Social Activity Measure March 8th
(Period Covered: Week Beginning March 8th)

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 Covid-19 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 that uses methods from behavioural science to help people to recall their activities. It asks about times when people left their homes, via factual, neutral questions. Questions cover locations people visited and visitors to their home during the previous week. Follow-up questions gather greater detail about the previous two days: how many people participants met, for how long, ease of keeping a 2m distance, use of hand sanitiser and face masks, and so on. The study concludes with questions about the pandemic more generally.

This report presents data from the fourth round of data collection, the first was collected in the week beginning January 25th. Data is collected from a nationally representative sample of 1,000 adults every two weeks. Recruitment is from existing online survey panels 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

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 increased further over recent weeks

Across the four rounds of SAM (covering a six-week period), the proportion of the population undertaking journeys outside of their home increased (Slides 3 and 4). We recorded more visits in relation to all 8 of the most popular locations. While increases in workplace activity were small (Slide 5), visits to locations associated with social activity, including to collect take-away food, increased more substantially. There was a steady rise in visits to shops (Slide 6). The substantial increase in outdoor activity during February levelled off in the most recent two-week period.

2. People met with more individuals from outside their household and there was an increase in close contacts between people

While the three previous rounds of SAM recorded that people left their homes more, this did not translate into meeting up with more people from other households. In this fourth round, however, the pattern changed. During the previous 48 hours, an individual met an average of 2.23 people from other households, up from 1.89 two weeks previously. Considering only people from outside the definition of a "support bubble", the average was 1.67, up from 1.38 (Slide 8). The proportion who had a close contact in the previous 24 hours rose to over one quarter (Slide 9). These changes 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.

figures may not appear large, but they translate into hundreds of thousands of additional contacts and this change in behaviour coincides with the stalling of the downward trend in case numbers.

3. The most substantive change was in social visits to homes

23.8% of the population either had a visitor to their home or visited another home the day before the study (Slide 10). Almost half of these (11.5%) were social visits (i.e. not professional, care or childcare related), up from 5.0% six weeks previously. Most visits involved time indoors, with the visitor not wearing a mask, and visits frequently lasting more than one hour. The minority who engaged in these social visits is spread across socio-demographic groups.

4. Three psychological factors predict risky behaviour

The changes in social activity were accompanied by changes in worry, the perceived consistency of restrictions, and how people trade off preventing the spread of the virus against the burden of restrictions. These three psychological factors are strongly related to behaviour. (i) *Worry*. The level of worry (about Covid-19 in general) has fallen steadily alongside case numbers and is closely correlated with how much attention people pay to the news (Slide 11). Worry is consistently the strongest predictor of behaviour: people who are more worried meet fewer people from other households, are less likely to be involved in a social visit, and less likely to have a close contact (including in a workplace) (Slide 12). (ii) *Perceived consistency of restrictions*. Those perceiving restrictions to be coherent rather than contradictory fell around the time of the announcement of school reopenings and the extension of Level 5, before recovering in the most recent data (Slide 13). People who perceive the current restrictions to be contradictory are more likely to meet others, to be involved in a social visit, or to have a close contact (Slide 14). (iii) *Prevention-burden trade-off*. When asked directly, a majority (75%) state that preventing the spread of the virus is more important than the burden of restrictions, but the minority who disagree has edged up in recent weeks (Slide 15). Those who disagree are more likely to meet people, be involved in a social visit, or have a close contact (Slide 16). A table in Slide 17 lists other psychological variables that are not significantly related to behaviour.

5. A majority expect restrictions to be eased in April

SAM asks what people expect to happen to restrictions come the following month. In February, initial expectations that restrictions would be eased fell away later in the month. In this March 8th round, 55.9% expected restrictions to be eased in April (Slide 18).

Other findings

There was a further slight fall in average self-reported compliance with Government recommendations (Slide 19), although it remains high (6.21 out of 7).

There is a cyclical pattern to close contacts and social visits across the days of the week, with riskier behaviour increasing towards the end of the week (Slide 20).

The proportion of the population yet to be vaccinated who stated that they will get the vaccination if offered rose to 81.8% (Slide 21). (Note that data collection ended as media stories about blood clots potentially linked to the Oxford-AstraZeneca first circulated).

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