

Social Activity Measure August 10th (Period Covered: August 10th – August 17th)

The Social Activity Measure (SAM) is a behavioural study that measures the public response to the risk of Covid-19 infection and Covid-19 guidelines. 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 gathered in the week beginning August 9th. 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 (referenced for ease of use). There were some small changes to restrictions prior to and during data collection. The maximum number of guests permitted at weddings rose from 50 to 100 on August 5th. A clarification on numbers permitted at organised outdoor events and gatherings was also issued on August 5th, confirming a limit of 200 people. Vaccine registration was available to all aged 16 plus and registration for children aged 12-15 opened on Thursday 12th August.

1. *The overall number of locations visited declined slightly.*

The average number of locations outside the home visited the previous day has fallen over the last two rounds of SAM (Slide 3), although the fall in weekly numbers is short of statistical significance. The reduced number of visits was spread across multiple locations (Slides 4 and 5) and probably reflected changing patterns of behaviour during peak holiday season. Despite the return of indoor dining and drinking in late July, no increase in visits to cafés, pubs and restaurants was recorded.

2. *Overall social activity, measured by the number of meetings, close contacts and social visits to other homes, remains lower than one month ago.*

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.

The average number of people individuals met from outside their household over a 48-hour period remained stable at 3.5, with each individual meeting an average of just less than 1 person who had not yet received any vaccine dose (Slide 6). On the day prior to data collection, 33% had had a close contact (Slide 7) – 27% while not wearing a mask – and 28% had either visited someone else’s home or received a visitor (Slide 8). These figures are slightly down on one month previously. The large majority of close contacts and social visits were reported by people who are fully vaccinated (Slides 9 and 10).

- 3. A small (but growing) minority of people take substantially more risk than the large majority of people. They are much more socially active and do not follow guidance for reducing risk.*

In analysing the riskiness of behaviour, we distinguish between decisions to undertake social encounters and how people choose to behave once they do. Based on the number of social encounters and their associated risk, a minority (approximately 1-in-6 individuals) attended substantially more risky social settings than was typical for the rest of the population (Slide 10). We refer to these people as “socialisers”. Meanwhile, across all locations visited outside the home, almost one quarter of the population reported keeping 2m distance from others, wearing a mask, and washing their hands less than half the time. This group, which we refer to as “non-mitigators”, has increased in size since April from 14% to 24% of the population (Slide 11). The proportion that is both a socialiser and a non-mitigator has climbed steadily to 11% (Slide 12). Although these people engage in much riskier behaviour than the average person, they mostly see themselves as low-risk (Slide 12). They are also more likely to view restrictions as unfair (Slide 13).

- 4. Trends in risk mitigation vary across workplaces, shops and transport.*

In workplaces, the proportions of workers who report that they wear a mask, that others wear masks, and that they maintain social distance have all fallen over the course of the Summer, although the proportion reporting good ventilation in the workplace has not (Slide 14). The supply of hand sanitation materials and frequency of handwashing in workplaces are also falling. Trends in shops and on transport are more positive, with slight falls in mask-wearing and hand-cleaning, but improved reports of good ventilation (Slides 15 and 16).

- 5. Behaviour in pubs is substantially higher risk than behaviour in cafés and restaurants.*

The proportion of people eating and drinking at cafés, pubs and restaurants (both indoors and outdoors) surpassed the proportion getting takeaway (Slide 17). During July and August, although cafés and restaurants were more popular than pubs, behaviour in pubs was markedly different. Pubgoers met almost three-times more people from other households, were more likely to meet indoors, and more likely to stay for over two hours (Slide 18). Customers were less likely to wear masks (other than when eating/drinking), as were staff, with 18% of pubgoers reporting at least some staff not wearing masks (Slide 19). While 73% of people now report having a Digital Covid Certificate, approximately one-third of customers eating or drinking inside cafés, pubs and restaurants reported that their certificate was not checked (Slide 20).

- 6. Vaccination uptake is high and intentions continue to be positive*

More than 80% of the adult population reported being fully vaccinated and almost 90% had received at least one dose (Slide 21). Almost all individuals aged over 40 who received a first dose now report having had a second one and, while hesitancy among younger adults is slightly greater, the very large majority are taking the vaccine and the proportion who are unsure has fallen (Slide 22). Satisfaction with the roll-out also remains high (Slide 23).

7. Other findings

- Numbers travelling across county boundaries, to Northern Ireland, or overseas, remained stable, with approximately 70% not planning to travel abroad during 2021 at (Slide 24).
- There was a significant fall in overall reported wellbeing (Slide 25).
- There were also falls in the perceived coherence of restrictions and ease of following them (Slide 26).
- Other psychological measures relating to worry, compliance and expectations were broadly stable (Slides 27-29).

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