

## Social Activity Measure December 16<sup>th</sup> (Period Covered: December 9<sup>th</sup> – December 16<sup>th</sup>)

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 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 then asks questions about people's vaccination status and intentions, as well as some broader questions about perceptions, plans and expectations.

This report presents results from a nationally representative sample of 1,000 adults surveyed between December 9<sup>th</sup> and December 16<sup>th</sup> – the twenty-fourth round of the study. Data have been collected fortnightly since the week of January 25<sup>th</sup>. 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.<sup>1</sup> The survey is completely anonymous.

### Main findings

Where differences are highlighted, they are statistically significant ( $p < .05$ ) unless otherwise stated. Further detail is provided in accompanying slides, which are referenced here for ease of use. Data were collected during a period when the news was dominated by predictions of a rapid wave of infections caused by the Omicron variant and the likelihood of tighter public health restrictions over Christmas. Tighter restrictions, including curtailing the opening hours of pubs and restaurants to no later than 8pm, were announced the day following the completion of data collection.

#### *1. There was a small reduction in social contact, but no change in close contacts*

There was a further decline in the total number of locations outside the home that people visited during the previous week, but no equivalent decline in locations visited the previous day (Slide 3), implying more frequent visits to a narrower range of locations. This interpretation is supported by reductions in visits to most locations during the previous week and the previous day, but increases in daily visits to shops and use of transport (Slides 4 and 5). There was no change in visits to cafés, pubs and restaurants. Following a spike in inter-county travel and travel to Northern Ireland in the previous round of SAM, travel returned to previous levels (Slide 6).

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<sup>1</sup> 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>

There was no change in the proportion of people who had a close contact the previous day, but there was a significant reduction in the average number of people individuals met up with from outside their household (Slide 7). Recent declines in the proportions of people having at least one close contact in a home and at work did not continue (Slide 8), but the total number of close contacts measured across all settings fell (Slide 9). The proportion of people engaging in home visits remained unchanged (Slide 10). There are downward trends in plans for activities over the next three months across all activities (Slide 11).

Assuming that the abovementioned activities (Slides 3-11) would normally increase substantially prior to Christmas, these data are consistent with people exercising some caution.

## *2. Most mitigation behaviours either increased or remained stable*

The recent increase in people reporting taking precautions when visiting locations outside the home (wearing a mask, keeping 2m, cleaning hands) sustained (Slide 11), while mask wearing and maintaining social distance at work increased (Slide 13). However, as Winter has progressed, there has been a downward trend in workers reporting that their workplace is well ventilated (Slide 13). The more cautious activity and mitigation behaviour over recent rounds of SAM applies also to those who are most socially active (Slide 14).

## *3. Public health restrictions are viewed as appropriate by most and additional restrictions were expected*

Following the reintroduction of some public health restrictions, there was an increase in the proportion of the population viewing the Government response as appropriate (50%) and a decrease in those believing it to be insufficient (33%), with a minority (16%) viewing it as too extreme (Slide 15). The majority expected more restrictions to follow (Slide 16). (Note that substantially stronger restrictions, including the 8pm hospitality curfew were introduced just after data collection).

## *4. Long-term expectations have changed sharply*

During November and December there was a sharp and substantial change in public expectations about how long the pandemic is likely to last. A majority of the population now believe that it will more than a year before all public health restrictions are lifted (Slide 17). Throughout 2021, this figure had never previously been above 33%.

## *5. Most psychological drivers of behaviour were unchanged, but there was an increase in the perceived coherence of restrictions*

Despite the news about the Omicron variant, overall worry about the virus remained steady (Slide 18), as did self-reported compliance with public health guidance (Slide 19). There was an increase in the perceived coherence of the restrictions, which throughout 2021 has been linked to how much people follow them (Slide 20). Fatigue with restrictions and how much people follow the news about COVID-19, both of which are also associated with behaviour, were unchanged (Slide 20). Self-reported overall wellbeing also remained stable (Slide 21). However, general support for the public health effort (measured by a pattern of positive responses across multiple questions) has a downward trend across 2021, especially among young people (Slide 22).

## 6. *Other findings*

- The data confirm a recent decrease in the proportion of people reporting that their Digital Covid Cert was not checked when entering cafés, pubs and restaurants to dine/drink indoors (Slide 23).
- There is an upward trend in willingness to take a booster vaccine, but no change in the willingness of parents to vaccinate children under the age of 12 (Slide 24).

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