

Article

Coronavirus and the social impacts on behaviours during different lockdown periods, Great Britain: up to February 2021

Indicators from the Opinions and Lifestyle Survey to understand the impact of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic on people, households and communities in Great Britain over time. Compares how the social impacts on people and their behaviours have changed when compared with earlier in the pandemic, with reference to other data sources.

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1 . Main points

Since the start of the pandemic in March 2020:

- the proportion of adults working from home is now at similar levels compared with May and June, towards the end of the spring lockdown, and higher than through the autumn, including the winter 2020 restrictions
- more people are reporting staying at home or only leaving for basic needs during the early-2021 lockdown than during the winter 2020 restrictions, but this is lower than in the spring 2020 lockdown
- the proportion of people meeting up in a personal place are similar to the spring 2020 lockdown, but meetings in public places are slightly higher in early-2021 lockdown compared with spring
- compliance with hands, face, space guidance has remained high through autumn into the new year, with more people reporting they maintain social distancing
- well-being measures suggest that the pandemic is taking its toll on people's mental health, with feelings of life satisfaction, happiness and feeling that things are worthwhile dropping with the early 2021 lockdown
- optimism about when life will return to normal declined with the early-2021 lockdown

2 . Overview

Throughout the pandemic, the Office for National Statistics (ONS) has been measuring the social and behavioural impacts on the UK population, including how people have responded to the different restrictions that have been brought in to help manage the pandemic.

This article looks at how behaviours have compared during three main periods of restrictions using data from the weekly [Opinions and Lifestyle Survey](#) (OPN) and complimenting these findings with reference to other [data sources](#). We take a look at people's work location, their reasons for leaving the home as well as looking at the "hands, face, space" compliance measures and how well-being has been affected throughout the course of the pandemic.

While direct comparisons across different restriction periods can prove challenging, the charts in this article show important differences in behaviours and social impacts across three distinct periods: spring 2020 lockdown, winter 2020 restrictions, and early-2021 lockdown ([see Glossary](#) for more detail on each and the periods they cover).

Spring 2020 lockdown

From the 23 March 2020, the whole of the UK was placed under lockdown measures, with schools shut, non-essential shops closed, and the population asked to work from home where possible and to only leave their houses for exercise and essentials. These measures began to be eased from mid-May 2020.

Winter 2020 restrictions

From the 14 October 2020, England entered [local restrictions by tiers](#), followed by a four-week lockdown from 5 November 2020. Wales entered a three-week [firebreak](#) from the 23 October 2020 followed by [alert level 4](#) restrictions; and Scotland introduced [protection levels](#) from 2 December 2020. This period ended on the 4 January 2020 after which Great Britain entered a nation-wide lockdown.

Early-2021 lockdown

From 5 January 2021, the UK government announced a further national lockdown for [England](#). Similar rules applied for [Scotland](#) and [Wales](#), particularly the message to "stay at home", meaning that adults in Great Britain were under a national lockdown at the start of the year in 2021.

Throughout the article these periods are referred to as spring 2020 lockdown, winter 2020 restrictions and early-2021 lockdown respectively.

3 . Working from home

During each period of lockdown, people have been encouraged to work from home if they can. Following the re-introduction of national lockdowns in England and Scotland in January 2021 and in Wales in December 2020, the proportion of adults working from home exclusively is currently at 36%. This is the highest proportion reported since June 2020, when restrictions were starting to be eased in Great Britain following the spring 2020 lockdown.

In Summer 2020 (16 to 30 August and 9 to 13 September 2020), when fewer restrictions were in place, just 20% of adults reported working from home (Figure 1). A similar proportion of businesses (34%) reported that their workforce was working remotely in the [Business Impacts of Coronavirus \(COVID-19\) Survey \(BICS\)](#), with the latest estimates referring to the period 28 December 2020 to 10 January 2021.

Figure 1: The proportion of adults working from home at some point in the past seven days is the highest since June 2020

Great Britain, May 2020 to January 2021

Notes:

1. Question: "In the past seven days, have you worked from home because of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic?"
2. Base population for percentage: working adults.
3. For this survey a person is said to be "working" if they had a paid job, either as an employee or self-employed; or they did any casual work for payment; or they did any unpaid or voluntary work in the previous week.

Download the data

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The proportion of working adults that report travelling to work in the last seven days (36%) is at its lowest since 18 to 20 June 2020 but is still slightly higher than the levels seen during May 2020 (29%). This was at its highest between 16 to 20 September (53%), when fewer rules were in place and remained at a relatively high level (40% to 50%) up to 20 December 2020.

Further findings from [BICS](#) highlighted differences between the lockdown periods across different industries with regards to the proportion of businesses that have been able to keep trading. An example of this can be found in the accommodation and food service activities industry where, in the latest wave, 34% of businesses were currently trading compared to 25% back in June 2020 as the nation emerged from the spring 2020 lockdown.

Collectively, these findings show us that work behaviour during the early-2021 lockdown more closely resembles the spring 2020 lockdown than the winter 2020 restrictions and that the differences that do remain may be attributed to noticeable differences in specific industries.

4 . Staying at home

During the early-2021 lockdown (between 27 and 31 January 2021), 57% of adults in Great Britain reported staying home or only leaving for basic needs (work, exercise, essential shopping or medical needs). This is a significant increase compared with the winter 2020 restrictions, but lower than the 81% reported during the spring 2020 lockdown.

Coinciding with people staying home more, the volume of car traffic was lower during the spring 2020 lockdown (between 14 and 17 May 2020, it averaged at 51% of the level observed in the first week of February 2020) and reduced to a similar average (51%) in the early-2021 lockdown (between 20 and 24 January 2021). The road traffic data published by the Department for Transport and in the [Faster Indicators release](#) is indexed to the equivalent day of the week in the first week of February 2020. We show this averaged for the weekly Opinions and Lifestyle Survey (OPN) periods found in Figure 2.

Figure 2: The proportion of adults staying at home or only leaving for essentials was at its highest in May 2020

Great Britain, May 2020 to January 2021

Notes:

1. OPN questions: "In the past seven days, have you left your home for any reason?" and "In the past seven days, for what reasons have you left your home?".
2. Daily road traffic index: 100 equals same traffic as the equivalent day of the week in the first week of February 2020, then averaged for OPN weekly reporting periods.
3. Road traffic data are available up to 1 February 2021.
4. OPN Base population for percentage: all adults.

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Over the summer, with fewer movement restrictions in place, we saw a higher volume of car traffic along with a lower proportion of adults reporting staying home (and finding more than essential reasons to leave the house) in the last seven days. The sharp fall in car traffic data from 5 to 8 November 2020 coincided with the introduction of tighter restrictions for England (lockdown), Scotland (tiers) and Wales (high alert), however, car traffic levels were still higher than the lockdowns in spring 2020 and early-2021.

A similar pattern of behaviour was reported in our weekly [Coronavirus and the latest indicators for the UK economy and society](#) release, which looked at footfall compared with the same week a year earlier. Recent retail footfall for the UK (in the week ending 31 January 2021) was at 35% of its level in the same week a year earlier; higher than the spring 2020 lockdown at 25% (in May 2020) but lower than the winter restrictions in November 2020 at 45% of the level reported a year earlier (Figure 3).

Figure 3: In the week ending 31 January 2021, overall retail footfall in the UK was at 35% of its level in the equivalent week of 2020

Volume of footfall, percentage compared with the same day the previous year, UK, 1 March 2020 to 31 January 2021



Source: Springboard and the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy

Notes:

1. The spike on Monday 24 August 2020 was caused by the comparison with 26 August 2019, which was bank holiday Monday with good weather. The bank holiday this year was a week later, on 31 August 2020.

In summary, these findings appear to tell a similar story to that uncovered by the analysis looking at where people have been working throughout the pandemic. Figure 2 shows the noticeable effects of the different lockdown periods, with the spring 2020 and early-2021 lockdowns having the biggest effect.

5 . Meetings in personal and public places

Looking at popular reasons reported by adults for leaving the house, the proportion of adults that reported to meeting up with others in a personal place has continued to fall since Christmas, and has now reached its lowest point since May 2020 at 1% in the week ending 31 January 2021.

A similar proportion was reported at the beginning of the series in May 2020 (2%) during the spring 2020 lockdown.

Figure 4: A lower proportion of adults reported meeting up with people in a public and personal place during national lockdowns in May 2020 and January 2021

Great Britain, May 2020 to January 2021

Notes:

1. Question: "In the past seven days, for what reasons have you left your home?".
2. Base population for percentage: all adults.

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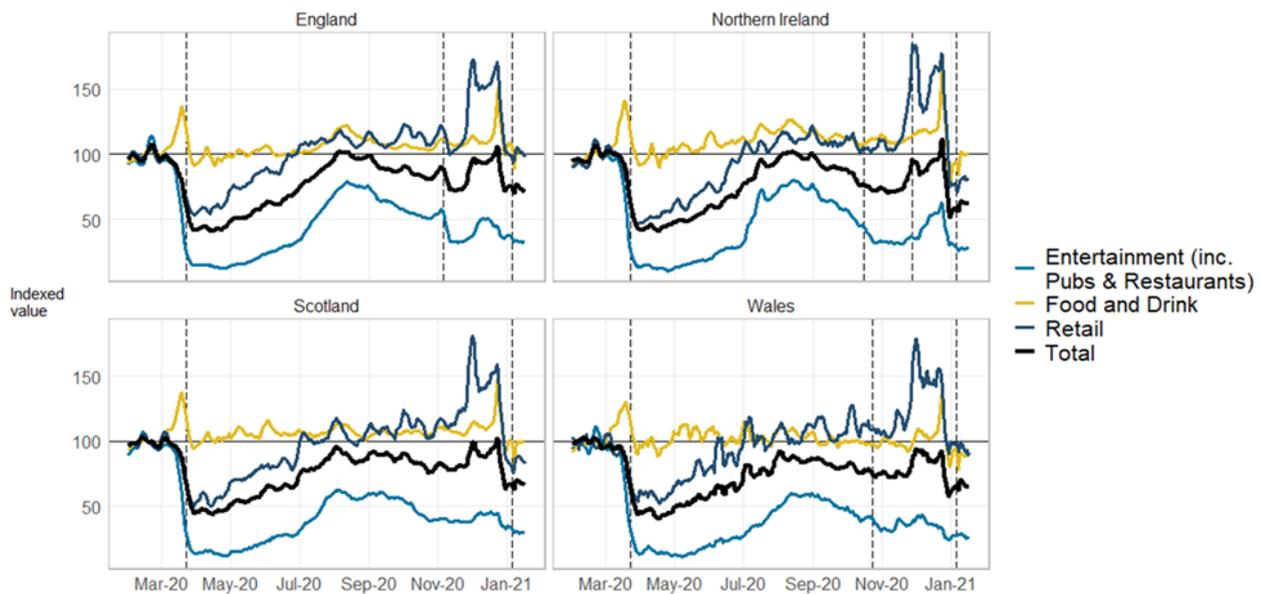
It seems that people became more sociable as lockdown restrictions eased in summer 2020. Among adults who reported leaving their home in the last seven days, the percentage reporting to meet in either a public (32%) or personal (35%) place was at its highest on record since the start of the pandemic between 11 and 16 August 2020.

Meeting in a public place was slightly higher in the week ending 31 January 2021 (5%) than in the spring 2020 lockdown (3% between 14 and 17 May), which may be because of differences with the restriction rules. In the early-2021 lockdown, people can meet one other person for exercise, which was not in place during the spring 2020 lockdown.

As parts of the economy began to open up during the summer, and with the Eat Out to Help Out scheme introduced in August 2020, the proportion of adults reporting leaving home and eating in a restaurant, bar or pub peaked at 40% between 26 and 30 August 2020. The [impact of the coronavirus pandemic on retail sales](#) release looked at total card spending and found that the Eat Out to Help Out scheme in August 2020 drove a recovery in the food services sector, which was reversed from September 2020 as restrictions tightened (Figure 5).

Figure 5: The Eat Out to Help Out scheme in August 2020 drove a recovery in the food services sector, which was reversed from September 2020 as restrictions tightened

Daily total card expenditure by UK nation and sector, seven-day rolling average of adjusted indexed values (100 = day of week average February 2020), May 2020 to January 2021



Source: Source: Revolut, Office for National Statistics calculations

Notes:

1. Introduction of lockdowns and other restriction policies are expected to differ between the four UK nations.
2. Geographic locations are defined by Revolut cardholder address rather than merchant location.
3. Merchant category codes classify businesses dependent upon primary business categories, which can then be grouped up to higher, mutually exclusive sectoral levels. In this analysis, Entertainment includes pubs, restaurants, and social venues; Retail spending includes clothing and footwear, department stores, mixed retail businesses, household goods, and other retailers; Food and drink includes supermarkets, convenience stores, and other food and drink providers.
4. UK: Lockdown 1 – 23 February 2020, Lockdown 3 – 5 January 2021; England: Lockdown 2 – 5 November 2020, Wales: Fire-break – 23 October 2020; Northern Ireland: Lockdown 2 – 19 October 2020, Lockdown 3 – 27 November 2020.

According to our [Online Time Use Survey](#), which asked people in Great Britain to record how they spent their time during the first lockdown and the time that followed, respondents reported spending more time on social activities such as spending time with friends and family in September 2020, while other less social activities decreased.

All sociable measures such as meeting in a public place, a personal place and eating in a restaurant, bar or pub fell sharply at the beginning of November 2020 as restrictions began to tighten. Wales entered a firebreak at the end of October 2020, while England entered a three-week national lockdown from 5 November 2020 and Scotland entered a high alert tier system from 2 December 2020. While we saw an uptick in socialising over the Christmas period, there was a sharp fall in January 2021 to reach similar levels as the first lockdown in March 2020.

Eating out in a restaurant, bar or pub was no longer an option for people in January 2021 because of parts of the economy closing. Alternative options for people were to collect takeaway food or drink, which remained relatively stable since the start of the series (15% between 8 and 12 July 2020) but fell to around 8% by January 2021.

6 . Compliance with hands, face, space measures

Compliance with measures to help curb the spread of coronavirus (COVID-19) remained high throughout the early-2021 lockdown. Compliance with use of face coverings and hand washing has remained relatively stable since our series began in September 2020, throughout the winter restrictions and early-2021 lockdown. Social distancing has increased from 76% between 16 and 20 September 2020 to 90% between 27 and 31 January 2021.

Figure 6: Compliance with handwashing and the use of face coverings remained consistently high, while the proportion of adults that reported complying with social distancing increased to high levels

Great Britain, September 2020 to January 2021

Notes:

1. Questions: “In the past seven days, how often did you wash your hands with soap and water straight away after returning home from a public place?”, “In the past seven days, have you used a face covering when outside your home to help slow the spread of the coronavirus (COVID-19)?” and “In the past seven days, when you have met up with people outside your household or support bubble, how often have you maintained social distancing?”.
2. Base population for percentage: all adults.

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Other work using the [Coronavirus Infection Survey](#) has looked in more detail at how often individuals are reporting social contact with other people outside their own household and the characteristics of those they are meeting. The number of socially distanced contacts with people under the age of 70 years was higher during term-time for school-aged children.

Trends in physical contacts over time in adults are very similar to socially distanced contact trends. Across all ages of physical contacts, in adults the number of physical contacts has decreased over time from September and October 2020 (Figure 7).

Figure 7: In adults, the number of socially distanced contacts has decreased across all ages and numbers of contacts

Proportion of adults by number of socially distanced contacts with different age groups, from 27 July 2020 to 11 January 2021

Notes:

1. These results are provisional and subject to revision.
2. These statistics refer to infections reported in the community, by which we mean private households. These figures exclude infections reported in hospitals, care homes or other institutional settings.
3. This analysis includes all participants between 27 July 2020 and 11 January 2021, regardless of whether they tested positive or negative for COVID-19.

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The information provided by the Coronavirus Infection Survey has indicated that while the overall proportions of compliance with the measures appear to have remained high, variations may be found within demographic groups.

7 . Well-being and mental health

In the last week of January 2021, personal well-being scores for life satisfaction, feeling that things done in life are worthwhile and happiness remained at some of the lowest levels recorded since this survey began in March 2020. In addition, anxiety scores were at the highest they have been since April 2020 (Figure 8). This week's [Coronavirus and the social impacts on Great Britain: 5 February 2021](#) goes into more detail on the reported well-being scores.

Figure 8: Happiness remained at its lowest level in the early-2021 lockdown, a similar level to the start of the pandemic in the spring 2020 lockdown

Great Britain, March 2020 to January 2021

Notes:

1. Questions: "Overall, how satisfied are you with your life nowadays?", "Overall, to what extent do you feel that the things you do in your life are worthwhile?", "Overall, how happy did you feel yesterday?" and "Overall, how anxious did you feel yesterday?".
2. This question is answered on a scale of 0 to 10, where 0 is "not at all" and 10 is "completely".
3. Base: all adults.

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Well-being scores can be an indication of mental health. The [depression in adults](#) release showed that rates of depression had doubled since pre-pandemic levels with younger adults, women, those unable to afford an unexpected expense, or disabled people most likely to be experiencing depression. This analysis was revisited in the [Coronavirus and the social impacts on Great Britain: 11 December 2020](#) release, which showed that rates had stayed at record levels.

Coronavirus-specific circumstances associated with anxiety (explored in the [Coronavirus and anxiety in Great Britain](#) release) found that between 3 April and 10 May 2020, average anxiety levels were considerably higher for people who feel “unsafe or very unsafe” in their own home (5.8 out of 10) when compared with those who feel “very safe” (3.6).

Other [shielding analysis](#) looked at the impact of the pandemic on those who are classified by the NHS as [clinically extremely vulnerable](#) (CEV) to the coronavirus (COVID-19). It found that while 61% of CEV individuals reported no difference in their mental health during the coronavirus pandemic, 35% said that their mental health and well-being worsened; 29% of CEV people reported it becoming slightly worse and 6% reported their mental health becoming much worse.

Collectively, these findings highlight just how difficult a period the pandemic has been on the mental health of people in Great Britain.

8 . Optimism about when life will return to normal

Levels of optimism about the future have varied greatly across the course of the pandemic. The proportion of adults in Great Britain that felt that life will return to normal in six months or less continued to gradually fall to 17% in the week ending 31 January 2021; the lowest figure since the end of October 2020. A similar proportion of adults (16%) reported that they were not sure when life will return to normal (Figure 9).

Figure 9: The proportion of adults who reported they felt that it will take more than a year for life to return to normal continued to increase this week

Great Britain, March 2020 to January 2021

Notes:

1. Question: "How long do you think it will be before your life returns to normal?".
2. Base: all adults.
3. Response category of "Prefer not to say" is not shown on this chart.
4. Confidence intervals are provided in the datasets associated with this article. As a general rule, if the confidence interval around one estimate overlaps with the interval around another, we cannot say with certainty that there is more than a chance difference between the two estimates.

Download the data

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Other analysis has looked at people’s perceptions of the future from an [economic well-being](#) perspective. The number of people who expect the financial position of their household to get better over the next 12 months increased from 11.0% in April 2020 to 21.5% at the end of December 2020.

Optimism levels were different depending on an individuals’ employment status and age group. For example, self-employed people were 37.5% more likely to expect their household financial situation to get worse, compared with employees, throughout the pandemic.

9 . Social impacts on Great Britain data

[Coronavirus and the social impacts on Great Britain](#)

Dataset | Released 5 February 2021

Indicators from the Opinions and Lifestyle Survey (OPN) to understand the impact of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic on people, households and communities in Great Britain.

[Social behaviours during the different lockdown periods of the coronavirus \(COVID-19\) pandemic](#)

Dataset | Released 5 February 2021

Exploring the social impacts on behaviours during the different lockdown periods of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic in the UK. Data are from March 2020 to January 2021.

10 . Glossary

Lockdown

From the 23 March 2020, the UK was placed under lockdown measures, with schools shut, non-essential shops closed, and the population asked to work from home where possible and to only leave their houses for exercise and essentials. These measures began to be eased from mid-May 2020. This is referred to as spring 2020 lockdown throughout the article.

From the 14 October 2020, England entered [local restrictions by tiers](#), followed by a three-week lockdown from 5 November 2020. Wales entered a three-week [firebreak](#) from the 23 October 2020 followed by [alert level 4](#) restrictions; and Scotland introduced [protection levels](#) from 2 December 2020. This period ended on the 4 January 2020 after which Great Britain entered a nation-wide lockdown. This is referred to as winter 2020 restrictions throughout the article.

From 5 January 2021, the UK government announced a further national lockdown for [England](#). Similar rules applied for [Scotland](#) and [Wales](#), particularly the message to "stay at home". This period is referred to as early-2021 lockdown throughout the article.

Personal well-being

Personal well-being measures ask people to evaluate, on a scale of 0 to 10, how satisfied they are with their life overall, whether they feel the things they do in life are worthwhile, and happiness and anxiety yesterday.

Working adults

For this survey, a person is said to be a "working adult" if:

- they had a paid job, either as an employee or self-employed
- they did any casual work for payment
- they did any unpaid or voluntary work in the previous week

11 . Data sources and quality

The Opinions and Lifestyle Survey (OPN) is a monthly omnibus survey. In response to the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, we have adapted the OPN to become a weekly survey used to collect data on the impact of the coronavirus on day-to-day life in Great Britain.

In the latest wave, 6,029 individuals were sampled, with a response rate of 78% (or 4,624 individuals) for the survey conducted from 27 January to 31 January 2021.

More information on the OPN can be found in the weekly [Coronavirus and social impacts of adults in Great Britain release](#) and the [Opinions and Lifestyle Quality and Methodology Information \(QMI\)](#).

12 . Related links

[Coronavirus \(COVID-19\) latest data and analysis](#)

Web page | Updated as data become available

Latest data and analysis on the coronavirus (COVID-19) in the UK and its effects on the economy and society.

[Coronavirus and the latest indicators for the UK economy and society: 04 February 2021](#)

Bulletin | Released 4 February 2021

Early experimental data on the impact of the coronavirus (COVID-19) on the UK economy and society. These faster indicators are created using rapid response surveys, novel data sources and experimental methods.

[Impact of the coronavirus \(COVID-19\) pandemic on retail sales in 2020](#)

Bulletin | Released 1 February 2021

Insights into the impact of the pandemic on retail in 2020, including how the national and local lockdowns and restrictions impacted on retail expenditure. Our analysis uses official Retail Sales Index figures and new financial card transactions data.

[Coronavirus \(COVID-19\) Infection Survey: characteristics of people testing positive for COVID-19 in England, 27 January 2021](#)

Bulletin | Released 27 January 2021

Characteristics of people testing positive for COVID-19 from the Coronavirus (COVID-19) Infection Survey. This survey is being delivered in partnership with University of Oxford, University of Manchester, Public Health England and Wellcome Trust.

[Deaths registered weekly in England and Wales, provisional: week ending 15 January 2021](#)

Bulletin | Released 26 January 2021

Provisional counts of the number of deaths registered in England and Wales, including deaths involving COVID-19, by age, sex and region, in the latest weeks for which data are available.

[Coronavirus and the social impacts on disabled people in Great Britain: September 2020](#)

Article | Released 11 November 2020

The social impacts of the coronavirus pandemic on disabled people in Great Britain based on indicators from the Opinions and Lifestyle Survey (OPN). Insights from qualitative research commissioned by the Cabinet Office Disability Unit and conducted by Policy Lab help illustrate how these indicators can be experienced by disabled people in day-to-day life.

[Personal and economic well-being in Great Britain: January 2021](#)

Bulletin | Released 20 January 2021

Estimates looking across personal and economic well-being covering the period from March to December 2020, to understand the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on people and households in Great Britain.

[Coronavirus \(COVID-19\) roundup](#)

Blog | Updated as data become available

Catch up on the latest data and analysis related to the coronavirus pandemic and its impact on our economy and society.