Social Activity Measure February 22nd
(Period Covered: February 15th – February 22nd)

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 February 15th and 22nd 2022 – the twenty-eighth round of the study. Data have been collected fortnightly since the week of January 25th 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.[1] 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 one month after the lifting of the majority of public health restrictions. During data collection (February 18th), there was an announcement that remaining public health measures would ease from February 28th. Data collection covered a period of particularly bad weather, notably Storms Eunice and Franklin.

1. Little further change in social activity

Compared to early February, this wave of SAM shows no change in the number of locations people visited during the previous week and the previous day (Slide 3). The rise in visits to medical facilities observed in early February reversed in this wave (Slides 4 and 5). Visits to outdoor locations were down compared to January, possibly linked to bad weather (Slides 4 and 5), and there was a significant drop in intercounty travel (Slide 6). There was no change in multiple other measures of social activity: the proportion of the population who had a close contact the previous day (15 minutes within 2m of someone from another household) (Slide 7), the number of close contacts among those who had at least one (Slide 8), the locations close contacts occur, the average number

[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

of people individuals met up with from outside their household (Slide 10) or the frequency of social visits to other people's homes (Slide 11). Our overall index of social activity again recorded little change, with the proportion of adults engaging in particularly high levels of social activity ('socialisers') remaining steady also (Slide 12). The drop in the proportion of people engaging in high levels of mitigation (wearing a mask, maintaining distance, washing hands) observed in early February recovered in this wave (Slide 13).

2. Large majority continued to comply with mask requirements in retail

There was no change in self-reported mask wearing in retail settings following the announcement on February 18th that the requirement would be lifted from February 28th (Slide 14). There was also no significant change in reports that staff were wearing masks. Reports that all other customers were wearing masks has trended downwards since early January, from 85% to 75%, but there was no change immediately following the announcement (Slide 14). (Note the sample size for those who used public transport was too low to do a similar analysis.)

The vast majority (approx. 90%) of people were aware that masks were required in supermarkets and other retail stories, at medical facilities and on public transport (Slide 15). However, most people (73%) believe that the requirement is due to these locations posing the highest risk of infection, with almost half of people (45%) not recognising a primary reason was that vulnerable people cannot avoid these locations (Slide 15).

3. Worry about COVID-19 continues to fall, but 1-in-5 still highly worried

Worry has been the most consistent driver of behaviour in the SAM data over the past year. Overall worry about COVID-19 fell sharply at the end of January and has continued to fall (Slide 16). The percentage of the population who report being highly worried about COVID-19 (a response of 8 or more out of 10) fell from 35% in January to 22% in February (Slide 16). However, this figure implies that over one-in-five remain highly worried. A similar proportion (20%) report that the Government response to the pandemic is insufficient, but the majority judge it to be appropriate (66%) – a significant increase since early February (Slide 17).

Worry about all factors assessed in SAM continues to fall, although compared to the last round of SAM only worry about catching COVID-19 and restrictions returning show statistically significant declines (Slide 18). Worry about the economy remains the highest of all components. This may partly reflect concerns about the cost of living, although the question asks specifically about the effect of COVID-19 on the economy.

4. Reported wellbeing remains lower than before restrictions lifted

Self-reported wellbeing fell following the lifting of the majority of restrictions and remains lower than December (Slide 19). Seasonal effects and/or adjustment to life without public health measures and change to routines may explain some of the decline in wellbeing, but overall the drop in wellbeing remains hard to explain from available data.

5. Consistent link between exercise and better wellbeing

The only behaviour recorded in SAM that shows a consistent relationship with wellbeing is exercise. Those who report going for a walk, run or cycle the day before completing the survey report significantly higher wellbeing, noting that both questions are asked in different stages of the survey

(Slide 20). However, the latest wave of SAM shows that significantly fewer people reported having gone for a walk, run or cycle the previous day, compared to late January and early February (both over 40%). Hence part of the recent drop in wellbeing may be explained by reduced opportunity to exercise outdoors due to bad weather. The wellbeing gap between those who recently exercised and those who didn't widened throughout 2021.

The association between wellbeing and exercise is also observed when looking at broad changes in activity compared to before the pandemic. Those who report walking less, playing sport less often or engaging in another form of exercise less now compared to before March 2020 report consistently lower wellbeing, compared to those engaging in the same or more levels of exercise (Slide 21). Note that exercise is well established to have causal effects on mood, but the measures we record are correlational.

6. *Many experienced positive life changes due to the pandemic*

The majority of people report the pandemic has led to them spending more time at home (74%), going on fewer nights out (69%) and having more time to themselves (57%; Slide 22). Most who have experienced these changes find them to be positive overall (giving a score of 5-7 on a 7-point scale), with the exception of fewer nights out on which people are more divided. Almost half of workers report changes to their work-life balance (49%) and working flexibility (46%), again with a majority finding these changes to be positive (Slide 22).

7. *Most workers happy with hybrid working arrangement but over 1-in-3 would prefer to work from home more often*

This wave of SAM includes a snapshot of changes to working patterns, combining responses from workers in the last three waves of the survey (since restrictions lifted on January 18th). Changes relate to commuting patterns, hybrid working and workplace measures to mitigate the spread of COVID-19.

One-in-five workers who previously commuted using public transport now get to work by other transport modes (Slide 23). Over half of these now travel by car (or motorbike, taxi or similar) with the remainder engaging in active travel (walking or cycling). The vast majority who previously travelled by car (98%) continue to do so, as do those who previously walked or cycled (95%).

Over one quarter of workers (27%) report that it would be feasible to do their job from home, but just 12.2% report that their employer has offered hybrid working (Slide 24). Of those who report that working from home would be feasible, a majority (58%) report being happy with their arrangement (regardless of the number of days they work at home or in the office). Most of the remainder (37.6%, or 10% of all workers who could work from home) would prefer to spend fewer days at their workplace (Slide 24). Statistical models show that general wellbeing is significantly higher among those who are happy with their hybrid working arrangement, controlling for gender, age, socio-economic grade, being a parent and living in an urban or rural area (Slide 24).

The majority of workers (83%) report being satisfied with the COVID-19 mitigation measures in their workplace, but 14% feel they are insufficient (Slide 24). Satisfaction with mitigation measures is linked to the measures that are in place: workers satisfied with their workplace mitigation measures are far more likely to report that their workplace has measures for ventilation, social distancing and mask-wearing (Slide 25). Satisfaction with workplace measures is linked to preferences to work from home. Almost a quarter of those who report they would prefer fewer days in the office also report they are unhappy with their workplace mitigation measures compared to 9% of those who are happy with their hybrid working arrangement.

8. *High levels of optimism for the future*

Almost 90% of people expected further easing of restrictions in March (26%), with almost no one (3%) anticipating any tightening (Slide 26). The proportion who expect all restrictions to lift for good within 6 months rose significantly compared to early February, from 48% to 68% (Slide 27). The proportion who expect it to take longer than a year for restrictions to lift for good has fallen sharply since December (Slide 27).

9. *Other findings*

- The perceived coherence of restrictions and ease of understanding them both increased significantly again (Slide 28). Fatigue with restrictions and the extent to which people are following the news about COVID-19 remain their lowest levels since early 2021 (Slide 29). Despite the rise in recorded mitigation behaviours (Slide 13), self-reported compliance with public health measures dropped significantly to its lowest level since SAM began (to 5.7 out of 7) but there was no change in perceived compliance of others (Slide 30). Overall support for the public health effort remains stable (Slide 31).
- The decline in the proportion who have taken or are willing to take a third dose of the vaccine recorded in the last wave of SAM recovered in this wave (Slide 32). The proportion of parents who report being willing to vaccinate their 5-to-12 year old (or their child is already vaccinated) increased from 35% to 46%, although this change is not statistically significant (Slide 33).
- People judged the quality of relationships with friends and family to have worsened over the Winter period, but the lifting of restrictions has coincided with significant improvements in both (Slide 34). In general, quality of relationships with friends is judged to be about the same as before the pandemic (an average of 4.1 on a scale from 1 (very much worse) to 7 (very much better)) and quality of relationships with family are slightly better than before the pandemic (4.3 on the same scale). Social life in general has shown a similar trend since restrictions lifted but remains far worse than before the pandemic (1.6 on the same 1 to 7 scale; Slide 34).

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