# Social Activity Measure – Wave 1

## (Period Covered: Week Beginning January 25th, 2021)

The Social Activity Measure (SAM) is a behavioural study that records the public response to the risk of Covid-19 infection 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 was designed by the BRU in consultation with the Department of the Taoiseach, and is funded by them/Government of Ireland.

### 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 survey is completely anonymous.

This first wave of SAM reports results from a nationally representative sample of 1,000 people (aged 18+). The intention is to collect data from 1,000 respondents 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]

### Main Findings from Wave 1

Wave 1 produced the following findings. Further detail is provided in accompanying slides, which are referenced here for ease of use.

*1. A small proportion of people are responsible for most social activity*

Most people (92%) had left their home over the previous week (slide 3). A majority (73%) shopped for food and most had walked in their local neighbourhood (53%) (slide 4). However, in the two days prior to the survey, half the adult population had no social contact outside their own household (slide 5). By this, we mean that they had not arranged to meet anyone at an external location, bumped into anyone and chatted for an extended period, met people at a workplace, or received household visitors. More than a quarter had met with only one or two people from other households. A small minority, less than 10%, had met seven or more.

When added up over multiple locations, 20% of the population had "close contact" (more than 15 minutes within 2m or 2 hours indoors without good ventilation) with a person from outside their household during the previous day (slide 5). Workplace settings accounted for the majority of close contact interactions. Almost half of all close contact interactions occurred in workplaces involved in

[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.

the provision of essential services (9%-pts) and 4% of people attended close contact, non-essential workplaces (slide 6). Over one quarter (28%) of respondents (48% of workers) had travelled to their workplace at some point during the previous week (slide 6), most of whom (73%) were essential workers. Most of those who worked in a close contact environment over the study period reported always wearing a facemask or wearing one while indoors with others.

A smaller proportion (6 %-pts) had close contact interactions while visiting other households or hosting visitors (slide 7). In the majority of cases visitors kept a 2m distance, but meetings were mostly indoors and facemasks were seldom worn.

*2. People are greatly overestimating the social activity of others*

The large majority of participants (81%) believed they were following recommendations to prevent the spread of Covid-19 better than others (slide 8). People who met three or more people from outside their household were in the highest 25% with respect to social activity, yet they believed they were meeting fewer people than average (slide 9). Similarly, more than 90% of people believed their behaviour was more careful than average. The figure was only slightly lower for those who had had a close contact the previous day (slide 10).

*3. Worry and engagement, not fatigue, are associated with social activity*

It is often asserted that compliance with guidance is reduced by people being "fatigued" with restrictions. However, our data do not support this. People who said they find it tiresome to stick to restrictions were not significantly more likely to meet up with others or to have had a close contact (slide 11). A large majority (88%) thought that preventing the spread of disease was more important than (77%), or at least as important as (11%), the burden of restrictions (slide 12). Levels of worry and engagement were more predictive. Those who expressed greater worry about the coronavirus in general were far less likely to meet with others outside the household or to have had a close contact (slide 13). People who said they do not follow news about the virus were substantially more likely to meet with others or to have had a close contact (slide 14).

*4. Other findings*

While older people were less likely to have had a close contact than younger people, the difference was accounted for by not going to work. Older people were as likely to meet others outside the household (slide 15).

Parents with children under the age of 18 were more likely to meet others from outside the household and to have had close contacts (slide 16). Further waves can establish the nature of this effect, for example where these close contacts are occurring.

People living outside Leinster were more likely to have met up with others from outside their household. There was no significant difference between urban and rural locations (slide 17).

The overwhelming majority reported that masks were worn by staff and other customers in shops and businesses they visited. Sanitiser use was also very high. However, more than one-third said that social distance was not maintained during visits to shops, especially supermarkets (slide 18).

Interactions involving cafés, pubs and restaurants were limited to a very low number, almost all for collecting take-away (slide 19).

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