through a randomised controlled trial study, the research found that one-on-one engagement with religious leaders encourages them to impart health guidelines to congregants. Respondents were 25% more likely to advise wearing a mask to prayers if they received any of the permission scripts.
- The findings suggest that public health policies can mobilise community leaders (religious or non-religious) on two fronts: commitment and prevention. Evidence from this study highlights that there is room for policymakers to build a more collaborative relationship with community leaders through one-on-one engagement.
- The results can provide valuable insights for strategies used by other public health campaigns to engage the public and build trust, such as COVID-19 vaccination.

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We implemented a randomised controlled trial study to measure the impact of one-on-one engagement with local religious leadership on the compliance of protocols at their mosque. Our messaging was a combination of religious appeal and public health guidelines that were interactive, involving frequent elicitation of the respondents' reactions and agreement, as well as asking them to commit to action. Our study is different from previous strategies of COVID-19 containment as it does not rely on mass messaging but rather focuses on one-on-one engagement with focal community leaders. It aims to improve the implementation and communication of the 20-point plan that was agreed between the government and religious clergy to contain the spread of COVID-19. However, it is not novel in its approach as it is similar to previous interventions like the polio vaccination drive that disseminates knowledge and engages at the community level. Thus, the results from our study can provide valuable

insights for strategies used by other public health campaigns to engage the public and build trust, such as polio vaccination and eventually the COVID-19 vaccination.

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