

Social Activity Measure July 27th (Period Covered: July 27th – August 3rd)

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 data from the fourteenth round, carried out in the week beginning July 26th. Data have been collected fortnightly since the week of January 25th, from nationally representative samples of 1,000 adults. 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 followed the re-opening of indoor dining for those with proof of being fully vaccinated or having recovered from COVID-19. The vaccine registration portal for the 18-24 age group opened on July 21st. A change to the maximum number of guests permitted to attend weddings was announced on July 27th, up from 50 to 100, to come into effect from August 5th.

1. *Little change to locations visited, including cafés, pubs and restaurants.*

There were few significant changes in the proportions of the population who visited specific locations over the previous week (Slide 3-4). The proportion of those who visited their workplace declined significantly from the previous SAM wave and there was a marginal increase in those who visited hotels/B&Bs, likely reflecting summer holidays. On locations visited the day before completing the survey, there was a small decline in visits to outdoor locations (Slide 5). Despite the re-opening of indoor dining, there was no change in the proportion of people who visited cafés, pubs and restaurants, although some of those who visited these locations reported dining indoors.

SAM also asks respondents about compliance with guidelines in the places they visited. While over 70% of the population reported having the EU Digital COVID Certificate (DCC), some of those who

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), pp.3-4.

dined indoors reported that their proof of vaccination was not checked (Slide 6). The overall proportion of those who dined indoors during the latest wave of SAM is too low to reliably report exact figures for DCC checks, but detecting this effect in one iteration of the survey implies some scope for improvement in the number of indoor dining venues checking customer DCCs.

2. *Pace of vaccine rollout and high uptake mean most socialising is now accounted for by those fully vaccinated.*

Longstanding upward trends in the number of people individuals met from outside their household, as well as the proportions of those who had a close contact and who were involved in a social visit to a home stabilised in this wave of SAM (Slides 7-9). The number of unvaccinated people an individual met fell to its lowest level (Slide 7). The proportion of people who had a close contact while not wearing a mask declined significantly and was primarily driven by a decline in close contacts in the workplace (which can be linked to the overall decline in those who attended work; Slide 8). The large majority of close contacts and social visits in homes were reported by fully vaccinated people, as the pace of vaccine rollout leaves an increasingly smaller proportion of the population unvaccinated (Slides 10, 11).

The share of the population who are 'very often or always' cautious recovered after dropping in the previous wave of SAM (Slide 12). Those who are least willing to be vaccinated tend to take fewer precautions, such as wearing a mask (Slide 13).

3. *Vaccine hesitancy has fallen sharply since January. Satisfaction with the rollout increased in all age groups but particularly among younger respondents.*

Between July 27th and August 3rd 75.8% of the SAM sample reported being fully vaccinated (Slide 14), consistent with vaccination rates posted by the HSE for the same time period. A minority of 5.4% who were still unvaccinated indicated that they intend to refuse the vaccine. This rate was highest among the under 40 age bracket, at 8.9% (Slide 15). However, a clear majority across all age groups has engaged with the vaccination process.

The proportion of the population who report being unsure about taking the vaccine has declined sharply since early 2021, down from approximately 15% in February to 2.5% in the latest waves of SAM. The proportion of those who report that they do not intend to take the vaccine has also fallen since early 2021, from approximately 7.5% averaged over the first three waves of SAM (from late January and early February) to 4.5% of the adult population now, taking the average of the last three waves of SAM (Slide 16). This implies that many of those who were initially reluctant subsequently changed their mind. A clear majority of all age groups have now got as far as taking the first dose of the vaccine, with over three quarters of those under 30 having had at least one dose and a further 11.9% have registered for an appointment (Slide 17).

Satisfaction with the vaccine rollout rose significantly in this wave of SAM, with increases across all age groups. The biggest increase is evident among 18-29 year olds, for whom vaccine registration had recently opened (Slide 18).

4. *A majority judge current restrictions to be fair, but less so for restrictions related to family events such as religious occasions.*

This wave of SAM asked respondents how fair they judged a series of current restrictions to be, on a scale from 1 (not at all) to 7 (very fair) (Slide 19, 20). A large majority (83.7%) judged the requirement of proof of vaccination, recovery or a negative PCR test in order to travel to Ireland as fair (as response of 5 or above on the scale). Almost three quarters of people (73.2%) judged keeping

nightclubs, discos and casinos closed to be fair. Over two-thirds judge the current ban on indoor events and restrictions on exercise and sport to be fair (68.3% and 67.1%, respectively). A majority also judged limits on organised outdoor events (maximum 200 attendees, or 500 if the capacity is greater than 5,000) and indoor dining being permitted only for those who are fully vaccinated or who have proof of recovery to be fair (64.2% and 62.7%, respectively). Just 51.9% of people, however, judged unvaccinated children dining indoors if accompanied by a fully vaccinated adult to be fair (with little difference between those with and without children under 18 at home). Restrictions on religious ceremonies were judged as least fair, ranging from 57.6% of people judging wedding guest restrictions to be fair to 47.5% who judged the advice against Baptisms, Communion and Confirmations to be fair. The pattern of responses suggests that restrictions around family occasions tend to be perceived as less fair than other types of restrictions.

A majority (51.1%) expected some easing of restrictions in early August, with the next largest group (36.1%) expecting no change (Slide 21).

5. Travel levels remain low, although international travel rates have increased.

Following the resumption of international travel for non-essential reasons, traveling abroad has increased in the current wave compared to June (Slide 22). However, overall travel rates remain low—about 15% of people reported that they travelled to another county on the previous day, less than 5% went to Northern Ireland and less than 3% travelled off the island of Ireland in the previous week. After an increase in inter-county travel in the previous round of SAM, it decreased in the current round and returned to the level of two waves ago (Slide 22). There has been little change in the share of people planning to travel abroad this year. The majority (over 70%) of people have not made any travel plans for 2021, regardless of their vaccination status (Slide 23).

6. The influence of psychological variables on behaviour has changed across SAM periods.

Wellbeing continued to steadily increase in the current wave, reaching its highest point since the start of SAM (Slide 24). Following a decrease in early July, perceived coherence and simplicity of restrictions have begun to recover (Slide 25). Fatigue with the restrictions (Slide 24), as well as the levels of worry and perceived burden of restrictions (Slide 26), remain stable. Importantly, the predictive power of psychological variables has changed since SAM began. While worry was the most important driver of behaviour in the first study period (under Level 5 restrictions), tiredness with restrictions and confidence in the Government's handling of the pandemic seem to have become more influential determinants of behaviours since restrictions have eased (Slide 27). In other words, in early 2021 an individual's level of worry was strongly related to their behaviour, with people who were more worried meeting fewer others and being less likely to have close contact interactions. As restrictions have eased, worry is less strongly related to behaviour. Instead, those who report finding the restrictions more tiresome are more likely to meet more people and have close contact interactions.

Confidence in the Government's handling of the pandemic also reached its highest point since the start of SAM (Slide 28). Self-reported compliance with restrictions has stabilised while perceived compliance of others has recovered in the latest wave of SAM after the dip in the previous waves (Slide 29).