

Statistical bulletin

Coronavirus and compliance with government guidance, UK: April 2021

Exploring the attitudes and behaviours of different social groups in relation to compliance with coronavirus (COVID-19) government guidance across the UK.

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1 . Main points

- Overall, compliance was high and many participants in the study had a good awareness of the “Hands, Face, Space” government guidance (to wash and sanitise hands, wear a mask and keep a two metre distance from others) and of how the coronavirus spreads.
- Some participants did not comply with social mixing guidance and these participants often did not understand the rationale behind not meeting people from other households indoors.
- Some participants from the groups interviewed, particularly participants from the young people group, mentioned a concern that the lack of socialising had a negative impact on their mental well-being.
- Fear of the coronavirus (COVID-19) and passing it on to others, especially the vulnerable, motivated many participants across all groups to comply with the guidance.
- Some participants were demotivated from following the guidance by seeing others, including their peers and public figures, not complying with the guidance.
- A few participants did not trust the seriousness of the coronavirus or questioned the effectiveness of the COVID-19 guidance, particularly those from ethnic minority groups or those on low income.
- Many students and young people showed lower levels of concern for the guidance when among their peers, because they perceived that they were unlikely to either catch COVID-19 or be seriously affected by it if they did catch it because of their age.
- A few participants who were very optimistic that the vaccines would bring an end to the pandemic, felt the vaccines made them more likely to comply, as they saw the current lockdown restrictions as “the last stretch”.

2 . Understanding compliance with COVID-19 guidance

This bulletin contains summary findings from a qualitative study undertaken by IFF Research, which was commissioned by the Office for National Statistics (ONS). Its aim was to understand compliance with coronavirus (COVID-19) guidance in depth in the UK. The findings are based on in-depth interviews with adults aged 18 years and over in the UK, conducted between 23 December 2020 and 22 January 2021.

A summary of the results are presented for each of the six social groups interviewed for the study: low-income workers, young people, students, parents with dependent children, ethnic minorities and high-income workers. The [full set of findings for each social group](#) are published on the IFF website. These demographic groups are not directly comparable, and caution should be taken when drawing conclusions.

This analysis is not intended to be “representative” or measure the incidence of attitudes or behaviours, it is to understand them in depth and detail. When describing the results, terms such as “many”, “some” or “a few” are used to give a relative indication of the extent to which views were expressed or behaviours reported within the sample. The term “many” is used to mean that a view or behaviour is fairly widespread within a particular group of participants while “few” indicates that the findings applied only to a small handful of participants. “Some” is used to indicate a middle-ground between “many” and “few”.

More information on the study is available in the [Section 11: Data sources and quality](#) and [Section 12: Strengths and limitations](#).

3 . Low-income worker compliance

Many low-income workers (LIWs) were working in public-facing roles and were under increased work pressures because of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. These pressures included working longer hours because of increased demand or reduced staffing, and reductions in hours and income. Some were also more exposed to COVID-19 because of their work.

For many low-income workers, employers played a critical role in their opportunities to comply. Many low-income workers were compliant with rules out of necessity in fulfilling public-facing roles. However, some reported problems with their employer providing equipment or facilities to do their job safely, although even in these instances, employers tended to profess a desire to provide the opportunity to comply.

A few reported that they were under income pressure and that they or their colleagues would not necessarily self-isolate, be tested or participate in Test and Trace because they could not afford to be off work without pay.

Many low-income workers were increasing their handwashing and use of sanitising gel, adhering to social distancing, and wearing masks.

A few of these participants regularly ignored the guidance. This included not complying around social mixing, social distancing and mask wearing. This was driven by a combination of not grasping the rationale behind the guidance, being influenced by others, being defiant in the face of the guidance, and not believing the severity of the pandemic.

Some low-income workers created their own rules or justifications to give themselves permission to not follow the guidance. Many of these participants used maintaining their mental well-being – sometimes for themselves, sometimes for others – as a justification.

Many were motivated to adhere because they feared COVID-19 and passing it on to others, especially the vulnerable. Being able to socialise again and return to normality motivated both non-compliance and compliance, with many low-income workers using it as a positive incentive.

More detailed findings from the [study on low-income worker participants](#) are on the IFF website.

4 . Young people compliance

Many young people had a high awareness and compliance with the guidance around hands, face and space but low awareness of viral load building indoors.

However, many of these participants people felt that social mixing rules were confusing because of changes around where you could meet and with how many people. Some also questioned the motives behind social mixing guidance, for instance, allowing people to mix in business settings (such as shops or pubs) but families not being able to mix in homes.

Many young people had not complied with social mixing guidance on a few occasions during the pandemic. Of these participants, many were motivated to see others because they felt they were missing out on their social life. Many also described a negative effect on their mental well-being because of the pandemic and often felt isolated by not being able to socialise with peers.

An underlying assumption among some young people was that coronavirus (COVID-19) posed less of a risk to them because they were young. A few participants knew someone who had had COVID-19 so they concluded that it was unlikely that they would catch COVID-19.

Many students took steps to reduce their contact with strangers but sometimes met up with friends. Some of these participants made assessments of which friends were safe to meet (such as friends they felt they could trust in terms of behaving responsibly).

Many young people spoke of wanting to do the right thing, to do their part for society. Some young people expressed a sense that they had a “civic duty”, courtesy and responsibility to society to do their bit to stop the spread of COVID-19.

More detailed findings from the [study on young people participants](#) are on the IFF website.

5 . Student compliance

Many students felt they were “missing out” on the university experience. They felt they were missing social experiences by not being able to go out to parties or clubs.

Many felt learning remotely was not as effective as learning in person and a few felt they were not receiving value for money from their fees.

Students were notable in adapting their behaviours to the different contexts in which they found themselves. Many were more careful in following the guidance when with their families than when on or around student areas.

Many reported that wider life on or around student areas made compliance much more difficult because of the behaviours of others and the temptations to be more social in a university environment. Few mentioned putting any steps in place to safely manage the transition from campus to family home.

In a university environment, many students did not perceive the coronavirus (COVID-19) to be much of a threat. Some students knew people who had had COVID-19 but had not been seriously affected by it. They therefore concluded that they would recover easily if they caught it, so saw no harm in attending parties or mixing in large groups.

Many students showed good awareness of “Hands, Face, Space” guidance and of how COVID-19 spreads. However some were confused because of a perceived lack of clarity or contradictions of the tier system and travel restrictions.

Mental well-being considerations and frustration at seeing others bend or break the guidance led some students to socialise more than permitted – using their own “risk assessment” approaches to manage the risk of transmission.

Despite feeling less at risk from COVID-19 themselves, many students cared about the welfare of other groups and expressed concerns about passing on COVID-19 to older or more vulnerable people.

More detailed findings from the [study on student participants](#) are on the IFF website.

6 . Parents with dependent children compliance

Limits on social interactions had resulted in life becoming more “boring” for many parents with dependent children, with lost social opportunities for parents and fewer activities for children.

Most parents were interviewed when schools and nurseries were open, although parents did discuss the challenges of home-schooling, often referring to the first lockdown in spring 2020.

Many parents understood and were compliant with the guidance to reduce the spread of the coronavirus (COVID-19). That said, a few misunderstood aspects of the guidance that changed over time or geography.

Many in this group felt their social environment gave them opportunities to follow the guidance and they felt comfortable enforcing social distancing boundaries with friends and family.

Social distancing and social mixing were identified as the hardest aspects of the guidance to follow by many parents. These parents experienced a unique tension between a desire to comply with the guidance, and a responsibility to support their children’s well-being and give them a normal childhood, which they felt required allowing them to mix with other children.

Many parents were motivated to follow the guidance to protect family, in particular elderly and vulnerable relatives. A desire to get back to “normal life” as quickly as possible was a motivator for many, as was doing their bit for society.

The effects of social distancing on mental well-being and perceived contradictions in restrictions between tiers, regions and situations were demotivators for some, as were public figures not following the guidance.

More detailed findings from the [study on parents with dependent children](#) are on the IFF website.

7 . Ethnic minority participant compliance

Many ethnic minority participants continued to socialise indoors with friends and family during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic but were compliant with other areas of the guidance.

Many ethnic minority participants accessed information through social media, WhatsApp groups with friends or alternative news sources as these felt more culturally relevant to them than mainstream news sources. This included COVID-19 misinformation and disinformation.

Some ethnic minority participants were exposed to alternative views among their social environments that were unsupportive of aspects of the guidance, for example, views that questioned the effectiveness of face masks in stopping the spread of COVID-19 or questioned the seriousness of COVID-19.

While many ethnic minority participants felt that the guidance would be beneficial in stopping the spread of COVID-19, some were sceptical as to the usefulness of various aspects of the guidance, and/or mistrustful of its intentions. This tended to be among those who were exposed to misinformation or disinformation.

Some participants critically weighed up the misinformation or disinformation that they had been exposed to, but still took on board a more sceptical attitude. For example, toward the severity of the pandemic, or the reliability of the guidance.

Many ethnic minority participants were demotivated by misinformation and disinformation. Many also report being demotivated by witnessing others' non-compliance and a perceived lack of punishment of those disregarding the rules.

More detailed findings from the [study on ethnic group participants](#) are on the IFF website.

8 . High-income worker compliance

Many high-income workers were working from home. Adaptation to life during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic was felt to be successful for many, ranging from changing working habits to exercise routines. Loss of social contact with friends and family was crucial for many of these individuals and was most keenly felt at weekends.

Many high-income workers had good opportunities to follow the guidance. For many, home working made it straightforward to comply; they usually had sufficient space and resources. Socially, many reported the main challenges for compliance were if relatives or close friends were not complying.

There were high levels of understanding of the guidance by many, informed by mainstream sources of information, with good awareness of the underlying scientific rationale. Many participants in this group demonstrated high levels of compliance with mask wearing, handwashing and sanitising, and self-isolating when required.

There were, however, some high-income workers who broke social mixing and social distancing guidance to meet family and friends. Many of these participants justified this on the grounds that either they or a member of their family required support with childcare or to maintain their mental well-being.

A few also justified breaching the guidance as they judged the activity to be low risk. These participants typically judged the perceived likelihood of their friends and family to have been engaging in risky behaviour. A few implied their non-compliant behaviour was “offset” with compliant behaviour in other areas.

The most unique attitude of this group was that many seemed clear about what they should be doing but were confident in arguing that they had good reasons for ignoring the guidance or that they had assessed and minimised the risk.

Some high-income workers were motivated to comply because they wanted to return to normal life. Protecting family members and protecting vulnerable members of society also motivated many participants.

A few high-income workers were demotivated by the perception that they were not vulnerable to COVID-19. Concern for negative effects on mental well-being was also a demotivator for a few.

Some were demotivated by the perceived frequent changes to the guidance, or lack of belief in their effectiveness, and witnessing non-compliant behaviour by others in their area or public figures.

More detailed findings from [the study on high-income worker participants](#) are on the IFF website.

9 . Reasons for vaccine refusal

For many participants, across all the demographic groups, the coronavirus (COVID-19) vaccines had no effect on behaviour in relation to following official guidance to stop the spread of COVID-19. They believed that the restrictions currently in place would need to continue for some time after the rollout.

A few participants who were very optimistic that the vaccines would bring an end to the pandemic, felt they made them more likely to comply with the guidance.

On the other hand, a few said that the vaccination rollout would make them less likely to comply with the guidance or believed they could stop complying with the guidance after receiving a vaccine.

Many participants were positive about receiving a vaccine and viewed the vaccines as a source of hope that the pandemic would end or that restrictions would be eased.

However, some also had concerns or were undecided about receiving a vaccine, and a few said they would refuse the COVID-19 vaccines. The recurring reasons for concern about the vaccines were uncertainty about side effects, feeling that they had been developed too quickly and therefore may not be safe, and doubts about their effectiveness either against other strands of coronavirus, or in preventing the transmission of COVID-19 by those who had been vaccinated.

A few individuals had concerns about the safety of the COVID-19 vaccines but had weighed this against the benefits, such as being able to return to their old lifestyle and decided that on balance they would probably receive one.

There was an appetite for more information among some of the participants who had doubts about the COVID-19 vaccines, including published data on their effectiveness, and what the different types of vaccines contained.

More detailed findings from the [study on attitudes towards vaccines](#) are on the IFF website.

10 . Glossary

Low-income workers

A low-income worker is defined for this research as someone with an annual household income last year of less than £18,000, after tax.

Young people

Young people in this research refers to people aged between 18 and 24 years.

Student

A student in this research refers to someone currently studying at a UK university.

Parent

A parent in this research refers to someone who is a parent or legal guardian of one or more children aged under 16 years.

Ethnic minority participants

Ethnic minority participants in this research refers to people who are from an ethnic minority group or background.

High-income workers

A high-income worker is defined for this research as someone with an annual household income last year of £47,000 or more, after tax.

11 . Data sources and quality

The findings in this bulletin are summary findings from an in-depth qualitative study that was completed by IFF research and commissioned by the Office for National Statistics. Its aim was to understand compliance with COVID-19 guidance in depth in the UK for six different social groups. These are:

- low-income workers
- young people
- students
- parents with dependent children
- ethnic minority groups
- high-income workers

The full set of findings from each social group are published on the [IFF website](#). The findings are based on 180 in-depth interviews with adults aged 18 years and over in the UK, conducted between 23 December 2020 and 22 January 2021. The findings are also based on diaries completed by 90 of these participants during the same time period. We also asked some questions around vaccine attitudes and uptake.

More quality and methodology information on strengths, limitations, appropriate uses, and how the data were gathered is available in the [Coronavirus and compliance with government guidance QMI](#).

12 . Strengths and limitations

The main strengths of the study include:

- it captures the personal circumstances of individual participants within the main social groups with lower compliance
- it captures attitudes towards compliance and any barriers that participants were experiencing
- the interview guide was developed through expert consultation and met policy user needs

The main limitations of the study include:

- the COVID-19 guidance changed throughout the fieldwork period so participants are not always talking about the same guidance as each other (particularly as fieldwork was staggered across the different social groups)
- findings relate to certain circumstances (for example, national lockdowns) that have since changed, and therefore behaviours may have changed
- because of the sample design, there is duplication of personal characteristics across each group (for example, one individual may be a student, a young person and from an ethnic minority); comparisons across groups should be made with caution

There is more information in the [Coronavirus and compliance with government guidance QMI](#).

13 . Related links

[In their own words: How different people respond to coronavirus guidance](#)

Article | Released 12 April 2021

The government's coronavirus (COVID-19) guidance has restricted day-to-day life to reduce the spread of infection. In interviews and diaries, people from different social groups describe in their own words what influenced them to follow – or not follow – the guidance.

[Coronavirus and the social impacts on Great Britain: 6 April 2021](#)

Bulletin | Released 6 April 2021

Indicators from the Opinions and Lifestyle Survey covering the period 24 March to 28 March 2021 to understand the impact of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic on people, households and communities in Great Britain.