Covid-19 Social Study
Results Release 31

Dr Daisy Fancourt, Dr Feifei Bu, Dr Hei Wan Mak, Dr Elise Paul, Prof Andrew Steptoe
Department of Behavioural Science & Health

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Executive summary

Background
This report provides data from the last 48 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 THIRTY-FIRST report, we focus on psychological responses to the first forty-eight weeks since just before the first UK lockdown was announced (21/03/2020 to 21/02/2021). 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*** Concerns after lockdown and activities missed during lockdown

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

- Over half (57%) of adults are concerned that cases of Covid-19 will increase after the current lockdown restrictions are eased. This is down from 78% in May 2020 when these questions were asked at an almost identical timepoint as in the current lockdown. A similar proportion of adults across age groups are also concerned that people will not adhere to social distancing guidelines once restrictions start to lift (53%). NB these data were collected before the 22 February 2021 announcement on the timing of lockdown restriction easing in England.
- People are as worried about hospitals being overwhelmed (43%) after the current lockdown restrictions are eased as they were in May 2020 (44%). Young adults are more worried about this happening than adults aged 30 and over.
- Around 1 in 3 people are expressing concerns about an economic recession and increasing unemployment levels once the current lockdown restrictions are lifted. Adults of working age are more affected by economic concerns than those aged 60 and up. One-quarter of young adults are currently concerned about pollution increasing once restrictions are lifted.
- The activities people are missing the most during the latest lockdown are the same as they were in May 2020. Nearly 2 in 3 reported missing meeting up with friends and family, and these proportions were similar across age groups. Over half of adults are reporting missing going out for meals, coffee or drinks, and on holiday, but just 13% miss going to the office.
- Young adults are missing usual activities the most. 1 in 3 young adults miss going to the gym, spending time in nature, and having time alone. Over half (58%) miss going to cultural venues, compared to 49% of adults aged 30-59 and 42% of older adults. However, in general adults are reporting missing usual activities less than they did in first lockdown in 2020.
- Confidence in the central government to handle the Covid-19 pandemic has increased since the start of the year in England. Whilst levels remain lower in England than devolved nations, they are now back to levels recorded in mid-May 2020.
- Compliance continues to be at its highest levels since May of 2020. Majority compliance is being reported by around 96% of people, while complete compliance (no bending of the rules) by 3 in 5 people. Compliance has maintained a steady rate since the start of the new year.
- Stress about catching or becoming seriously ill from Covid-19 is similar to what it was in the autumn but has been decreasing since late December. Worries about accessing sufficient food have slightly decreased in the past several weeks but are still affecting approximately 1 in 10 people.
- Although mental health is worse than during the summer, there are some signs of improvement. Happiness and life satisfaction levels have increased over the last several weeks but remain at levels similar to those of the late spring of 2020 when lockdown restrictions had eased. There is also some indication that the previously recorded increases in depression and anxiety are stabilising, with possible improvements.
- Loneliness levels are still roughly the same as they were during first lockdown, although they appear to have been slightly decreasing over the past several weeks. Loneliness remains highest in people living alone, those with a mental health condition, people with lower household income, and people from ethnic minority backgrounds.
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 across the whole of the UK 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 stayed consistently high since the start of the year as new lockdowns were announced across the UK and is now as high as it was at the end of the first strict lockdown in May 2020.

Complete compliance (i.e. following rules and recommendations with no bending or even minor infringements) has been reported by around 3 in 5 people since the start of the new year. Across demographic groups, patterns of complete compliance remain as they were for the last few months, with compliance lower in higher income households, amongst young adults, amongst keyworkers, in urban areas, amongst men, amongst those in ethnic minority groups, and amongst people in good physical health.

Majority compliance continues to be reported by around 96% of people, with consistent patterns across the latest lockdown present in all major demographic groups (Figures 2m-2x).

\footnote{Figures for ethnicity sub-groups are analysed by month rather than by week to maximise sample size.}
1.2 Confidence in government

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

Confidence in the central government to handle the Covid-19 pandemic has increased since the start of the year in England. Whilst levels remain lower in England than devolved nations, they are now back to levels recorded in mid-May 2020.²

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 (further separate analyses are focusing on subgroups in devolved nations). In England, confidence in government is still lowest in those under the age of 30. Confidence also remains lower in urban areas, amongst people from ethnic minority backgrounds, in people with a mental health diagnosis, and amongst people with higher educational qualifications.

² 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.

There is some indication that the rises recorded in anxiety and depression levels since the end of the summer may be stabilising and anxiety levels may be beginning to decline. 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). Depression and anxiety are still highest in young adults, women, people with lower household income, people with a long-term physical health condition, people from ethnic minority backgrounds, and people living with children. People with a diagnosed mental illness have still been reporting higher levels of depression and anxiety symptoms (as might be expected), especially since the latest lockdown was announced (see Figures 6 and 7).

2.2 Stress

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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).

Although stress about catching Covid-19 or becoming seriously ill from it is similar to what it was in the autumn, it has decreased substantially since the start of the year with just under 40% of people reporting being worried. This decrease has followed the increase that was seen after the news of the new more contagious variant at the end of last year. When separated by age group, however, these decreases were only seen in adults aged 30-59 years and 60 years and older, who are more likely to have already received the Covid-19 vaccine or are nearer to doing so.

Worries about finance have remained relatively stable since the latest lockdown started, comparable to their lowest levels of around 1 in 4 people over the summer. Worries about unemployment remain relatively low, concerning just 1 in 8 people. Worries about accessing food have slightly decreased in the past several weeks, affecting approximately 1 in 10 people; comparable to when lockdown easing began in May 2020.

People with diagnosed mental illness have been more worried about all factors. But stressors in other demographic groups have varied. Specifically in relation to worries about Covid-19, these levels are highest in adults over the age of 30, women, and people with diagnosed physical health conditions, but have been decreasing across these groups in the last weeks.

Concerns about unemployment and finances remain highest amongst adults of working age and are comparable to their levels in the summer. Unemployment and financial stress are still higher in those living with children. Most groups are showing similar concern about accessing food, although these concerns are higher in people with a diagnosed mental health condition and those in ethnic minority groups. People with physical health conditions are also more concerned about accessing food, which may be due to greater concerns about going to supermarkets.
Figure 11e Financial stress by nations

Figure 11f Financial stress by keyworker status

Figure 11g Financial stress by living with children

Figure 11h Financial stress by living area
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, the respondent 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 or self-harm. Percentages of people having thoughts of death or self-harm have been relatively stable throughout the pandemic. They remain higher amongst younger adults, with around one-quarter reporting thoughts of death or self-harm. Thoughts of death or self-harm are also higher in those with a diagnosed mental health condition, those with lower incomes, in urban areas, and amongst those in ethnic minority groups.
3.2 Self-harm

Self-harm was assessed using a question that asks whether in the last week the respondent 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 over the course of the pandemic. Self-harm remains higher amongst younger adults and those with a diagnosed mental health condition. It is now slightly higher amongst people who are not keyworkers.

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.

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FINDINGS

Spikes on particular days are likely due to variability in the data as opposed to indications of particularly adverse experiences on certain days. NB the question on self-harm was asked starting on 30 March 2020 and thus the x-axes for these graphs are slightly different compared to the other graphs in this report.
3.3 Abuse

Abuse was measured using two questions that ask if the respondent 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 in the past few months. It remains higher amongst people with a diagnosed mental or physical health condition. It is also slightly higher amongst people with lower household income, and people from ethnic minority backgrounds but appears to have been decreasing in the last month in this latter group. This pattern remains to be explored further in the coming weeks. Whilst abuse increased slightly more amongst non-keyworkers after the start of the third lockdown, levels of abuse have been similar in keyworkers and everyone else over the last several weeks.

It should be noted that not all people who experienced physical or psychological abuse will necessarily report it, so these levels are anticipated to be an under-estimation of actual levels\(^5\).

\(^5\)Spikes on particular days are likely due to variability in the data as opposed to indications of particularly adverse experiences on certain days.
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).

There has been an increase in life satisfaction in the last month seen across all age groups. Life satisfaction remains lower than during the summer, but levels are now similar to June 2020 when lockdown restrictions were being lifted.

However, younger adults and women continue to have lower levels of life satisfaction, as are people living alone, those with a mental health condition, those with lower household incomes, people with a long-term physical health condition, and people from ethnic minority backgrounds (although smaller sample sizes compared to people with white ethnicity mean there has been greater volatility in these data).

Although this study focuses on trajectories rather than prevalence, the levels of life satisfaction are lower than usual reported averages using the same scale (7.7)\(^6\).

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Figure 20i Life satisfaction by gender

Figure 20j Life satisfaction by ethnicity

Figure 20k Life satisfaction by educational levels

Figure 20l Life satisfaction by physical health diagnosis
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 remain similar to what they were during first lockdown. Although they increased just after the introduction of the latest lockdown, the levels recorded in the past two weeks are in line with those recorded over the autumn and winter. Loneliness remains highest in people living alone, those with a mental health condition, amongst those from ethnic minority backgrounds, people with lower household income, and women.
4.3 Happiness

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 increased somewhat in recent weeks in all age groups, showing similar levels to during first lockdown in 2020. However, they remain lower than they were in the summer. Happiness levels over the past several weeks are similar to levels early in the pandemic in the UK.

There continue to be differences in reported levels of happiness across demographic groups. Levels of happiness remain lower in adults under the age of 60, people living alone, people with lower household incomes, people with a diagnosed mental or physical health condition, in urban areas, in females, and people from ethnic minority backgrounds.
5. Concerns after lockdown

In May 2020 towards the end of first lockdown, respondents were asked about what factors they were concerned about as lockdown is eased. In January-February 2021 these questions were repeated.

The proportion of people concerned about each factor has decreased compared to May, although concerns about hospitals becoming overwhelmed remain similar in January/February 2021 (43%) to what they were in May 2020 (44%). Concerns about increasing cases of Covid-19 and about hospitals being overwhelmed are fairly consistent in the two older age groups, but slightly higher in younger adults.

As in May 2020, the most prevalent current concerns are cases of Covid-19 increasing (57%) and people not adhering to social distancing (53%). Economic concerns remain relatively high, with around 1 in 3 people (37%) concerned about a recession and about unemployment levels rising (33%), and nearly as many people are worried about social cohesion decreasing (31%). Fewer than 1 in 5 people are now showing concern about pollution increasing and crime levels rising compared to around 1 in 3 in May 2020.

Around 1 in 3 adults of all ages are concerned about unemployment and a recession, and these proportions are slightly higher in adults of working age (recession: 39%, unemployment: 34%). Concern about people not adhering to social distancing is highest in older adults, while concern about pollution increasing is higher in adults under the age of 30 (26%).
Crime levels rising
Pollution increasing
Cases of Covid-19 increasing
People not adhering to social distancing
Hospitals becoming overwhelmed
Recession
Decreasing social cohesion
Unemployment levels rising
Crime levels rising

Figure 26a Concerns after lockdown in Jan-Feb 2021 amongst younger adults (aged 18-29)

Yes  No

Figure 26b Concerns after lockdown in Jan-Feb 2021 amongst adults (aged 30-59)

Yes  No

Figure 26c Concerns after lockdown in Jan-Feb 2021 amongst older adults (aged 60+)

Yes  No
6. Activities missed during lockdown

In May 2020 towards the end of first lockdown, respondents were asked about which activities they have been missing during lockdown. In January-February 2021 these questions were repeated.

Whilst fewer people are currently reporting missing each of the activities compared to May 2020, the most prevalent activities missed in January/February 2021 continue to be meeting up with friends (64%) and family (61%). There are few differences in whether people are missing meeting up with family and friends by age.

Over half of adults are missing meals and coffees out and going on holiday. Going to cultural venues is being missed by 48% of adults, while 29% are missing spending time in nature. These factors are all being missed most by younger adults.

Around 1 in 4 adults are missing going to the gym. This is particularly prevalent amongst younger adults (33%). Similarly, 1 in 4 adults (35% of adults under 30) are missing having time alone.

1 in 4 adults are missing taking part in community groups, while just 13% of people are missing going to the office. More young adults say they miss going to the office (22%).

Overall, younger adults are reporting missing more things than older adults, with an average of 6 out of 12 factors reported as being missed by adults under 30 compared to 5 factors amongst adults over the age of 60.
Figure 28a Activities missed during lockdown in Jan-Feb 2021 amongst younger adults (aged 18-29)

Figure 28b Activities missed during lockdown in Jan-Feb 2021 amongst adults (aged 30-59)
Figure 28c Activities missed during lockdown in Jan-Feb 2021 amongst older adults (aged 60+)

- Meeting up with friends
- Meeting up with family
- Going out for meals
- Going out for coffees or drinks
- Going on holiday
- Going to cultural venues
- Spending time in nature
- Taking part in community groups
- Going to the gym or other
- Doing regular volunteering activities
- Having time on your own
- Going to the office

Yes | No
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 2020 to the 21st February 2021 (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

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

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