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## People want freeloaders punished, study finds

### Live and let live is fine at first, but over time, sanctions preferred

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Joe Sutliff / Science

This cartoon portrays the collapse in cooperation as a result of those who don't contribute to the efforts of others, but nevertheless benefit from them. Groups that punish such free-riders stabilize cooperative behavior and outcompete those that do not.

By Maggie Fox  
**REUTERS**

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WASHINGTON - People's ideas of a happy, cooperative society in which no one gets punished fall apart as soon as a few freeloaders show up, researchers reported on Thursday.

Although most volunteers in a study first chose to join a group that did not use punishment, most eventually left for a group that fined transgressors, the team at the University of Erfurt in Germany and the London School of Economics in Britain found.

"Our results show that the sanctioning institution is the undisputed winner in a 'voting-with-one's-feet' competition with a sanction-free institution," the researchers wrote in their report, published in the journal *Science*.

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The study can help in understanding how to make society work more smoothly and can help in designing policies aimed at ensuring cooperation, Joseph Henrich, an anthropologist at Emory University in Georgia, wrote in a commentary.

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"Even if nearly everyone is initially cooperative and contributes, free-riders can profit and proliferate, leading to the eventual collapse of cooperation," Henrich wrote.

For example, if most people in society are brave, conserve gas and donate blood, he explained, others benefit by evading military service or driving gas-guzzling cars.

### **Playing a game with tokens**

In the study, researchers asked 84 students from Erfurt University to join one of two groups to play a game with tokens. One group of players punished members who did not share freely, while the other group did not.

The students could choose which group to join.

"Each player is endowed with 20 money units (tokens) and may contribute between 0 and 20 (tokens) to a public good," the researchers wrote. "Each group member equally profits from the public good, independent of his or her own contribution."

In the punishment group, members could choose to fine other members three tokens, but it cost them one of their own tokens to do so.

Two-thirds of the students initially chose the group in which members could not punish others, but many abandoned that group when they saw those in the "punishment" group were prospering more.

### **Enthusiastic converts**

Former freeloaders were some of the most enthusiastic converts to the punishment mode, the researchers found.

"You can't explain this dramatic change in behavior by saying that people are just looking for the best payoff. People gave up payoff to follow the cooperative norm," Erfurt researcher Bettina Rockenbach said.

Bernd Irlenbusch of the London School of Economics added, "I was surprised so many of the freeloaders exerted punishment on others when they entered the sanctioning institution."

When the game ended after 30 rounds, the people in the punishment group had donated an average of 18 tokens per round, while the live-and-let-live group had almost no members, and those who remained donated three tokens to the public good on average per round.

Little actual punishment was applied during the later rounds of the game, apparently because the threat of punishment was enough to ensure cooperation, the researchers said.

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