ESRI

Rialtas na hÉireann
Government of Ireland

Social Activity Measure August 24th

(Period Covered: August 24th – 31st)

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 Economic and Social Research Institute'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 results from a nationally representative sample of 1,000 adults who participated in the study between August 24th and 31st. This is the sixteenth wave of the survey. Data have been collected fortnightly since the week of January 25th. Recruitment is from existing online survey panels to match the socio-demographic profile of the adult 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. Data collection took place during a period of speculation about the removal of restrictions but before a formal announcement was made. On the last day of data collection, 31st August, the Government announced an easing of most restrictions from 6th September and, prospectively, a full lifting from 22nd October. Vaccination was open for anyone aged 12 and over during this time period.

1. *Over 50% of people have visited a café, pub or restaurant in the past week.*

While visits to many locations remained relatively stable, visits to hospitality venues continue to increase (Slides 3-4). More than 50% of the population went to a café, pub or a restaurant over the previous week (Slide 4). There were small increases in visits to other indoor and to outdoor locations over the previous day, with outdoor location visits recovering after a drop in previous weeks (Slide 5). There was also increased use of transport (Slide 5).

2. *Mask-wearing and checking Covid-19 certificates for indoor dining remains problematic in some hospitality venues.*

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[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, pp.3-4. http://www.esri.ie/system/files/publications/SUSTAT96.pdf

Reported compliance with public health guidelines is generally high in shops (Slide 6), on public transport (Slide 7) and in hospitality venues (Slide 8), although it has dropped since before the summer. However, there are still some areas with lower compliance than others. Visits to pubs are slightly riskier with people spending more time there than in cafés or restaurants, being less likely to wear masks and less likely to report that staff and customers were wearing masks (Slides 8-9). Pubs are also the most social places – one person meets an average of 2.6 people from outside of their household in a pub (Slide 10). There is still a gap in Covid digital certificate checks – about a third of those dining indoors in cafés and restaurants said that their certificate was not checked (Slide 11).

3. *Workers who go to their workplace tend to be a little less worried about Covid-19 than workers who work from home, and take less preventive action.*

Around 50% of people who work attended their workplace at least once in the past week (Slide 12). This percentage has remained relatively stable since January, although holidays in July and August could mask an upward trend. Most workers who went to their workplace did so because they cannot work from home, but 5% reported feeling under pressure to attend the workplace and 12% said they could work from home but preferred their workplace (Slide 12). Preventive behaviours in the workplace (i.e. wearing masks, maintaining distance, having adequate ventilation and having good hand hygiene) had been declining but seem to have stabilised (Slide 13). Workers who work from home tend to be slightly more worried about Covid-19 and to carry out more preventive actions to avoid Covid-19 compared to workers who go to their workplace (Slide 14). This difference remains after controlling for age, gender, education, social class, nationality, region and having children. There may be other differences between these groups that we cannot take into account, such as industry differences. It is difficult to disentangle cause and effect because some workers are not able to go to their workplaces as they remain closed, other workers may be able to go to their workplace but choose not to due to worry about Covid-19, and other workers whose workplaces are open may have become less worried with the routine of going to the workplace. However, as workplaces consider policies around workers returning to the workplace, it might be important to consider that the subgroup of the population who have been working from home are currently more worried and risk averse than those who are in workplaces now.

4. *There are large differences in social activity across the population, with 33% of people still meeting no-one from outside their household in the previous 48 hours period; while the average number of people met is 3.7.*

There have been no changes in the number of people met compared to the previous round. A third of participants reported having met with no one outside of their household in the 48 hours before doing the survey (Slide 15). On average, people met 3.7 people in total from outside their household in a 48 hour period, including 0.8 unvaccinated people from outside their household (Slide 15). Home visits for all reasons have remained stable (Slide 16), as has the number of close contacts overall (Slide 17). The vast majority of social visits and close contacts are reported by vaccinated people (Slide 17-18). There has been a slight increase in the close contacts in hospitality venues (Slide 19).

5. *Vaccine uptake has increased again in all age groups, as has satisfaction with the rollout.*

Nearly 90% of adults are now fully vaccinated, with 93% having received at least one dose of the vaccine (Slide 20). Uptake and intention remain high in all age groups, with those who stated that they would not get vaccinated remaining a very small minority group (Slide 21). This group is larger in the youngest (under 40 years old) age group (6.7%) than in the oldest group (1.3%) (Slide 22). Satisfaction with the vaccine rollout has increased in all age groups (Slide 23).

6. *Expectations for easing of restrictions in September were split with around 60% expecting some easing, but 40% expecting no change or a tightening.*

Following speculation around the change in restrictions, there has been a large increase in the share of those who expected restrictions to be eased in September. By the end of August, around 60% of people expected some restrictions to be eased. At the same time, this leaves a significant proportion of people who did not expect any change or who expected a tightening of restrictions (Slide 24).

7. *International travel remains uncommon and 74% of the population say they do not plan to travel internationally in 2021.*

Despite restrictions on international travel being lifted, only 2% of those surveyed reported having travelled off the island of Ireland in the previous week (Slide 25). Around 15% reported having travelled to another county within Ireland. There has been little change in the percentage reporting that they plan to travel internationally in 2021 with 74% saying they do not intend to travel (Slide 26). Just over half of those who do intend to travel internationally in 2021 have booked.

8. *There are large differences in worry across the population, with nearly one in three under 30s remaining very worried about Covid-19.*

Although worry has declined on average since January, a significant percentage of the population remain highly worried about Covid-19 (Slide 27). In August, 37% of people gave a rating of 8-10 on a 10-point scale that asked them how worried they were personally about Covid-19 (Slide 28). There is a wide range in worry scores in the population and they are not strongly associated with age or gender. Men and women do not differ in their level of worry (Slide 29). Older adults are more likely to be worried than younger adults, but the difference is relatively small. While one in two adults aged over 70 are highly worried about Covid-19, so are nearly one in three adults aged under 30.

9. *People who believe that others are not following the rules are not more socially active than others, but they do take fewer preventive actions against Covid-19.*

People risk transmitting Covid-19 through two behaviours: how much they choose to interact with other people and how often they take preventive steps when they do. We separate these two types of behaviour. Around 20% of people are 'low mitigators' who rarely take preventive action (Slide 30), while around 18% are 'socialisers', who are highly socially active, with about 9% of the population falling into both categories (Slide 31). Sociodemographic characteristics do not have strong associations with being a socialiser or a low mitigator, but some psychological variables do. The largest difference between them is that people who believe that others are not following public health guidance are more likely to be low mitigators, but not high socialisers (Slide 32). Making preventive actions obvious, so that people can see that most others are following them, may be important as restrictions are eased.

10. *Other psychological variables*

Most people still judge preventing the spread of the virus to be more important than the burden of restrictions (Slide 33). There was an increase in the perception that restrictions are coherent and easy to understand this week (Slide 33). There was no further change to wellbeing, reported tiredness with the restrictions, self-reported compliance or reported compliance of others (Slides 34-35).