

Self-Reliance Norms as a Constraint on Prosocial Behavior

David Danz¹, David Huffman², and Tymofiy Mylovanov³

¹University of Pittsburgh (davidnilsdanz@gmail.com)

²Cornell University SC Johnson College of Business, IZA, CESifo (dbh234@cornell.edu)

³University of Pittsburgh, Kyiv School of Economics (tym10@pitt.edu)

December 14, 2025

Preliminary draft.

Please click here for the latest version.

Abstract

We investigate how altruism depends on whether potential beneficiaries have costly opportunities to help themselves. Using laboratory experiments where initial effort is equalized, we vary whether disadvantaged individuals can take costly action to improve their outcomes. We find that giving rates are significantly lower when recipients have self-help opportunities, even when exercising those opportunities requires additional effort. This effect is driven by adherence to self-reliance norms and operates through fairness perceptions. Similar patterns emerge for taking behavior. Our findings reveal a "hidden cost of opportunity": expanding options for disadvantaged individuals may reduce their welfare by crowding out altruistic assistance.

Keywords— Social norms, self reliance, prosocial behavior, giving, experiment