

## Social Activity Measure January 25<sup>th</sup> (Period Covered: January 18<sup>th</sup> – January 25<sup>th</sup>, 2022)

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, the ease with which people kept a 2m distance, their 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 January 18<sup>th</sup> and January 25<sup>th</sup> 2022– the twenty-sixth round of the study. Data have been collected fortnightly since the week of January 25<sup>th</sup> 2021. 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 high case numbers had begun to fall and hospitalisations had remained broadly stable. On January 20<sup>th</sup>, NPHET issued guidance about lifting restrictions. On Friday 21<sup>st</sup> January, the Taoiseach announced the lifting of the majority of the public health restrictions from the following day. Some analyses in this round of SAM split the sample between people surveyed before and after this announcement (401 participants January Tuesday 18<sup>th</sup>-Friday 21<sup>st</sup>; 599 Saturday 22<sup>nd</sup>-Tuesday 25<sup>th</sup>).

1. *There was a large increase in social activity and close contacts, especially following the 21<sup>st</sup> January announcement*

People visited more locations outside the home, during both the previous week and the previous day (Slide 3). This increase in activity began before the Taoiseach's announcement and was observed for all locations (Slides 4 and 5). There was also a sharp recovery in intercounty travel (Slide 6). The proportion of the population who had a close contact the previous day went up steeply following the announcement, reaching 43% – the highest recorded since SAM started in January 2021 (Slide 7).

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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>

Those who had at least one close contact also had a higher number on average (Slide 8). Close contacts were more likely in all types of location and when people were not wearing facemasks (Slide 9). The average number of people individuals met up with from outside their household returned to its highest level since last Autumn (Slide 10). People also made more social visits to other people's homes (Slide 11). Combining all visits outside the home, our overall index of social activity recorded a sharp increase, the large majority of which occurred following the Taoiseach's announcement. (Slide 12). There were increases in the proportions of people engaging in particularly high levels of social activity ('socialisers') and doing so while taking few or no precautions, such as wearing a mask or maintaining 2m distance ('non-mitigating socialisers') (Slide 13). These proportions increased only following the January 21<sup>st</sup> announcement. Overall, therefore, despite speculation in the days prior to the announcement that a radical lifting of restrictions was coming, behaviour change was driven not by the speculation but by the announcement and accompanying relaxation of restrictions.

*2. Behaviour change was greatest among women, older adults, nonworking people and those without children*

The likelihood of having a close contact increased most strongly among women, older adults, nonworking people and those without children (Slide 14). These were also the groups that had changed their behaviour most substantially between mid-December and January, in response to the Omicron wave of infections. These same variations by social group (with the exception of women versus men) were also apparent in the number of locations visited (Slide 15).

*3. Fewer people took precautions when visiting locations outside the home*

Fewer people reported taking precautions (wearing a mask, keeping 2m, cleaning hands) when visiting locations outside the home (Slide 16). This change accelerated following the January 21<sup>st</sup> announcement. (The post-announcement sample was not large enough to assess how much people continued to wear masks in specific locations where they are still required, e.g. shops, public transport. This can be assessed in the next round of SAM).

*4. The January 21<sup>st</sup> announcement had contrasting effects on the psychological drivers of behaviour*

Worry fell sharply to its lowest level since SAM began a year previously (Slide 17). This fall was due to a drop in overall worry about the health impacts of COVID-19 and occurred prior to the Taoiseach's announcement, after which it went up again. Worry about the economy and impact of restrictions remained stable. There was little change in reported compliance with public health guidance (Slide 18), but increases in the perceived coherence of restrictions (Slide 19) and how easy they are to understand (Slide 20). These two changes both occurred following the announcement, when there was also a steep decline in how much people said they were fatigued with restrictions (Slide 21). People reported following the news about COVID-19 less (Slide 22). Overall support for the public health effort rose among younger adults (Slide 23).

*5. There was a fall in reported wellbeing, despite support for the change in policy*

Self-reported wellbeing fell following the January 21<sup>st</sup> announcement, for the first time in many months (Slide 22). This finding is not easy to explain. The proportion of the population who viewed the Government's response as appropriate increased (Slide 23), although following the announcement the proportion viewing the response as insufficient climbed to 27%. Yet the fall in

wellbeing occurred among the 58% of the population who viewed the Government's response as appropriate. One possibility is that the rapid lifting of restrictions is viewed by many as the right approach, but is nevertheless felt to be daunting or difficult to manage in the short-term.

#### *6. Expectations changed sharply and people are planning more activity*

Almost 4-in-5 people expect restrictions to be (further) eased in February, up from just 12% earlier in January (Slide 27). Longer-term expectations shifted dramatically following the Taoiseach's announcement, with over 60% saying that they now anticipate all restrictions to be gone within 6 months (Slide 28). People have greatly increased planned social activity across the range of different activities (Slide 29).

#### *7. Vaccination*

While a very large majority have either taken or say that they will take a booster vaccine, the declining trend in the proportion of people saying that they will refuse the booster has halted (Slide 30). There remains substantial hesitancy among parents about vaccinating their children, especially younger children, although many are still undecided (Slide 30).