

Social Activity Measure February 22nd (Period Covered: Week Beginning February 22nd)

The Social Activity Measure (SAM) is a behavioural study that records the public response to the risk of Covid-19 infection and Covid-19 guidelines over time. Designed by the ESRI's Behavioural Research Unit (BRU), SAM is an anonymous, interactive, online study that surveys people about their recent activity. The study offers insight into where and how risks of transmission arise. SAM aims to inform policy regarding the opening of parts of the economy and society, while keeping Covid-19 under control. The research is funded by the Department of the Taoiseach.

Method

SAM is a "prompted recall" study. As such, it uses methods from behavioural science to help people to recall their activities. It then asks about times when people left their homes, via factual, neutral questions. Questions cover locations people visited and whether they had visitors to their home during the previous week. Follow-up questions gather greater detail about the previous two days: how many other people participants met, how easy it was to maintain a 2m distance, whether hand sanitiser and face masks were used, and so on. The study concludes with questions about perceptions of the behaviour of others and the pandemic more generally.

The intention is to collect data from a nationally representative sample of 1,000 adults every two weeks. Recruitment is from existing online survey panels and aims to match the socio-demographic profile of the population. A discussion of the accuracy of this method can be found in previous ESRI-BRU publications.¹ The survey is completely anonymous.

Main Findings

This report presents data from the third round of data collection. Previous rounds collected data in the weeks starting January 25th and February 8th. Where differences are highlighted they are statistically significant unless otherwise stated. Further detail is provided in accompanying slides, which are referenced here for ease of use.

1. Mobility and social activity has increased modestly over recent weeks

Across the three rounds of data collection, there has been a small increase in the proportion of the population undertaking journeys outside of their home (Slides 3 and 4). The largest increases relate to trips to outdoor locations (parks, beaches, countryside) and visits to other households. These increases have occurred in the context of improved weather since the last week of January, when the baseline data were collected. The higher level of mobility does not translate directly into greater social activity (Slide 5). Approximately half the adult population continued to meet up with no individuals from outside their household in a given 48-hour period, with another quarter meeting up with only one or two; a further quarter met up with three or more.

2. There has been a modest increase in the number of close contacts between people, mostly due to a rise in the number of close contacts at outdoor locations

In the week beginning 22nd February, 24% of the population had a close contact with another person outside their household during the previous 24 hours (Slide 8). This compares to 20% four

¹ See Timmons et al. (2020), Public understanding and perceptions of the COVID-19 Test-and-Trace system, ESRI Survey and Statistical Report Series 96 (www.esri.ie/system/files/publications/SUSTAT96.pdf), p.3-4.

weeks previously. Most close contacts are happening in workplaces, outdoor locations and in homes. The largest increase was at outdoor locations, up from 1.1% to 6.2% of the population. There was a smaller but still significant increase in the number associated with visiting homes (3.9% to 5.4% of the population). Although more close contacts happen in workplaces, most of these occur with at least one person wearing a mask (Slide 9). In contrast, very few people who have a close contact in a home wear a mask at the time.

While these proportions of people engaging in risky interactions may appear low in percentage terms, it is important to understand that they involve hundreds of thousands of individuals and are likely to be slowing the current decrease in Covid-19 case numbers.

3. There is a psychological impact of the extension of Level 5 restrictions

The extension of Level 5 restrictions has been associated with a drop in self-reported wellbeing and an increase in how tiresome people say it is to stick to the public health guidelines (Slide 13). However, a much greater proportion of people rate preventing the spread of the disease as more important than the personal burden of restrictions, and there has been no change in this. Moreover, any change in reported compliance with the guidelines (of self or others) is very small (Slide 14).

4. Worry and concern about the consistency of restrictions are most strongly related to social activity

As case numbers have fallen, the overall level of worry about the disease has fallen too, as has the proportion closely following the news about Covid-19 (although this remains high) (Slide 15). Heightened public discussion about the lifting of restrictions has been accompanied by an increase in the minority of people reporting that the restrictions are contradictory rather than coherent (Slide 15). Both the level of worry and concern about the consistency of restrictions are associated with meeting more people from other households or having close contacts (Slides 16 and 17). These factors are stronger influences on behaviour than people's reported level of fatigue with restrictions.

5. Three in four say they will definitely accept the COVID-19 vaccine when it is offered to them

There is no statistically significant change in these numbers over the last four weeks (Slide 19). Those who have already been vaccinated are more likely to have had a close contact in the past 48 hours, but most of those who have been vaccinated are essential workers. People who more closely follow the news about Covid-19 are very much more likely to say that they will definitely get the vaccine when offered it (slide 20).

Other findings

There remain large misperceptions about how people's own activity compares to the activity of others. Those who are most likely to meet up with people from other households continue to believe that they meet fewer people than average (Slides 6). This misperceptions is less strong among essential workers (Slide 7). Those who have close contacts believe they are more careful than average (Slide 12).

There has been a small increase in the proportion of non-essential workers going to their workplace during the previous week (Slide 10), to more than a quarter (25.7%).

Expectations that public health restrictions would be lifted soon have fallen somewhat (Slide 18).