

Social Activity Measure Feb 8th

(Period Covered: Week Beginning February 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 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 findings from data collected in the week starting 8th February. The previous wave of data was collected in the week starting 25th January. Where comparisons are highlighted (e.g. between survey rounds or between different socio-demographic groups), any differences are statistically significant unless otherwise stated. Further detail is provided in accompanying slides, which are referenced here for ease of use.

1. There was a small increase in mobility without an increase in social activity.

There was a small increase in mobility compared to the week beginning 25th January, possibly linked to an improvement in weather. There was no comparable increase in social activity. A majority (92%) had left their home over the previous week (slide 3), with most visiting a shop or business (79%, slide 4). This represents a small increase since the Jan 25th Wave of SAM (73%), with similar increases in enclosed transport (45% vs. 37%, which includes private cars) and visiting another home or garden (22% vs 15%) (slide 4). However there was no change in the number of people met outside the household or the number of close contacts the day before (slide 5). As in the Jan 25th Wave of SAM, approximately half of the adult population (54%) had not met anyone from outside their household

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.

in the past 2 days. Around a quarter of people had met one or two others from different households and a minority had met seven or more people (8%, slide 5).

Similar to two weeks previously, nearly 1 in 5 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. Most close contacts happened in workplaces (9% of the population). A majority of these close contact interactions in workplaces were attributable to essential workers (86%) but some were in non-essential workplaces (14%) (slide 6). 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. Around 7% of people had a close contact while receiving a visitor to their home or while visiting another person’s home over the two surveys (slide 7). In contrast to workplaces, few reported wearing a mask during the visit.

2. People continue to overestimate the social activity of others

Belief in the extent to which others are following restrictions did not change between 25th Jan and 8th Feb (slide 8). Again, the large majority of participants (84%) believed they were following recommendations to prevent the spread of Covid-19 better than others (slide 9). Although half of respondents had met no one outside of their household in the two days before completing the survey, people who met three or more others believed they were meeting fewer people than average (slide 10). Almost every respondent (97%) believed their behaviour was as or more careful than average. The figure was only slightly lower for those who had had a close contact the previous day (94%; slide 11).

3. Worry about the virus is more strongly linked to behaviour than fatigue with restrictions

Most people (60%) report finding restrictions tiresome to stick to, but there is no evidence that fatigue increased between the Jan 25th and Feb 8th Waves of SAM . While there is some indication that those who reported a close contact interaction outside the home were also more likely to find the restrictions tiresome, this effect was not statistically significant after controlling for other factors (slide 12). Rather, feeling less worried about the virus is more strongly linked to meeting more people and having a close contact encounter outside the home. A majority (73%) remain very worried about the virus (slide 13). Similar to late January, most (79%) judge preventing the spread of the disease to be more important than the burden of restrictions (favoured by 10%, with 11% judging both equally important; slide 14).

Across both waves of SAM, respondents who reported better mental health and wellbeing were more likely to have met someone from outside of their household in the previous 2 days. The data do not show whether meeting others is beneficial for wellbeing; although meeting someone from outside the household could lead to greater wellbeing, those with greater wellbeing might be more likely to meet with someone from outside their household. There was no association between wellbeing and having met someone in a close contact environment (slide 15).

4. More people anticipated some easing of restrictions than in late January, but expectations of the future did not change.

Compared to the Jan 25th Wave of SAM, there was a sizeable decrease in the percentage of participants who reported that the Government response was ‘insufficient’ (49% to 38%) and a corresponding increase in the percentage who reported it was ‘appropriate’ (40% to 49%) (slide 16).

Expectations for how restrictions might change in the next month were also different between the waves. When asked about their expectation of early February in the Jan 25th Wave of SAM, most participants (90%) expected there to be no change in restrictions or a tightening with the next announcement, with few expecting any easing (10%). A much larger proportion of people (41%) in Feb 8th Wave of SAM expected some easing of restrictions in early March (slide 17).

There was little difference in bigger picture expectations, with the largest proportion of people (34%) expecting restrictions to last another 9 months to a year in both surveys (slide 18). Most people reported finding the current Level 5 restrictions easy to follow (80% give an answer of 5+ on a 7 point scale) and coherent (60%; slide 19). Finding restrictions confusing or contradictory was not associated with engaging in more social activity.

5. Other findings

While people over 60 were less likely to have had a close contact than those under 40 and those aged 40 to 60, this was mainly due to the higher proportion of people in the younger ages who are working. People aged 40 to 60 and 60+ were more likely to meet with others outside the household than younger people (aged 18 to 40) (slide 20).

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 21). Further waves of SAM will establish the nature of this effect, for example where these close contacts are occurring.

People living outside Dublin were more likely to have met up with others from outside their household. There was no significant difference between urban and rural locations (slide 22).

Similar to the Jan 25th Wave of SAM, 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. Again, more than one-third said that social distance was not maintained during visits to shops, especially supermarkets (slide 23).

Interactions involving cafés, pubs and restaurants remain limited to a very low number, almost all for collecting take-away (slide 24).

Behavioural Research Unit, ESRI, 26 02 21