

Social protests in times of social distancing: Black Lives Matter and COVID-19

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Abstract:

The effect of pandemics on protests is theoretically ambiguous. On the one hand, activists may be deterred from protesting to protect their own (private good) or others' health (public good). On the other hand, reduced economic activity implies a lower opportunity cost of protesting, the increased private cost may enhance the informative value of protests (signaling) and the salience of racial inequality may be higher in areas most affected by the pandemic. In this paper, we use county-level variation in the timing and magnitude of the COVID-19 pandemic to identify its effect on Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests. We find that counties most affected by the pandemic experience increases in BLM events in both the extensive (occurrence) and the intensive margin (number and participants). We test the mechanisms behind this increase using text analysis on Twitter posts and leveraging variation in the stringency of lockdown measures and the timing of scientific findings on the new coronavirus.