

Statistical bulletin

Social capital in the UK: April 2020 to March 2021

How the UK fared in the four domains of social capital - personal relationships, social network support, civic engagement, and trust and cooperative norms - during April 2020 to March 2021. Sub-population breakdowns by sex, age, ethnicity, disability status, religious status, National Statistics Socio-economic Classification (NS-SEC), urban and rural area, and ITL1 regions are included for the first time in the accompanying data tables.

Contact:
Ida Sadlowska and Eleanor Rees
qualityoflife@ons.gov.uk
+44 1633 455455

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1 . Main points

- Overall, in the UK in 2020 to 2021, the majority of the reviewed social capital indicators remained at their pre-April 2020 levels; however, people's experiences varied depending on their characteristics.
- Females, older people and those in rural areas tend to be more involved in local social and support networks than males, younger people and those in urban areas.
- Females reported having stronger social connections and support links with their local communities than males; 73.6% of females, compared with 65.5% of males, felt that they would receive support from their local community if they needed help during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic (Great Britain, May to August 2020).
- Social network support tends to increase with age; 65.8% of people aged 65 to 74 years checked on their neighbours who might need help compared with 41.3% of those aged 16 to 24 years (Great Britain, May to July 2020).
- Rural areas appear to have stronger community relations than urban areas, although some improvements in social capital in urban communities were observed; the percentage of people who believe that others in general can be trusted increased by 3.9 percentage points in urban areas between 2019 to 2020 and 2020 to 2021 in England.
- Following a period of narrowing, the gender gap in feeling safe when walking alone at night in one's local area increased again to levels seen from 2015 to 2016 through to 2018 to 2019; 69.5% of females reported feeling safe compared with 89.5% of males (England and Wales, 2020 to 2021).

2 . National level social capital over-time

Social capital is a term used to describe the extent and nature of our connections with others and the collective attitudes and behaviours between people that support a well-functioning, close-knit society. This bulletin focuses on social capital across the UK countries, in the context of the first year of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic (April 2020 to March 2021).

Estimates in this bulletin come from several data sources with different geographical coverage and data collection periods. The relevant geographies and time periods are referenced throughout the bulletin. Historical comparisons are provided when available. Differences are assessed using non-overlapping 95% confidence intervals, and only statistically significant differences are reported on. Caution should be exercised when making comparisons between indicators and over time. For more information, see the [Measuring the data section](#).

While most of the social capital indicators did not change significantly in 2020 to 2021 compared with their previous reporting period, in England the percentage of people phoning, or audio or video calling, and the percentage exchanging texts or instant messages with their family and friends at least once a week increased (by 4.1 percentage points and by 2.4 percentage points, respectively). A larger proportion of people also felt that, in general, people can be trusted (2.7 percentage points increase). In contrast, the percentage of people meeting in person with family members or friends at least once a week fell by 7.2 percentage points. The percentage of those engaging in formal volunteering in the last 12 months and those who donated to charity in the last 4 weeks also decreased by 7.3 percentage points and 11.5 percentage points, respectively. Additional research has, however, found [an increase in the percentage of people engaging in informal volunteering at least once in the previous 4 weeks](#).

The observed areas of improvement and deterioration in social capital indicators largely reflect the changes in social interactions related to periods of mandated COVID-19 restrictions.

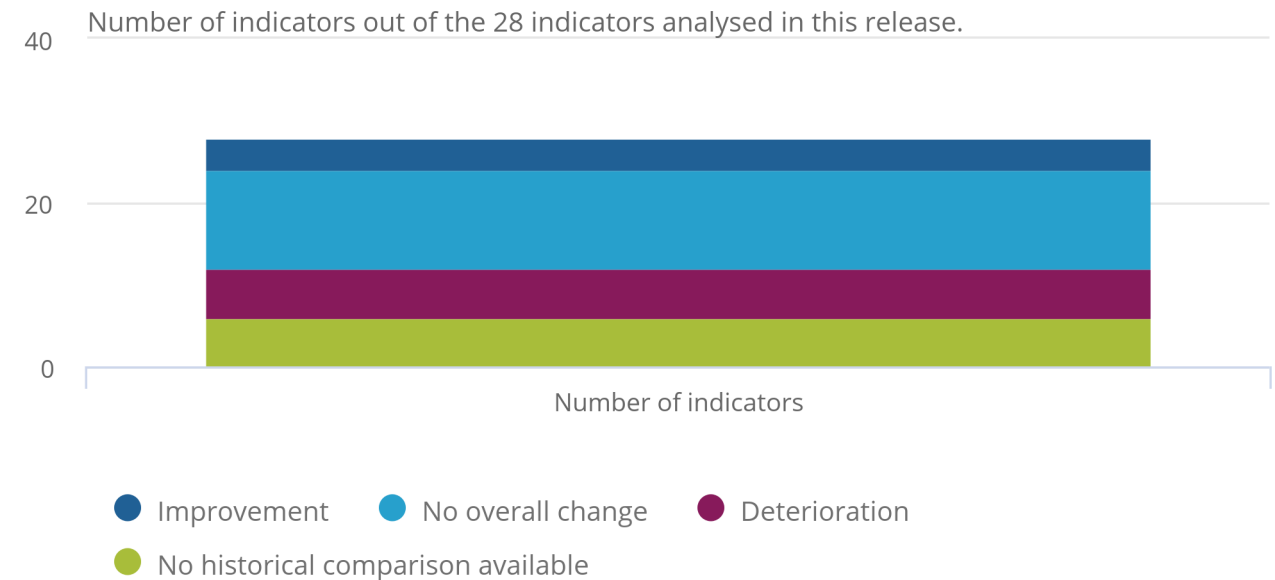
For the UK, the data collected in March 2021 also show a long-term decrease since 2014 to 2015 in the percentages of people agreeing that others in their neighbourhood can be trusted (a fall of 8.0 percentage points) and that people in their local area are willing to help their neighbours (a fall of 7.2 percentage points). However, as these comparisons are with 2014 to 2015, the changes cannot be solely associated with the most recent years.

Figure 1: While four social capital indicators improved and six deteriorated, the majority of measures remained stable in 2020 to 2021

Assessment of over-time changes in social capital indicators on the national level

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Assessment of over-time changes in social capital indicators on the national level



Source: Understanding Society: COVID-19 Study (UK), Understanding Society: The UK Household Longitudinal Study Main Survey (UK), the Opinions and Lifestyle Survey (Great Britain), the Community Life Survey (England), the Telephone-operated Crime Survey for England and Wales and the Crime Survey for England and Wales.

Notes:

1. Over-time comparisons are made to different time periods, depending on the data source and indicator. Latest available pre-April 2020 data were used for each measure.

3 . Social capital by sex

In March 2021 in the UK, comparable percentages of females and males believed that others in their neighbourhood can be trusted (62.1% and 62.0%, respectively) and that people in their local area are willing to help their neighbours (68.2% and 66.6%, respectively). However, females were more likely to be involved in social and support-based interactions in their local areas in the first year of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic.

In Great Britain, between May and August 2020, more females than males declared that they checked on neighbours who might need help at least once in the past seven days (60.8% and 49.7%, respectively). Females were also more likely to feel that they would receive support from their local community if they needed help during the COVID-19 pandemic (73.6% compared with 65.5% of males) (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Females were more likely than males to check on their neighbours and to believe that they would receive support from their local community in Great Britain in 2020

Percentage of people who checked on neighbours who might need help at least once in the past seven days, by sex, Great Britain, May to July 2020

Percentage of people who believe that other local community members would support them if they needed help during the coronavirus outbreak, by sex, Great Britain, May to August 2020

Notes:

1. The estimates are informed by data pooled over two time periods, May to July 2020 (Waves 6 to 19 of the Opinions and Lifestyle Survey) and May to August 2020 (Waves 6 to 21 of the Opinions and Lifestyle Survey), to include the maximum number of survey waves when each question was asked.
2. Question wording for the "Percentage of people who believe that other local community members would support them if they needed help during the coronavirus outbreak" changed slightly for the last two weeks of data collection (Opinions and Lifestyle Survey, Waves 20 and 21) from "If I need help, other local community members would support me during the Coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak" to "I felt, other local community members would support me during the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak".

Download the data

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In March 2021, 29.6% of females in the UK were providing practical help (for example, with shopping, cooking, cleaning, childcare and personal needs) to family, friends or neighbours who were not living in the same household, compared with 22.5% of males (a 7.2 percentage points difference). There was no difference between the percentage of females and males providing financial help to family, friends or neighbours outside their household.

Between 2019 to 2020 and 2020 to 2021, there was a 3.6 percentage points increase in the percentage of females who borrow things and exchange favours with their neighbours in England, from 34.9% to 38.5%. In the same period, the percentage of females who believed that in general most people can be trusted increased in England, from 60.6% to 64.4%, while there was no change for men. More females than males also reported feeling that they belong to their neighbourhood (66.3% and 63.1%, respectively) in 2020 to 2021.

Despite females' improving neighbourhood connections, the Telephone-operated Crime Survey for England and Wales (TCSEW) estimated that the percentage of females declaring that they felt safe walking alone in their local area after dark levelled at 69.5% in 2020 to 2021. In contrast, the percentage of males who felt safe increased by 2.7 percentage points, from 86.8% to 89.5%. This led to widening of the gender gap in feelings of safety between 2019 to 2020 and 2020 to 2021 (please note [the change in survey methodology in 2020 to 2021](#), which might have affected the estimates). This widening follows a period of narrowing observed in the estimates from the Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW) between 2015 to 2016 and 2019 to 2020, when the percentage of females feeling safe increased while the percentage of males feeling safe remained stable (see Figure 3). More recent [analysis of perceptions of personal safety and experiences of harassment in Great Britain](#) is also available on the ONS website, with data for February to March 2022 available from 25 May 2022.

Figure 3: The gap between the percentage of females and males reporting feeling safe walking alone in their local area after dark increased in England and Wales between 2019 to 2020 and 2020 to 2021

Percentage of females and males who felt "very" or "fairly" safe walking alone in their local area after dark, England and Wales, between 2015 to 2016 and 2020 to 2021

Notes:

1. The methodology of data collection changed in 2020 to 2021, compared with the previous years. The 2020 to 2021 data were collected between May 2020 and March 2021 using the Telephone-operated Crime Survey for England and Wales (TCSEW). The data for earlier time periods were collected in face-to-face interviews as part of the Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW).
2. ONS guidance explains [comparability between the TCSEW and the face-to-face CSEW](#).
3. The TCSEW estimates for 2020 to 2021 will differ from those previously published for this period because only data collected in Wave 1 interviews were presented for comparability purposes.
4. The CSEW estimates for 2019 to 2020 will not match those previously published as those aged 16 to 17 years have been removed for comparability.
5. There may be some overlap of interviews between the 2019 to 2020 data and the 2020 to 2021 data.

Download the data

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4 . Social capital by age

During 2020 to 2021 in England, all age groups reported a decrease in frequency of in-person meetings with family and friends, in line with restrictions related to the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic at the time. The decrease was most substantial for those aged 16 to 24 years (9.4 percentage points), those aged 65 to 74 years (9.8 percentage points) and those aged 75 years and over (8.9 percentage points), when compared with 2019 to 2020 (see Figure 4).

Figure 4: People in all age groups reported meeting up in person with family and friends less in England in 2020 to 2021 compared with 2019 to 2020

Percentage of people who meet up in person with family members or friends at least once a week, by age, England, 2019 to 2020 and 2020 to 2021

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Those aged 16 to 24 years were the only age group for which a substantial increase (11.2 percentage points) was observed in the percentage of people involved in civic activism (contacting local officials, attending a rally or signing a petition) in England in 2020 to 2021. This may be a temporary increase caused by high-profile societal events, such as racial injustice protests and climate change protests, Brexit, and cases of violence against women and girls, but it could also be an early sign of a more general change in young people's involvement in civic matters.

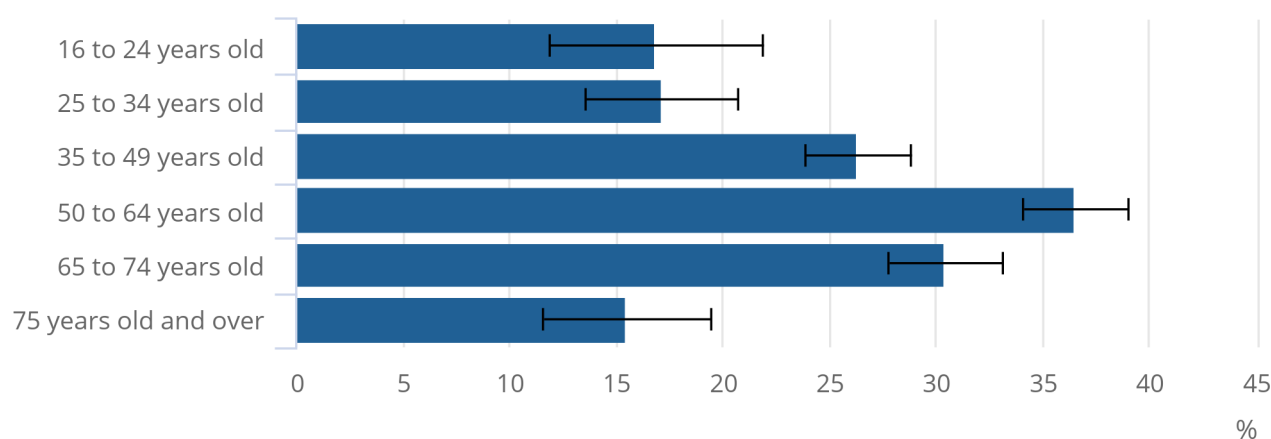
In terms of involvement in support relations, in March 2021 in the United Kingdom, 36.5% of those aged 50 to 64 years reported giving practical help (for example, with shopping, cooking, cleaning, childcare and personal needs) to family, friends or neighbours who did not live with them (see Figure 5). Those in age groups above 50 years old were also more likely than those aged under 50 years to give financial assistance to their family, friends or neighbours. These findings give an insight into a unique "burden of care" that these groups might have experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic. Among those receiving support, those aged 65 to 74 years and 75 years and over were less likely to receive financial support (2.0% and 2.3%, respectively), but they were more likely to receive practical support (18.8% and 30.5%, respectively) than the younger age groups.

Figure 5: Those aged 50 to 64 years were most likely to provide practical support to others in the UK in March 2021

Percentage of people who in the last four weeks provided practical help to family, friends or neighbours who do not live with them, by age, UK, March 2021

Figure 5: Those aged 50 to 64 years were most likely to provide practical support to others in the UK in March 2021

Percentage of people who in the last four weeks provided practical help to family, friends or neighbours who do not live with them, by age, UK, March 2021



Source: Understanding Society: COVID-19 Study Wave 8

The older age groups also reported feeling more connected to neighbourhood support networks than those in the younger age groups. In Great Britain in May to August 2020, 65.8% of people aged 65 to 74 years were checking on their neighbours who might need help, compared with 41.3% of those aged 16 to 24 years. Similarly, 84.7% of those aged 75 and over believed that they would be supported by other local community members during the COVID-19 pandemic, compared with 58.1% of those aged 25 to 34 years (see Figure 6). This age-based pattern may help contextualise findings from other Office for National Statistics (ONS) research, which showed that [younger people were more likely to have had their well-being affected by the coronavirus than the elderly](#).

Figure 6: Rates of involvement in neighbourhood and local community support networks (relying on neighbours for support and checking on neighbours) were greater among the older age groups in Great Britain in 2020

Percentage of people who checked on neighbours who might need help at least once in the past seven days, by age, Great Britain, May to July 2020

Percentage of people who believe that other local community members would support them if they needed help during the coronavirus outbreak, by age, Great Britain, May to August 2020

Notes:

1. The estimates are informed by data pooled over two time periods, May to July 2020 (Waves 6 to 19 of the Opinions and Lifestyle Survey) and May to August 2020 (Waves 6 to 21 of the Opinions and Lifestyle Survey), to include the maximum number of survey waves when each question was asked.
2. Question wording for the “Percentage of people who believe that other local community members would support them if they needed help during the coronavirus outbreak” changed slightly for the last two weeks of data collection (Opinions and Lifestyle Survey, Waves 20 and 21) from “If I need help, other local community members would support me during the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak” to “I felt, other local community members would support me during the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak”.

Download the data

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5 . Social capital by urban and rural area

In England in 2020 to 2021, larger percentages of people in rural areas reported talking regularly with their neighbours (81.8% compared with 72.4% of the urban population) and borrowing things or exchanging favours (44.1% compared with 35.6% of the urban population). These area-based differences were observed both in 2019 to 2020 and 2020 to 2021, with no over-time changes for either of the areas.

In addition, between May and July 2020 in Great Britain, 63.8% of people in rural areas were checking on their neighbours who might need help, compared with 53.2% of those in urban areas. More people in rural areas, than in urban areas, also felt that they could rely on their local community for support (79.3% and 67.4%, respectively).

In March 2021 in the UK, 75.4% of people in rural areas agreed that people in their area are willing to help their neighbours (compared with 65.0% of those in urban areas).

While people in rural areas appear to have stronger social network support than those in urban areas, our data show over-time improvements in the urban-rural gap in levels of trust and cooperative norms (see Figure 7). In England in 2020 to 2021, the gap in the sense of belonging to one’s neighbourhood narrowed down from 11.1 percentage points (in 2019 to 2020) to 8.3 percentage points between those in rural and urban areas. At the same time, the gap in generalised trust levels decreased from 15.6 percentage points to 9.1 percentage points because of an increase in the percentage of urban people who think that people in general can be trusted. Finally, while the neighbourhood trust levels (percentage of people agreeing that most people in their neighbourhood can be trusted) fell sharply in both rural and urban areas between 2014 to 2015 and March 2021, they declined more in the rural communities. As a result, the urban-rural gap in neighbourhood trust also narrowed from 14.2 percentage points to 10.9 percentage points.

Figure 7: Gaps in sense of neighbourhood belonging, generalised trust levels and neighbourhood trust levels between urban and rural areas narrowed in 2020 to 2021

Percentage of people who feel strongly that they belong to their neighbourhood, by area type, England, 2020 to 2021

Percentage of people who think that people in general can be trusted, by area type, England, 2020 to 2021

Percentage of people who would say that most people in their neighbourhood can be trusted, by area type, UK, March 2021

Notes:

1. The estimates presented on the chart come from data sources with differing coverage of time periods and geographies so should not be directly compared.
2. For neighbourhood trust, the comparisons are with 2014 to 2015, and therefore the changes cannot be solely associated with the most recent years.

Download the data

[.xlsx](#)

In urban areas, there was also a 2.8 percentage points increase (from 85.2% to 88.0%) in the percentage of males reporting feeling safe walking alone after dark in their local area in England and Wales between 2019 to 2020 and 2020 to 2021 (please note [the change in survey methodology between 2019 to 2020 and 2020 to 2021](#), which might have affected the estimates). No change was seen in urban females' feelings of safety. In 2020 to 2021, females in urban areas continued to feel safe at a below average rate of 66.6% (compared with 69.5% of all females and 81.4% of females in rural areas) (see Figure 8). The gender gap in feelings of safety increased in both urban and rural areas since 2019 to 2020 and remained bigger in urban areas (21.5 percentage points) than in rural areas (14.6 percentage points) in 2020 to 2021.

Figure 8: Females in urban areas reported the lowest rates of feeling safe walking alone in their local area after dark (for estimates by sex and area type) in England and Wales in 2020 to 2021.

Percentages of females and males who felt “very” or “fairly” safe walking alone in their local area after dark, England and Wales, May 2020 to March 2021

Notes:

1. The methodology of data collection for the Crime Survey for England and Wales changed in 2020 to 2021, compared with the previous years, from face-to-face interviews to telephone interviews.
2. The Telephone-operated Crime Survey for England and Wales estimates for 2020 to 2021 will differ from those previously published for this period because only data collected in Wave 1 interviews were presented for comparability

Download the data

[.xlsx](#)

6 . Social capital in the UK data

[Social capital headline indicators](#)

Dataset | Released 24 May 2022

Current headline indicators of social capital in the UK. This dataset includes data collected between April 2020 and March 2021 for each indicator with a comparison with latest pre-April 2020 data where available.

Sub-population breakdowns by sex, age, ethnicity, disability status, religious status, National Statistics Socio-economic Classification (NS-SEC), urban and rural area, and ITL1 regions are included where available.

7 . Glossary

Social capital

Social capital is a term used to describe the extent and nature of our connections with others and the collective attitudes and behaviours between people that support a well-functioning, close-knit society.

Personal relationships

This aspect of social capital refers to the structure and nature of people's personal relationships and is concerned with who people know and what they do to establish and maintain their personal relationships.

Social network support

This aspect of social capital refers to the level of resources or support that a person can draw from their personal relationships, but also includes what people do for other individuals on a personal basis.

Civic engagement

This aspect of social capital refers to the actions and behaviours that can be seen as contributing positively to the collective life of a community or society. It includes activities such as volunteering, political participation and other forms of community actions.

Trust and cooperative norms

This aspect of social capital refers to the trust and cooperative norms or shared values that are beneficial for the society as a whole and which shape the way people behave towards each other and as members of society.

8 . Measuring the data

Social capital indicators

This release focuses on measuring social capital in the UK between April 2020 and March 2021. The selection of analysed indicators is based on [the framework of 25 headline measures of social capital proposed by the Office for National Statistics \(ONS\) in 2015](#), and [reported on in 2017 and 2020](#). However, to ensure data availability for 2020 to 2021, we could not use all original indicators and data sources. Given this release's focus on the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, we have also included some new indicators.

This release's commentary focuses on a selection of indicators and demographic and geographic sub-groups. The full set of social capital estimates and breakdowns, and the full list of indicator changes are available in the [accompanying data tables](#).

Data coverage

The data in this release come from several data sources and have been collected at various times between April 2020 and March 2021. As a result, the estimates are relevant for different countries of the UK and different time periods during 2020 to 2021 (see Data sources in [Measuring the data section](#)). Historical comparisons with the latest pre-April 2020 data are provided where available, but their timeliness also varies. In addition, for some of the data sources (for example, the Crime Survey for England and Wales), the mode of data collection changed in 2020 to 2021, compared with pre-April 2020. Therefore, caution should be exercised when making comparisons over-time and between indicators.

All analysed data were known to be current as of 4 January 2022.

Data sources

The following surveys informed this release:

- [Understanding Society: COVID-19 Study](#), March 2021 (Wave 8), UK.
- [Understanding Society: UK Household Longitudinal Study Main Survey](#), the 2014 to 2015 (Wave 6, UK) and 2018 to 2019 (Wave 10, UK) for historical comparison data
- the [Opinions and Lifestyle Survey \(OPN\)](#) May to July 2020 (Waves 6 to 19, Great Britain) for the "Checking on neighbours" indicator
- the [Opinions and Lifestyle Survey \(OPN\)](#) May to August 2020 (Waves 6 to 21, Great Britain) for the "Community support" indicator
- the [Community Life Survey \(CLS\)](#), April 2020 to March 2021 (England)
- the [Community Life Survey \(CLS\)](#), April 2019 to March 2020 (England) for historical comparison data
- the [Telephone-operated Crime Survey for England and Wales \(TCSEW\)](#), May 2020 to March 2021 (England and Wales)
- the [Crime Survey for England and Wales \(CSEW\)](#), April 2019 to March 2020 (England and Wales) for historical comparison data

Please note that for the Crime Survey for England and Wales, the survey methodology changed in 2020 to 2021 from face-to-face interviews to telephone-based interviews. Further information on [comparability between the Telephone-operated Crime Survey for England and Wales and the Crime Survey for England and Wales](#) can be found on the ONS website.

No historical comparisons are available for the Opinions and Lifestyle Survey.

Analysis and methodology

The social capital estimates are based on cross-sectional survey data. This means that survey data were collected for a sample of the population of interest at a point in time, and then weighted to adjust the estimates for representativeness of the population. Therefore, the estimates are subject to uncertainty, which is expressed using 95% confidence intervals. The [ONS guidance on uncertainty](#) contains more information on how we measure and communicate uncertainty for survey data.

In this release, over-time changes and differences between sub-populations are only commented on if they are statistically significant using non-overlapping 95% confidence intervals. This is a conservative method of assessing change, so it is possible that significant differences that have not been identified using this method exist in the data.

All analysis has been done on unrounded figures. Some figures may not sum because of rounding.

Social capital in the devolved administrations

Several indicators presented in this release are not currently measured at the UK level. For the indicators where the UK-wide data are not available, alternative data sources may exist for the devolved nations, but differences in methodology may affect comparability of the data.

For more information about social capital data collected by the devolved administrations, see the [Related links](#) section.

Improving measures of social capital

In July 2021, the ONS published the [Social capital harmonised standard](#), which sets out how to collect and report social capital indicators to improve comparability across different data sources. The standard provides a set of six social capital questions, which were determined to best capture the underlying concepts of the ONS social capital framework.

9 . Strengths and limitations

The main limitation of the presented social capital data is their coverage of geographies and time periods. We prioritised data sources that collected data between April 2020 and March 2021. Therefore, estimates are not always relevant for all of the UK, some indicators are only representative for a specific period between April 2020 and March 2021, and historical comparisons are not available for several indicators.

The main strength of this release is the sub-population breakdowns by demographic characteristics and geographies, which have been included for the first time. These additional breakdowns uncovered demographic patterns in the levels of social capital in the UK, resulting in more comprehensive and detailed insights. Still, certain suspected over-time changes and cross-group differences could not be established as the estimates for smaller sub-groups have higher levels of uncertainty because of the limited sample sizes.

10 . Related links

[Social capital harmonised standard](#)

Standard | Released 13 July 2021

The social capital harmonised standard sets out how to collect and report social capital statistics to ensure comparability across different data sources. The standard outlines a set of six essential social capital questions with appropriate answer options. The questions were developed through principal component analysis and discussions with an expert topic group, and they were determined to best capture the underlying concepts of the Office for National Statistics' social capital framework. They were cognitively tested in February 2021 and are recommended to users aiming to measure social capital in surveys.

[Measuring Social Capital](#)

Article | Released 18 July 2014

The original list of headline measures proposed by the Office for National Statistics (ONS) using a framework that covers the four core domains of social capital: personal relationships, social network support, civic engagement, and trust and cooperative norms. Defines social capital and highlights some examples of the importance of measuring it.

[Four interpretations of social capital: an agenda for measurement](#)

Working paper | Released 10 December 2013

An Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) paper that clarifies the range of different elements that are encompassed by the term "social capital", discusses the measurement issues, and makes recommendations for future research and the establishment of comparative social capital measures.

[Crime in England and Wales: Annual supplementary tables](#)

Dataset | Released 17 July 2020

Data tables providing (in Table S37) the long-term data on females' and males' feelings of safety when walking alone in their local area after dark from January to December 1994 until April 2019 to March 2020.

[Northern Ireland - CHS Social Capital](#)

Dataset | Released 15 March 2017

The Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency's (NISRA's) latest social capital data from the Continuous Household Survey (CHS). The survey asks questions on a variety of topics, such as internet access, the environment, tourism, libraries, health, sport and education. Northern Ireland also publishes estimates for some of the measures of social capital, including measures of loneliness and volunteering in annual reports by [The Executive Office](#) and [The Department for Communities](#).

[Scotland - National Indicator Performance](#)

Web page | Live page

An overview from the Scottish Government of how Scotland is performing against 81 National Indicators, which include a Social Capital Index. The index monitors aggregate changes in levels of social capital in Scotland since 2013 through the four domains of social networks, community cohesion, community empowerment and social participation.

[Wales - Wellbeing of Wales: national indicators](#)

Web page | Released 15 December 2021

An overview from the Welsh Government of performance against Welsh national wellbeing indicators and national wellbeing goals. Indicators include social capital measures such as rates of loneliness, volunteering and feeling able to influence decisions affecting the local area. Wales also collects and publishes some social capital data in reports from the [National Survey for Wales](#)