Social Activity Measure November 15th

(Period Covered: November 16th-November 23rd)

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. 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 examines where and how risks of COVID-19 transmission arise. SAM aims to inform policy regarding the opening 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 survey 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 November 16th-23rd – the twenty-second 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. During data collection, cases remained high. New restrictions were announced, including midnight closure for hospitality venues and a return to working from home where possible. Data collection ended before news about the new variant of COVID-19 emerged.

1. *Total social activity has not reduced significantly, but there is a decline in close contacts.*

A key consideration of SAM this round was whether there would be a significant change in public behaviour given the sustained high level of COVID-19 cases. The data does not show any change in the total locations visited in the past week (Slide 3) or in visits to individual locations (Slides 4-5). Neither has there been a reduction in the number of people met in the past 48 hours (Slide 6). However, there has been a reduction in close contacts (Slide 6) indicating that people may be more cautious when they meet others. The reduction in close contacts, both with and without masks, has been mostly in homes, the location where most close contacts occur (Slide 7). The overall reduction was not attributable to any one age group as the same trend was seen in all age groups (Slide 8). There was no difference in the number of people met by those aged under 40, 40-60 or 60+ (Slide 8). There has also been a small reduction in social visits to homes moving from 22% of the population at the start of November to 18% in mid-November (Slide 9). People aged 40-60 were the most likely to show a reduction in close contacts during such social visits, but all three age groups were equally as

[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

likely to have had a social visit (Slide 10). The percentage of the population who could be considered the riskiest i.e., those who are highly socially active but take few precautions, has decreased this week suggesting that the small changes in behaviour that can be seen are not just amongst those who are generally more cautious (Slide 11).

2. *There has been a small but significant increase in caution.*

More people now are engaging in mitigative behaviours (keeping their distance, washing hands and wearing masks) than at the start of November. The increase is not extensive, but the percentage of the population who report engaging in these behaviours most of the time has returned to its highest level since May. Meanwhile, there has been a drop in the percentage who report rarely or never engaging in these behaviours (Slide 12). The increase in mitigative behaviours has occurred across all age groups (Slide 13) and in vaccinated people (Slide 14). There is no difference in mitigative behaviours between age groups in this round. Looking at specific measures, October and November saw an increase in people reporting that they wore masks in pubs, restaurants and on transport (Slide 15). There was also an increase in those saying that others wore masks on transport (Slide 16). Levels of staff wearing masks in hospitality, retail and medical venues remained high overall (Slide 17). Mask wearing by staff and customers in pubs, which had been the location with the lowest adherence to this guideline, saw a small increase in November, but it was not statistically significant (Slide 17). The use of hand sanitiser has remained high, with a notable increase in use in exercise facilities in November (Slide 18). Although mask wearing and hand sanitisation are more common in this round, social distancing and reported ventilation have decreased in some locations. The percentage of people social distancing in cafés and other indoor locations has decreased, while ventilation across all areas has seen a notable decrease since the summer (Slides 19-20). This may be due to changes in the weather and more people spending time indoors. The increase in mitigative behaviours has not necessarily been recognised, as people tend to think that others are following the guidelines less now than they were in October (Slide 21).

3. *There has been no obvious change in workplace behaviour.*

There has been no change in the percentage of people who attended their workplace in this round (Slide 22). Yet it is important to note that data collection only covered 2 working days in which the renewed call to work from home was in place. We may therefore see a change in the next round of SAM. There have been gradual increases in the percentage of people attending their workplace in all sectors over the course of the year (Slide 22). Mitigation behaviours at workplaces had been falling gradually but remained stable in this round (Slide 23). It will be important to assess attendance and mitigation in the next round of SAM, during which the work from home recommendation will have been in place for the full period.

4. *People are increasingly worried about COVID-19, particularly about the healthcare system, the economy and restrictions.*

Worry about COVID-19 has seen a sharp rise over the last 2 months, reaching its highest level since May (Slide 24). People are most worried about the healthcare system, which has an average score of 5.8 out of 7. Other worries, in order, include worry about the economy, the health of family and friends, more restrictions being put in place, the number of cases, and COVID-19 circulating in other countries. The type of worry that received the lowest relatively rating is worry about catching COVID-19 (Slide 24). Nevertheless, it still received a mean score of 4.5 out of 7. Worry about COVID-19 has risen in all ages over October and November, but the sharpest increase in worry has been for those aged over 60 (Slide 25).

5. *There has been an increase in the percentage who think the current response is insufficient and most now expect restrictions to tighten next month.*

There has been a steep increase in the percentage of the population that thinks the Government's response to the pandemic is insufficient, rising from 18% in the beginning of October to 44% this round (Slide 26). However, the percentage of people who think the Government's response has been too extreme has remained constant over that period at around 15%. Similarly, the percentage of the population that expect COVID-19 restrictions to ease in the coming month has dropped steeply since the beginning of October when 70% expected easing to take place in November. This round, only 2% of the population expected restrictions to ease in December (Slide 27). There has also been a drop in the percentage of people who think restrictions will remain as they are. Almost 90% of the population expect some level of increase to restrictions in December.

6. *Fewer people have concrete plans for different events and parties over the next 3 months compared to when asked last month.*

SAM asks respondents to indicate whether they have concrete plans for a number of activities over the next 3 months (they are asked only to include plans that have a specific date set). These include family, friend and work gatherings, travel (work or leisure), overnight stays with friends/family or in hotels/B&Bs, and attendance at artistic or sporting events. When asked in November compared with October, fewer respondents reported having plans across all activities, despite Christmas being included in both time periods respondents were asked to consider (Slide 28). The biggest drops were for non-family parties and work gatherings, which may indicate a reduction in plans for work Christmas parties. However, the reductions were not large with a drop from 27 to 20% for non-family parties and 26 to 20% for work gatherings.

7. *Despite an increase in the percentage of people dining indoors, there has been no increase in how often COVID certs are checked.*

The percentage of people who had visited a café, pub or restaurant in the previous 24 hours and who reported dining indoors while there has been steadily increasing since August (Slide 29). Despite this, there has been no increase in those reporting that their COVID Certs were checked. Since August, approximately 27% of those sitting indoors at pubs and restaurants have reported that their COVID Certs were not checked, with the corresponding number for cafés being 32%. The total numbers dining indoors at all of these venues has been low, so it is possible that small changes in COVID Cert checking rates have not been detected.

Equal numbers of vaccinated and unvaccinated people reported sitting indoors in pubs and restaurants. Fewer unvaccinated people sat indoors in cafés. People who have been fully vaccinated were more likely to visit a café, pub or restaurant, but unvaccinated people who went to a café, pub or restaurant tended to go to slightly more of them than vaccinated people did (Slide 30).

8. *Other findings*

- <u>Fatigue</u>: Fatigue with restrictions has not changed this month and remains at the same level as in September (Slide 31).
- <u>Coverage</u>*:* There has been a large increase in those following news coverage of COVID-19 in November (Slide 31). Following of news coverage had been slowly declining since SAM began in January and this is the first month that it has increased. The change this month is also the largest change between any two consecutive months throughout SAM.
- <u>Coherence of restrictions:</u> There has been no change in the perceived coherence of restrictions since the large drop observed in the end of October (Slide 32).
- <u>Wellbeing:</u> There was a small drop in wellbeing this round of SAM compared with the previous round (Slide 33). However, wellbeing was not statistically significantly different this round than it had been from the end of August through to the end of October.

- Vaccine boosters: The percentage of the population reporting that they would take a vaccine booster if one was recommended and offered to them has not changed since the start of October (Slide 34), remaining at 80% of the population (90% of those who took the first vaccine).

- Vaccination in children under 12: There has also been no change since the start of October in the percentage of parents reporting that they would let their child under the age of 12 take a COVID-19 vaccine (Slide 34). Approximately 39% of parents report that they would, with 31% reporting that they wouldn't and 30% indicating that they are not decided.

- Travel: There has been a reduction in travel between counties and to Northern Ireland, but not abroad, since the end of September (Slide 35). Inter-county travel was the lowest this round that it has been since the start of May.

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