

# Breaking habits: a field experiment

Daan van Soest<sup>†</sup> and Ben Vollaard<sup>‡</sup>

<sup>†</sup> CentER, TSC, Tilburg University. E-mail: d.p.vansoest@tilburguniversity.edu

<sup>‡</sup> CentER, TSC, Tilburg University. E-mail: vollaard@tilburguniversity.edu

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## Abstract

We provide evidence of how a temporary incentive can produce persistent effects on prosocial behavior, without a detrimental effect on intrinsic motivation. We study a behavior that is known to be prone to habit formation: separating waste by households. We conducted a natural field experiment involving 70,000 households in the city of Tilburg, the Netherlands. The incentive consisted of a letter from the municipality informing households that not separating waste is illegal and punishable by a fine, followed by an intensive and highly salient enforcement campaign. Enforcement was limited to four consecutive weeks. The crackdown had a large and instantaneous effect on household behavior. Most of the effect was still apparent up to seven months after the end of enforcement. Given that the fear of punishment is likely to have gone down in the absence of any enforcement activity, and that we find intrinsic motivation to have quickly returned to its original levels after enforcement ended, the persistent increase in the rate of separating waste is likely to have been sustained by a new, improved habit.

Key words: habit formation, intrinsic motivation, deterrence, crackdown, field experiment, household waste management, environmental policy.

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