

A Finite Pool of Worry or a Finite Pool of Attention? Evidence and Qualifications

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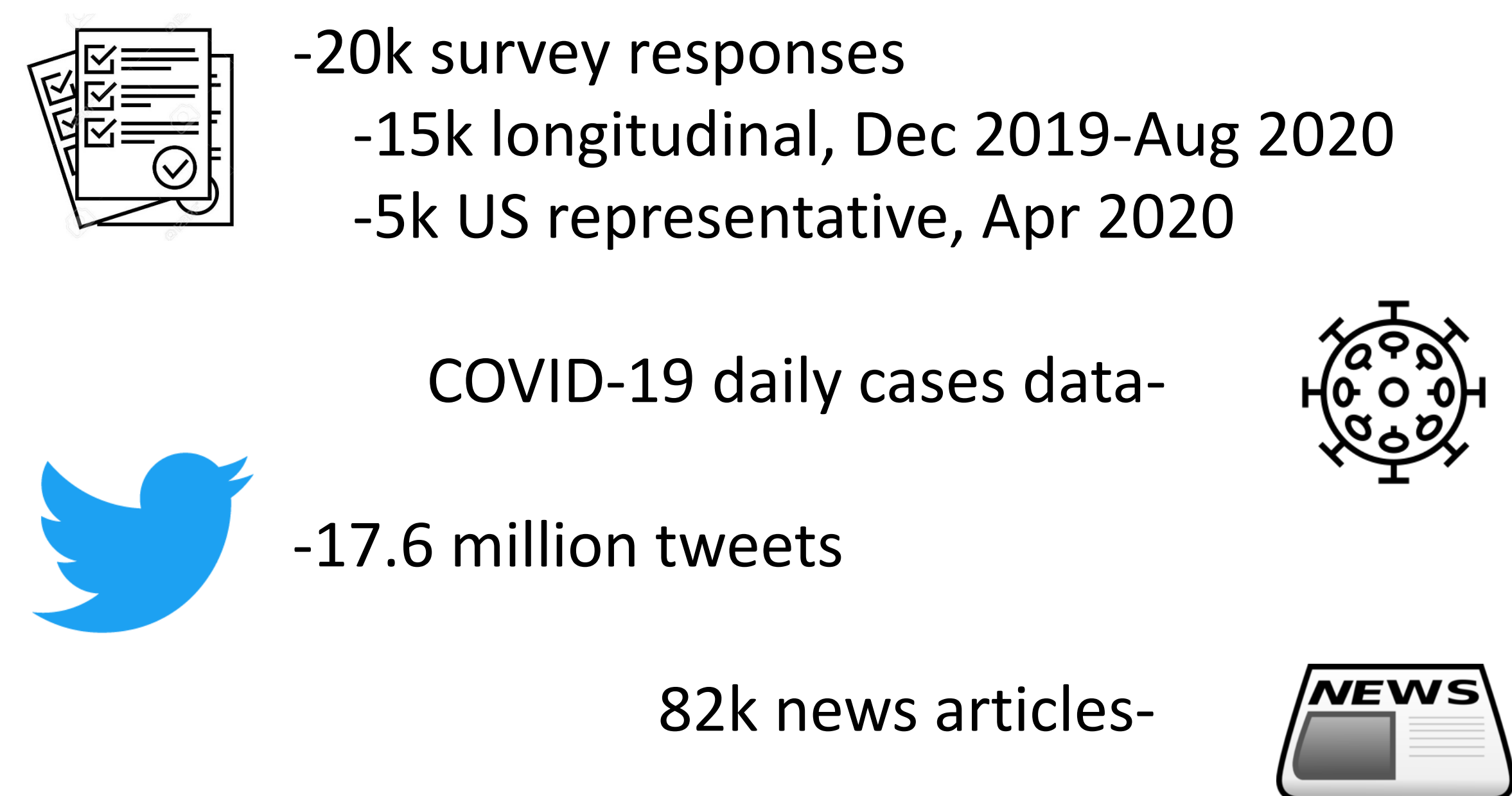
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Abstract

The Finite Pool of Worry (FPW) hypothesis states when we become more worried about one threat, it can decrease worry about other threats. We leverage the sudden onset of new worries introduced by the COVID-19 pandemic as a natural experiment to test the FPW. **As attention to and worry about COVID-19 increased, we find that attention to climate change and terrorism (unrelated threats) decreased but that worry about them did not.** We find some perceived similarity between COVID-19 and climate change, but this does not fully explain the positive relationship in worry we see between them. **In summary, our findings suggest that while there appears to be a Finite Pool of Attention to threats, we do not see evidence of a Finite Pool of Worry.**

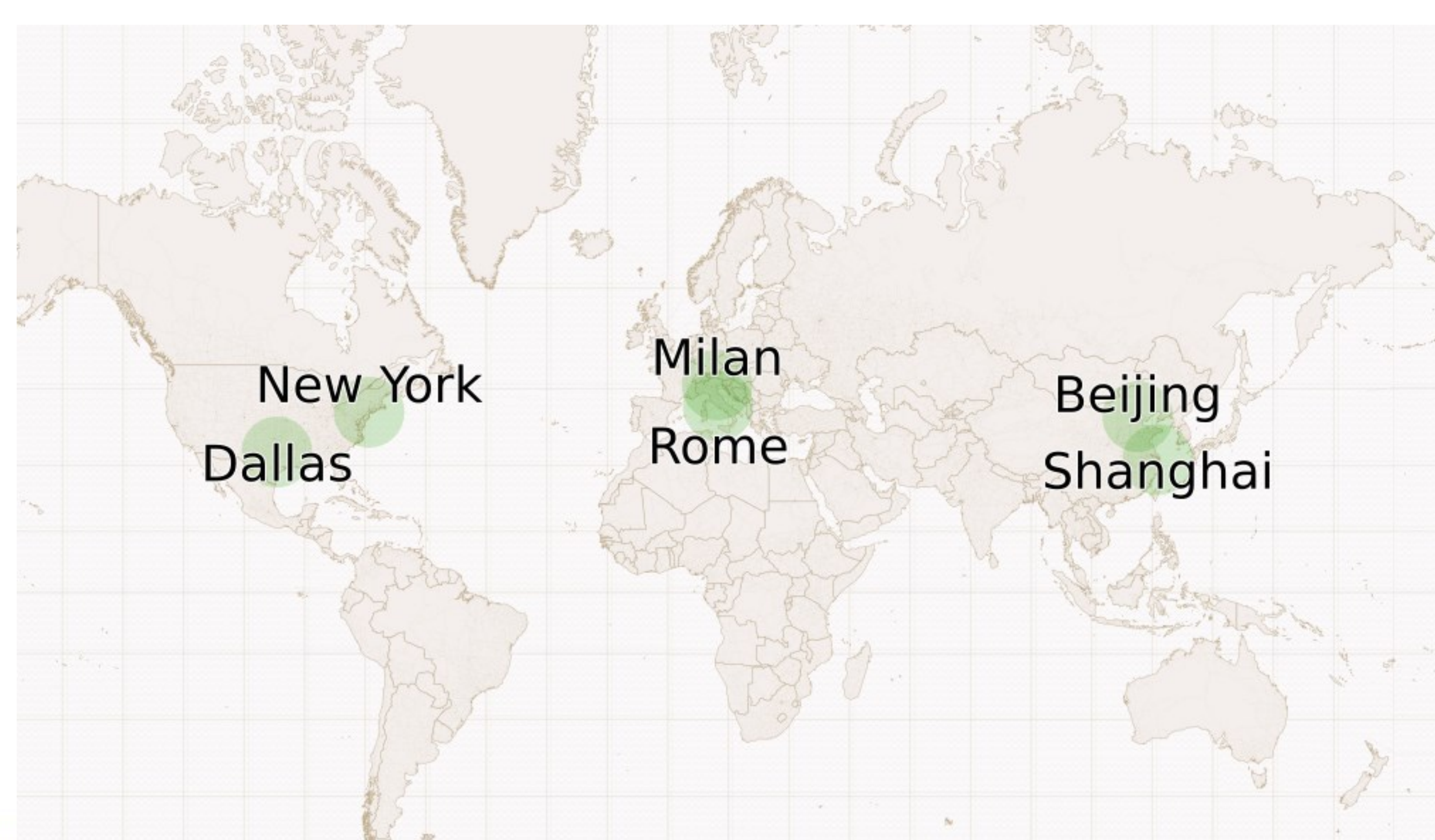
Data



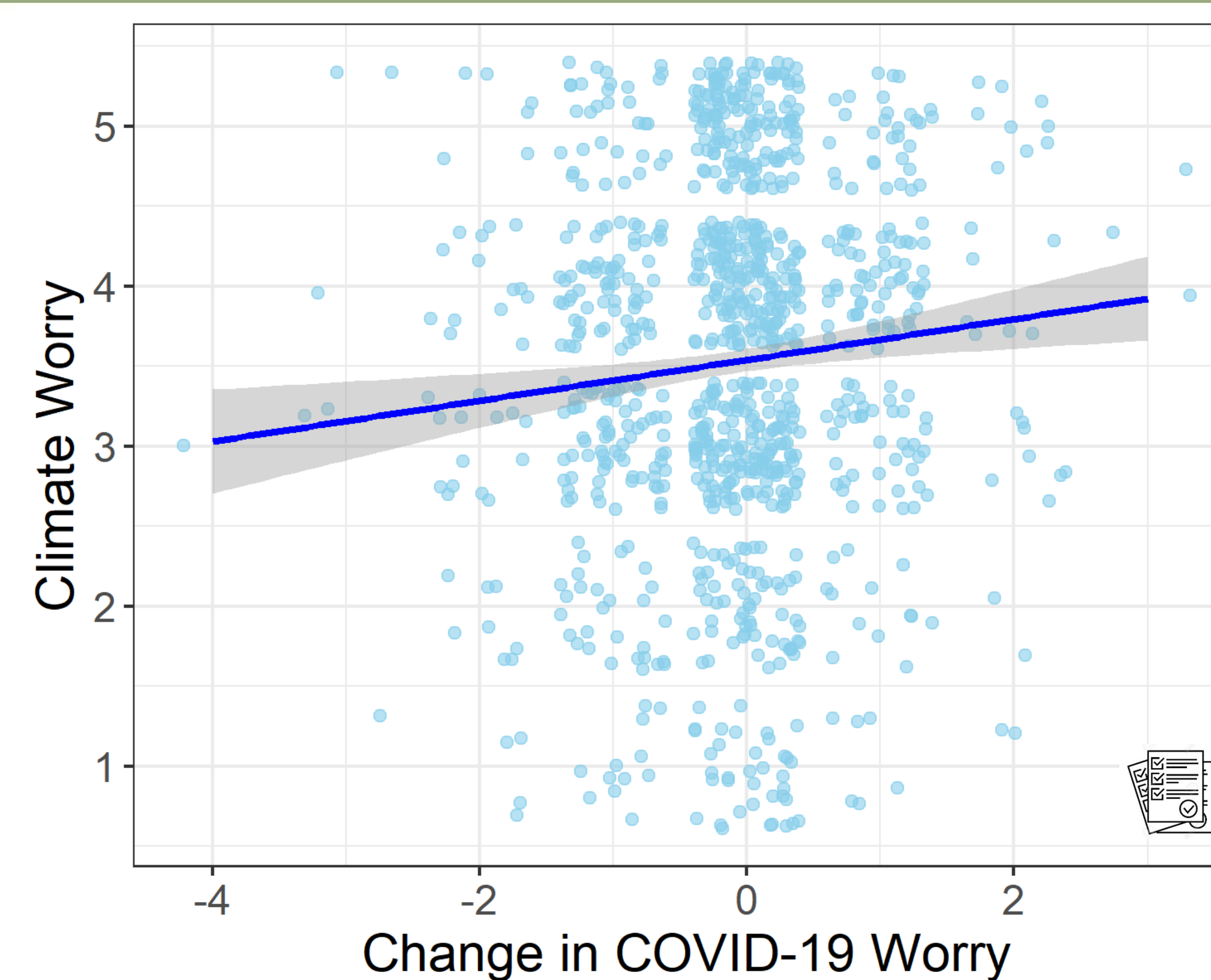
Method

We collected survey responses, Twitter data, news articles, and COVID-19 cases records on a daily basis from Dec 2019-Aug 2020 in six cities (below). To evaluate the effects of a new threat (COVID-19) on attention to and worry about other threats, we conduct a series of regression analyses which are visualized in the following sections.

Target Cities

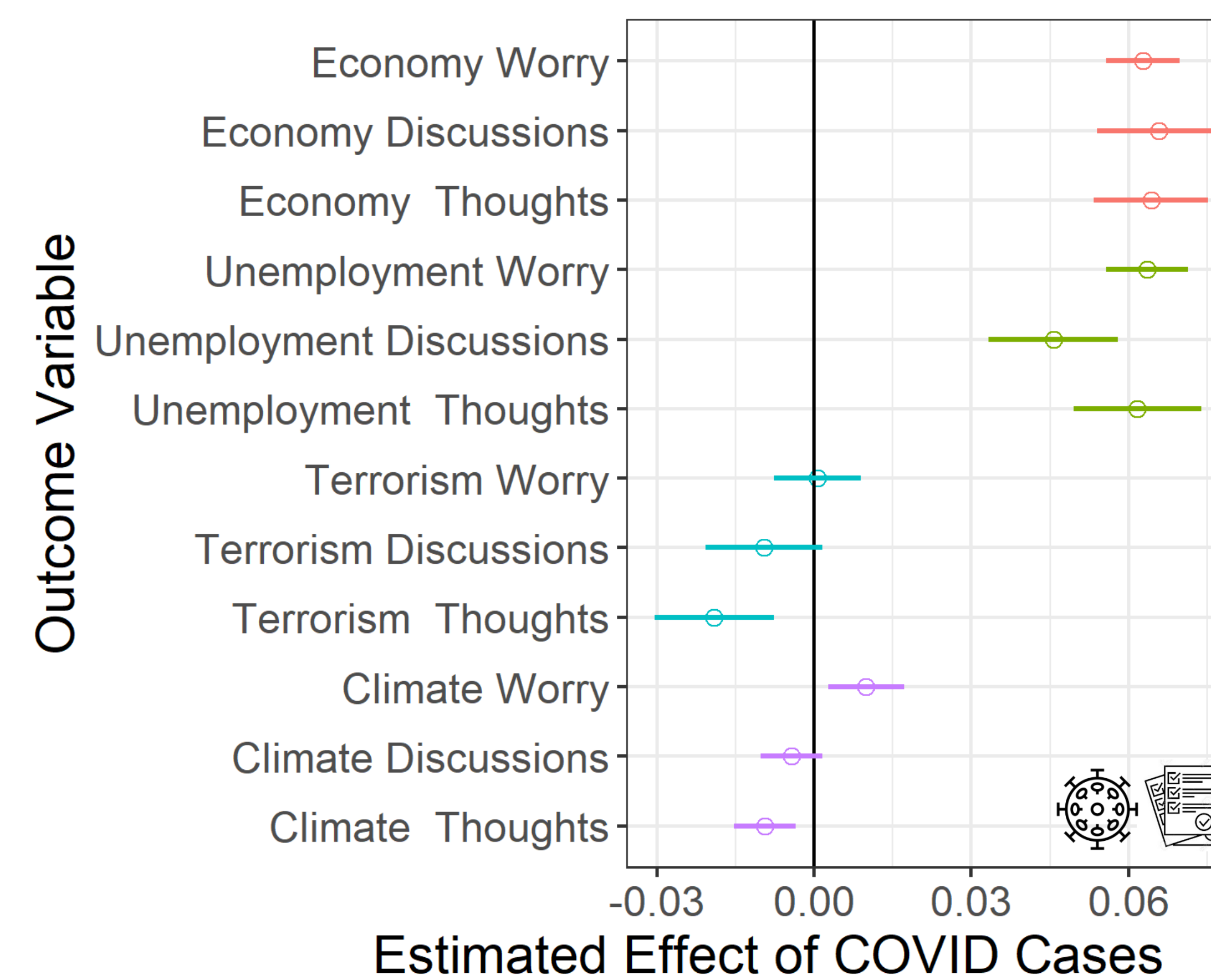


Climate Worry vs. COVID-19 ΔWorry



Takeaway: We see that within-person increases in COVID-19 worry correlate with higher worry about climate change.

COVID Cases vs. Other Threats



Takeaway: Higher COVID-19 cases are associated with lower attention to climate change and terrorism, but higher worry to these threats.

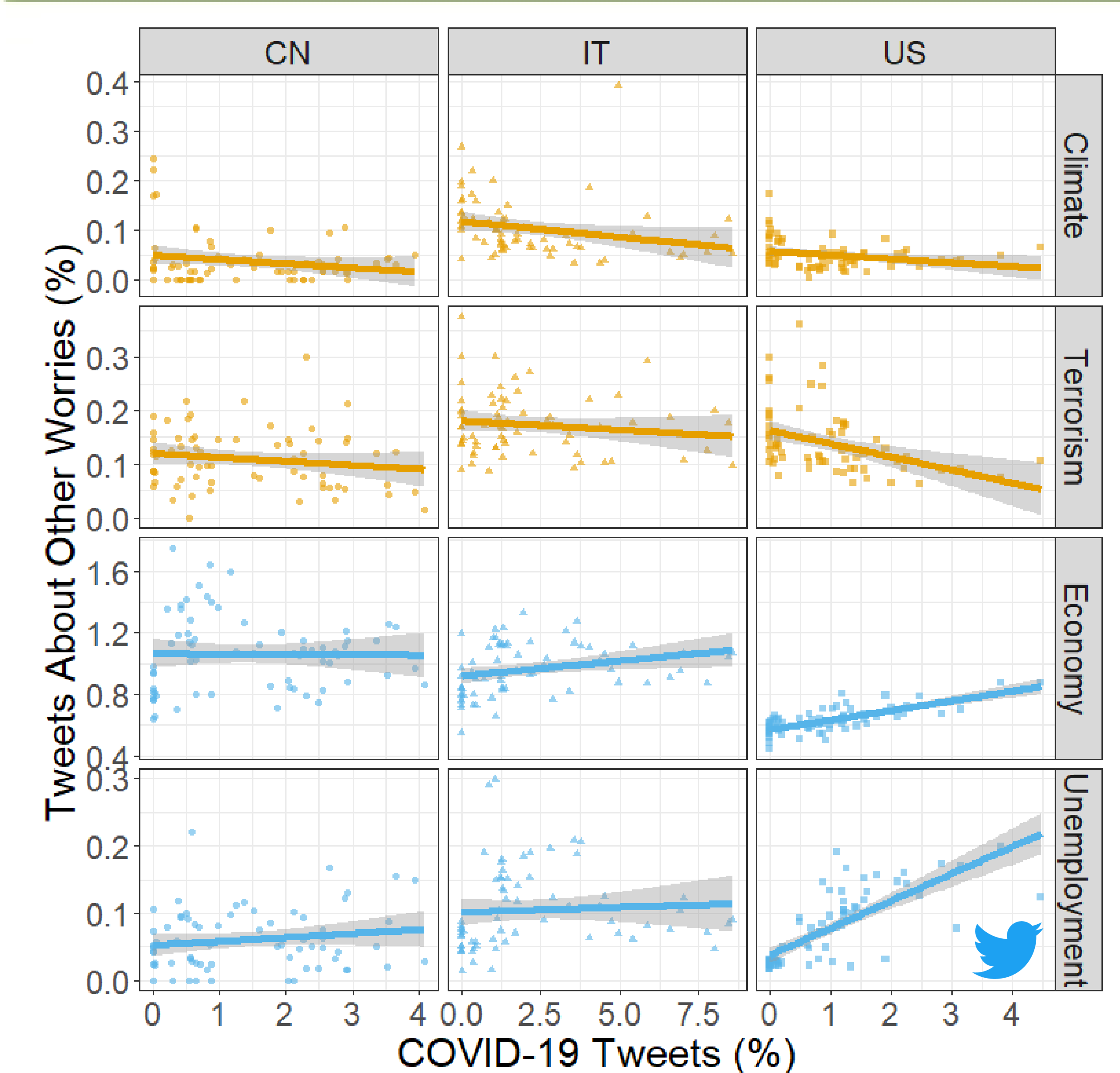
Main Findings

- Increased COVID-19 cases and reported worries **increased worries about climate change and terrorism** (unrelated, preexisting threats)
- Increased COVID-19 cases and reported worries **decreased attention to climate change and terrorism** (unrelated, preexisting threats)
- Perceived similarity between CC and COVID played a role but did not fully mediate the relationship

Discussion

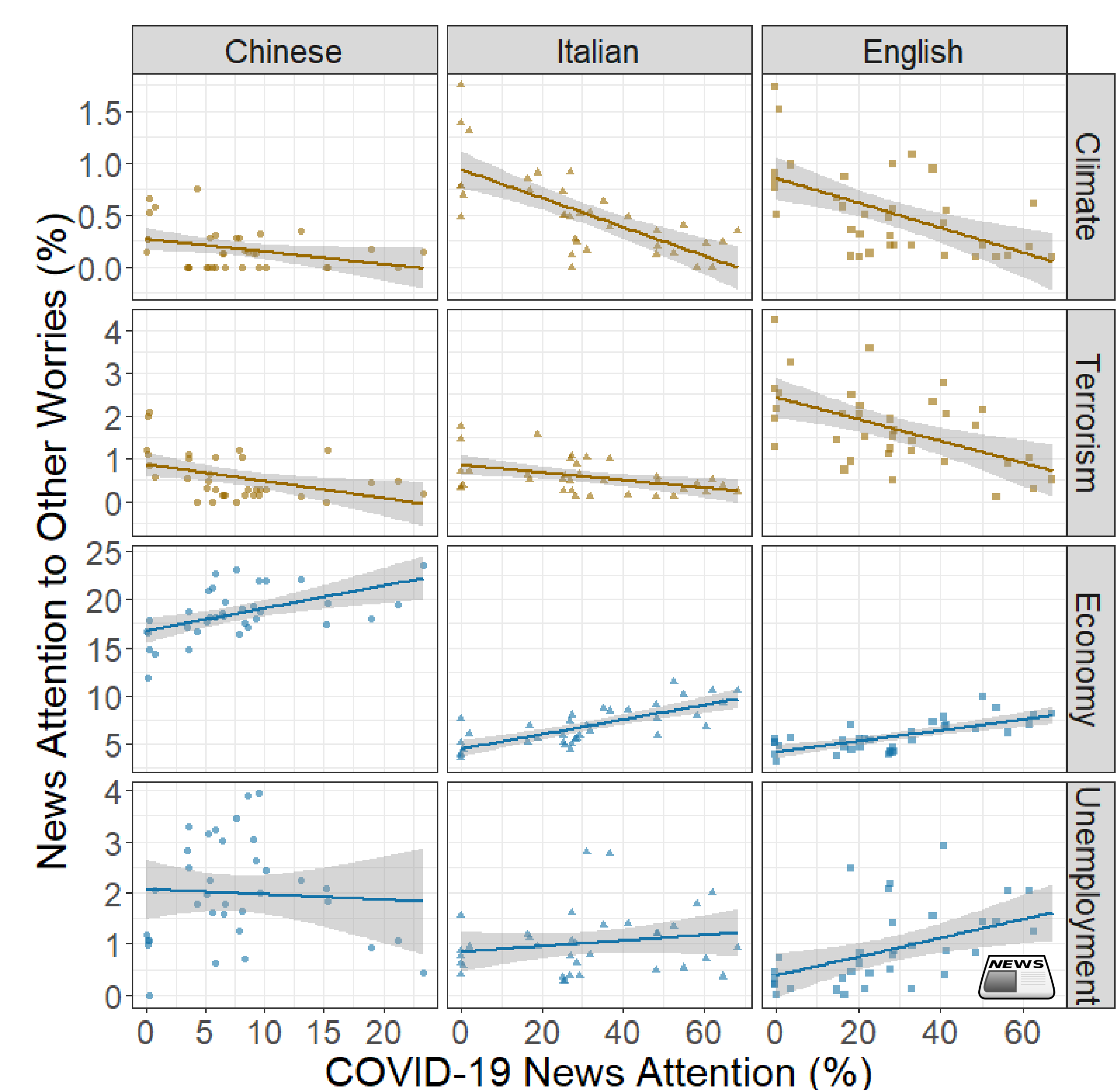
Our central finding that worries generalize, rather than crowd-out implies that communications and calls to action about climate change can achieve the same or greater success in the context of a new threat, even one that dominates public attention. In summary, our findings suggest that while there appears to be a Finite Pool of Attention to threats, worry begets worry. Events such as COVID-19 are unprecedented and tragic periods for many lives and livelihoods. As our results suggest, they may also present moments to introduce new policies to mitigate the even more disastrous looming global crisis of climate change.

Social Media Attention



Takeaway: Higher COVID-19 attention on Twitter is negatively correlated with climate change and terrorism and positively correlated with economic and unemployment concerns.

News Media Attention



Takeaway: Higher COVID-19 attention in news media is negatively correlated with climate change and terrorism and positively correlated with economic and unemployment concerns.

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