Covid-19 Social Study

Results Release 18

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13th August 2020
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The project has also benefitted from funding from UK Research and Innovation and the Wellcome Trust. The researchers are grateful for the support of a number of organisations with their recruitment efforts including: the UKRI Mental Health Networks, Find Out Now, UCL BioResource, HealthWise Wales, SEO Works, FieldworkHub, and Optimal Workshop.
Executive summary

Background

This report provides data from the last 21 weeks of the UK COVID-19 Social Study run by University College London: a panel study of over 70,000 respondents focusing on the psychological and social experiences of adults living in the UK during the Covid-19 pandemic.

In this EIGHTEENTH report, we focus on psychological responses to the first twenty-one weeks since just before the UK lockdown was first announced (21/03-09/08). We present simple descriptive results on the experiences of adults in the UK. Measures include:

1. Reported compliance with government guidelines and confidence in the government
2. Mental health including depression, anxiety and stress
3. Harm including thoughts of death or self-harm, self-harm and both psychological & physical abuse
4. Psychological and social wellbeing including life satisfaction, loneliness and happiness
5. ***New in this report*** Discrimination and changes in neighbourhood relationships

This study is not representative of the UK population but instead was designed to have good stratification across a wide range of socio-demographic factors enabling meaningful subgroup analyses to understand the experience of Covid-19 for different groups within society. Data are weighted using auxiliary weights to the national census and Office for National Statistics (ONS) data. Full methods and demographics for the sample included in this report are reported in the Appendix and at www.COVIDSocialStudy.org

Findings

- 1 in 4 people report experiencing some kind of discrimination since lockdown came in. 13% reported being treated with less courtesy or respect than others, 10% reported that people acted as if they were afraid of them, 6% reported either receiving poorer service than others (e.g. for deliveries or in shops) or being threatened or harassed, and 4% reported receiving poorer healthcare treatment than others or experiencing people acting as though they had been dishonest. 6% reported experiencing another kind of discrimination.

- In total, 7% reported that they felt their discrimination experiences were due to their age, 3% to their gender, 4% to their ethnicity, and 19% to other reasons. Total discrimination experiences were higher amongst younger adults (40% aged 18-30 reporting discrimination vs 16% of people aged 60+). It was slightly higher amongst women (27% vs men 25%) and people from BAME groups (42% vs 24% amongst people of white ethnicity), and more common in urban areas (27% vs 22% reported in rural areas).

- Respondents were asked about neighbour relations before and since Covid-19. 29% felt that their neighbourhood had become more supportive and shared values had increased. Similarly, 18% felt that their neighbourhood had become closer, 10% felt it had become more cohesive, and 8% felt they trusted people in their neighbourhood more. Fewer than 6% of people felt their neighbourhoods had deteriorated across any of the categories. Responses were similar across but urban and rural areas, although the improvements in neighbour relations were slightly stronger for all factors across urban areas.

- Compliance has remained relatively constant over the last two weeks. “Complete” compliance remains just 20%-30% in adults under the age of 30, 40-45% in adults aged 30-50 and 50-55% in adults over the age of 60. “Majority” compliance remains around 90% overall, but is lowest (70-80%) amongst adults under 30.

- Levels of confidence in the central government to handle the Covid-19 epidemic have remained constant over the past fortnight, with highest levels in Scotland and Wales and lowest levels in England.

- In the past fortnight, depression and anxiety levels, life satisfaction, happiness, and loneliness have stabilised or shown only slight improvements. However, levels are still better than at the start of lockdown. There has still been little change in people reporting major or minor stress due to catching COVID-19, unemployment, finance, or getting food.

- There are no sign of changes in thoughts of death or self-harm, reports of self-harming, or reported experiences of abuse.
1. Compliance and confidence

1.1 Compliance with guidelines

Respondents were asked to what extent they are following the recommendations from government such as social distancing and staying at home, ranging from 1 (not at all) to 7 (very much so). Of note, we ask participants to self-report their compliance, which relies on participants understanding the regulations. Figure 1 shows the percentage of people who followed the recommendations “completely” (with a score of 7) or to a large extent (with a score of 5-7; described below as “majority” compliance).

Compliance has continued to remain stable over the last two weeks, with no further signs of decreases for now. “Majority” compliance remains around 90% overall, but is lowest (70-80%) amongst adults under 30. “Complete” compliance remains around 40%, but is just 20-30% in adults under the age of 30, 40-45% in adults aged 30-50 and 50-55% in adults over the age of 60. “Complete” compliance is lower in higher income households, in England, in urban areas, and amongst adults living with children compared to adults not living with children.

These findings should be interpreted in light of the results in Report 17 showing that understanding of the current guidelines, though, is low. As such, these figures reflect people’s belief that they are complying rather than necessarily actual compliance levels.

Figures 2a-2h show “complete” compliance by demographic factors, while Figures 2i-2p show “majority” compliance by demographic factors.
1.2 Confidence in Government

Respondents were asked how much confidence they had in the government to handle the Covid-19 epidemic from 1 (not at all) to 7 (lots). People living in devolved nations were asked to report their confidence in their own devolved governments.

Levels of confidence in the central government to handle the Covid-19 epidemic have remained constant over the past fortnight, with highest levels in Scotland and Wales and lowest levels in England.¹

For subgroup analyses in Figures 4a-d and 4f-h, we restrict our results to respondents living in England in order to have sufficient sample sizes for meaningful subgroup analyses (future analyses focusing on weekly rather than daily tracking will look at subgroups in devolved nations). In England, confidence in government is still lowest in those under the age of 30. Confidence is also lower in urban areas and in people with a mental health diagnosis. Confidence is also slightly lower in people of higher household income.

¹ Figures for Northern Ireland have now been removed from our daily tracker graphs due to a small sample size that makes extrapolation even with statistical weighting unreliable. These data are being analysed in other papers and reports.
2. Mental Health

2.1 Depression and anxiety

Respondents were asked about depression levels during the past week using the Patient Health Questionnaire (PHQ-9) and anxiety using the Generalised Anxiety Disorder assessment (GAD-7); standard instruments for diagnosing depression and anxiety in primary care. These are 9 and 7 items respectively with 4-point responses ranging from “not at all” to “nearly every day”, with higher overall scores indicating more symptoms. Scores of higher than 10 can indicate major depression or moderate anxiety.

Depression and anxiety levels are similar to two weeks ago. Although this study focuses on trajectories rather than prevalence, the levels overall are higher than usual reported averages using the same scales (2.7-3.2 for anxiety and 2.7-3.7 for depression\(^2\)), but appear to be returning towards these usual averages.

Decreases in depression and anxiety have occurred across every subgroup. However, depression and anxiety are still highest in young adults, people living alone, people with lower household income, people living with children, and people living in urban areas. People with a diagnosed mental illness have still been reporting higher levels of symptoms (as might be expected), but they have on average experienced greater improvements in the past fortnight in depressive symptoms, starting to narrow the gap in experiences compared to individuals without a diagnosed mental illness.

Figure 7a Anxiety by age groups

- Age 18-29
- Age 30-59
- Age 60+

Figure 7b Anxiety by living arrangement

- Living alone
- Not living alone

Figure 7c Anxiety by household income

- Household income <30k
- Household income >30k

Figure 7d Anxiety by mental health diagnosis

- Mental health diagnosis
- No diagnosis
2.2 Stress

We asked participants to report which factors were causing them stress in the last week, either minor stress or major stress (which was defined as stress that was constantly on their mind or kept them awake at night).

There has still been little change in people reporting major or minor stress due to catching COVID-19, unemployment, finance, or getting food in the past fortnight. Stress relating to Covid-19 (both catching Covid-19 and becoming seriously ill from Covid-19) remains the most prevalent stressor, but is still not affecting the majority of people, with fewer than 40% reporting it. Notably, worries about finance and unemployment have not risen for individuals, despite the end of furlough schemes nearing and more companies discussing redundancy measures. Just 1 in 4 people report being worried about finance and 1 in 6 worried about unemployment. Worries about access to food are still only affecting around 1 in 20 people, but this residual worry is remaining.

People with diagnosed mental illness have been more worried about all factors. But other predictors of stressors have varied. People with lower household income are becoming more worried about Covid-19 than people with higher household income, and they are more worried about finances, but less worried about unemployment. People living with children have worried more about all factors, but the differences on worries relating to Covid-19 and food access have diminished as lockdown has eased. Older adults have worried less about unemployment and food. Unemployment has worried people in England and in urban areas more.
3. Self-harm and abuse

3.1 Thoughts of death or self-harm

Thoughts of death or self-harm are measured using a specific item within the PHQ-9 that asks whether, in the last week, someone has had “thoughts that you would be better off dead or of hurting yourself in some way”. Responses are on a 4-point scale ranging from “not at all” to “nearly every day”. We focused on any response that indicated having such thoughts.

There continues to be no clear change in thoughts of death since the easing of lockdown was announced. Percentages of people having thoughts of death or self-harm have been relatively stable throughout the past 19 weeks. They remain higher amongst younger adults, those with a lower household income, and people with a diagnosed mental health condition. They are also higher in people living alone and those living in urban areas.
3.2 Self-harm

Self-harm was assessed using a question that asks whether someone in the last week has been “self-harming or deliberately hurting yourself”. Responses are on a 4-point scale ranging from “not at all” to “nearly every day”. We focused on any response that indicated any self-harming.

Self-harm has remained relatively stable since the easing of lockdown was announced. Consistently across lockdown, self-harm has been reported to be higher amongst younger adults, those with lower household income, and those with a diagnosed mental health condition. It is also slightly higher amongst people living in urban areas.

It should be noted that not all people who self-harm will necessarily report it, so these levels are anticipated to be an under-estimation of actual levels.³

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³ Spikes on particular days are likely due to variability in the data as opposed to indications of particularly adverse experiences on certain days.
Abuse was measured using two questions that ask if someone has experienced in the last week “being physically harmed or hurt by someone else” or “being bullied, controlled, intimidated, or psychologically hurt by someone else”. Responses are on a 4-point scale ranging from “not at all” to “nearly every day”. We focused on any response on either item that indicated any experience of psychological or physical abuse.

Abuse has remained relatively stable since the easing of lockdown was announced. Abuse has been reported to be higher amongst adults under the age of 60, those with lower household income and those with existing mental health conditions. It is also slightly higher in people living with children compared to those living with just other adults.

It should be noted that not all people who are experiencing abuse will necessarily report it, so these levels are anticipated to be an under-estimation of actual levels.
4. General well-being

4.1 Life satisfaction

Respondents were asked to rate their life satisfaction during the past week using the ONS wellbeing scale, which asks respondents about how satisfied they are with their life, using a scale from 0 (not at all) to 10 (completely). Life satisfaction is similar to levels two weeks ago, but this remains substantially higher than when lockdown came in. Whilst it was lower amongst people with children during lockdown, this difference has disappeared as lockdown has eased. It remains lowest in younger adults, people living alone, people with lower household income, people with diagnosed mental health conditions, and people living in urban areas (although the gap in differences between urban and rural areas has narrowed as further lockdown easing has taken place). It is similar across UK nations and amongst key workers.

Life satisfaction is still noticeably lower than for the past 12 months (where usual averages are around 7.7), and wellbeing more generally appears to have decreased substantially in the weeks preceding lockdown.

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4.2 Loneliness

Respondents were asked about levels of loneliness using the 3-item UCLA-3 loneliness, a short form of the Revised UCLA Loneliness Scale (UCLA-R). Each item is rated with a 3-point rating scale, ranging from “never” to “always”, with higher scores indicating greater loneliness.

Loneliness levels have stabilised in the past fortnight, but are noticeably lower than 21 weeks ago. Loneliness levels are still highest in younger adults, people living alone, people with lower household income, people living with children, people living in urban areas, and people with a diagnosed mental health condition.
Respondents were asked to rate to what extent they felt happy during the past week using the Office for National Statistics wellbeing scale on a scale from 0 (not at all) to 10 (completely). Happiness ratings are only available from 21st April onwards.

Happiness levels have stabilised in the past fortnight, but are still substantially higher than early in lockdown. Happiness levels remain lowest amongst younger adults, those living alone, those with lower household income, people with diagnosed mental health conditions, and people living in urban areas.
5. Discrimination

Respondents were asked whether they feel they have experienced discrimination since lockdown came in, either due to their age, gender, ethnicity, or any other characteristics.

In total, 26% of people reported experiencing some form of discrimination. When looking at what type of discrimination people experienced, 13% reported being treated with less courtesy or respect than others, 10% reported that people acted as if they were afraid of them, 6% reported either receiving poorer service than others (e.g. for deliveries or in shops) or being threatened or harassed, and 4% reported receiving poorer healthcare treatment than others or experiencing people acting as though they had been dishonest. 6% reported experiencing another kind of discrimination. In total, 7% reported that they felt their discrimination experiences were due to their age, 3% to their gender, 4% to their ethnicity, and 19% to other reasons.

When looking at subgroups, total discrimination experiences were higher amongst younger adults (40% aged 18-30 reporting discrimination vs 16% of people aged 60+). They were also slightly higher amongst women (27% vs men 25%) and people from BAME groups (42% vs 24% amongst people of white ethnicity), and more common in urban areas (27% vs 22% reported in rural areas).
Figure 26a Experienced discrimination by age groups

- Age 18-29
- Age 30-59
- Age 60+

Figure 26b Experienced discrimination by gender

- Male
- Female

Figure 26c Experienced discrimination by ethnicity

- BAME
- White

Figure 26d Experienced discrimination by living area

- City/town
- Village/other
6. Changes in neighbourhood relationships

Respondents were asked to rate how they found their neighbourhood prior to Covid-19 and since lockdown. Five aspects of neighbourhood were assessed: (i) whether the neighbourhood is close knit (“closeness”), (ii) whether people in the neighbourhood generally get on with each other (“cohesion”), (iii) whether people in the neighbourhood can be trusted (“trust”), (iv) whether people in the neighbourhood share the same values (“shared values”), and (v) whether people are willing to help their neighbours (“support”).

The majority of people reported no change in how they found their neighbourhoods since before lockdown came in. 65% felt that their neighbourhood had not changed in terms of support or shared values, 79% felt that their neighbourhood was the same in terms of its closeness, and 86% and 87% felt that their neighbourhood was the same in terms of its trust and cohesion. However, 29% felt that their neighbourhood had become more supportive and shared values had increased. Similarly, 18% felt that their neighbourhood had become closer, 10% felt it had become more cohesive, and 8% felt they trusted people in their neighbourhood more. Fewer than 6% of people felt their neighbourhoods had deteriorated across any of the categories.

Responses were similar across urban and rural areas, although the improvements in neighbourhood relations were slightly stronger for all factors across urban areas.
Figure 28a Changes in neighbourhood relationships reported by people living in rural areas

Figure 28b Changes in neighbourhood relationships reported by people living in urban areas
Appendix

Methods

The Covid-19 Social Study is a panel study of the psychological and social experiences of adults in the UK during the outbreak of the novel coronavirus run by University College London and funded by the Nuffield Foundation, UKRI and the Wellcome Trust. To date, over 70,000 people have participated in the study, providing baseline socio-demographic and health data as well as answering questions on their mental health and wellbeing, the factors causing them stress, their levels of social interaction and loneliness, their adherence to and trust in government recommendations, and how they are spending their time. The study is not representative of the UK population, but instead it aims to have good representation across all major socio-demographic groups. The study sample has therefore been recruited through a variety of channels including through the media, through targeted advertising by online advertising companies offering pro-bono support to ensure this stratification, and through partnerships with organisations representing vulnerable groups, enabling meaningful subgroup analyses.

Specifically, in the analyses presented here we included adults in the UK. We used new cross-sectional data from individuals as they entered the study and also included weekly longitudinal data as participants received their routine follow-up. In this report, we treated the data as repeated cross-sectional data collected daily from the 21st March to the 9th August (the latest data available). Aiming at a representative sample of the population, we weighted the data for each day to the proportions of gender, age, ethnicity, education and country of living obtained from the Office for National Statistics (ONS, 2018). Where results for subgroups show volatility, this could be a product of the sample size being smaller so caution in interpreting these results is encouraged.

The study is focusing specifically on the following questions:
1. What are the psychosocial experiences of people in isolation?
2. How do trajectories of mental health and loneliness change over time for people in isolation?
3. Which groups are at greater risk of experiencing adverse effects of isolation than others?
4. How are individuals’ health behaviours being affected?
5. Which activities help to buffer against the potential adverse effects of isolation?

The study has full ethical and data protection approval and is fully GDPR compliant. For further information or to request specific analyses, please contact Dr Daisy Fancourt d.fancourt@ucl.ac.uk. To participate or to sign up for the newsletter and receive monthly updates on the study findings, visit www.COVIDSocialStudy.org

Demographics of respondents included in this report

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Demographics of respondents included in this report

Table: Demographics of observations from participants in the pooled raw data (unweighted; data are weighted for analyses)

For full demographics weighted to population proportions, see the User Guide at www.covidsocialstudy.org/results