

COVID-19 Briefing Note: evidence and insights from longitudinal population studies

This briefing note provides a summary of initial findings from the UK's longitudinal population studies and the impacts of the pandemic on specific groups of people. It highlights that socioeconomic inequalities in health and life chances are widening: COVID-19 has had a greater impact on those living in more disadvantaged areas, women, ethnic-minorities and those with chronic illnesses.

Background

The UK's longitudinal studies adapted rapidly in response to COVID-19 by developing and launching special questionnaires for their participants to help understand the health, social, economic and behavioural impacts of the pandemic, at both a national and regional level, and across all generations and ages.

These surveys are collecting a wide range of data from many thousands of people across the country, providing rich insights into the immediate impacts of COVID-19 on people's lives. Questions are asked to help understand the changes in response to the pandemic and the subsequent lockdown in relation to physical and mental health, family and relationships, finance and employment, education and home schooling.

COVID-19 risk factors

- Using pre-pandemic data on health behaviours, body size and blood samples, longitudinal research has shown that physical inactivity, smoking, and obesity are risk factors for COVID-19 hospital admission.

Impact on employment and finances

- At the height of the lockdown there was a 40% reduction in working hours across four generations aged 19, 30, 50 and 62. The biggest drop was among the youngest workers.
- Nearly one in five people aged 52 and over reported that their overall financial situation was worse in June–July 2020 than before the outbreak. Older workers have been more negatively affected than retirees: 29% of those in work immediately before the crisis reported that their financial situation was now worse, compared with 13% of retirees.

Impact on women

- The pandemic has had a disproportionate impact on women - particularly mothers - as they undertake the major share of housework and childcare.
- With schools closed, mothers were more likely than fathers to stop working to help educate their children. During lockdown, mothers spent around double the time than fathers on home schooling.

Suggested citation:

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For more information please contact Rob Davies, Head of the CLOSER COVID-19 Taskforce: rob.davies@ucl.ac.uk

About CLOSER

CLOSER, the home of longitudinal research, is an interdisciplinary partnership of world-leading longitudinal population studies, with participants born throughout the 20th and 21st centuries. Our mission is to maximise the use, value and impact of longitudinal studies and research, at home and internationally. CLOSER works alongside the UK Data Service and The British Library, and is funded by the UKRI Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC).

Impact on mental health

- Mental health problems - in particular anxiety, loneliness and reduced wellbeing - have risen substantially during the COVID-19 pandemic. This is being shown consistently across UK longitudinal studies, which can compare mental health prior to and during the pandemic.
- Large mental health differences across generations are emerging, with young people – especially women aged 19 to 30 – at the greatest risk of depression, anxiety, loneliness and low life satisfaction.
- Young adults have experienced poorer mental health compared to older adults - the youngest age groups (aged 16-34 years old) also report higher levels of loneliness than the oldest study participants (aged 70+ years old).

Impact on home schooling

- Children from low income and single-parent families and those who previously received free school meals have been most negatively affected when compared to their peers. Areas of particular concern are lack of access to equipment (computer, tablet, laptop) and free school meals for the most disadvantaged children.

Impact on alcohol and tobacco use

- Binge and more frequent drinking increased during the lockdown, particularly in those aged 25 and older, women, white ethnic groups and those with degree-level education. In contrast cigarette smoking decreased during the lockdown, particularly in younger age groups and men. Vaping also decreased. This seems to have been driven by a decline in lighter smokers.

COVID-19 Longitudinal Research Hub

- CLOSER has developed the COVID-19 Longitudinal Research Hub to act as a one-stop resource for researchers, parliamentarians and policy makers, now and in the future. This contains the new surveys, data releases, latest research and evidence in a searchable tracker, and expert views, all in one place.
- Access the COVID-19 Longitudinal Research Hub: <https://www.closer.ac.uk/covid19-longitudinal-research-hub/>

References

- This briefing note draws on a wide-range of data and research from the UK's longitudinal population studies COVID-19 surveys. Please visit the COVID-19 Longitudinal Research and Evidence Tracker to access the research papers, briefing notes and articles: <https://www.closer.ac.uk/covid19-longitudinal-research-hub/covid19-research-evidence/>

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