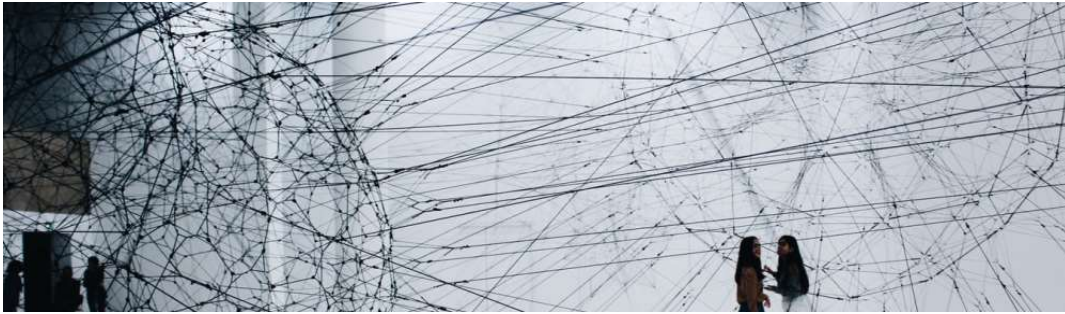


# Life in Lockdown: the impact on inter-personal relationships



**Preliminary Report - February 2021**

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## Background to the study

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There is a prevalent narrative that the corona virus pandemic is a great leveller and '[we are all in this together](#)'. Indeed it does seem that the virus does not respect wealth or privilege, as Hollywood stars (Tom Hanks), political leaders (Boris Johnson), royalty (Prince Charles) and world champions (Lewis Hamilton) succumb to its effects. However, it would be simplistic to assume that the pandemic and its associated restrictions impact on everyone in the same way. There is [mounting evidence](#) of the salient influences of gender, class, age and ethnicity in how the pandemic is experienced across society and how it is acting as a multiplier of inequalities.

While there has been much research on health outcomes, there is need for more analysis of the social impact of current restrictions. Therefore, during the summer of 2020, as lockdown was beginning to ease, a team of social scientists\* from the Universities of Manchester, Nottingham, East Anglia and London Metropolitan University launched a nationwide survey to investigate whether and to what extent personal relationships had changed during the lockdown, and how confinement had impacted upon domestic, work, leisure and social habits. The results of [our study](#) presented in this report refer to the first national lockdown.

### (\*) The research team includes:

- Dr Elisa Bellotti, [Mitchell Centre for Social Network Analysis](#), University of Manchester
- Dr Alessio D'Angelo, [International Centre for Public and Social Policy \(icPSP\)](#), University of Nottingham
- Professor Louise Ryan, FAcSS, Director of the [Global Diversities and Inequalities Research Centre](#), London Metropolitan University
- Dr Emilie Vrain, [Department of Environmental Science](#), University of East Anglia

The team was supported by Professor Dan Rigby, [School of Social Sciences](#), University of Manchester, who set-up the online questionnaire using the Lighthouse Studio Sawtooth Software platform.

The project website is: <https://lockdownnetworks.wordpress.com/>

## Research Methods

The UK questionnaire was organised around 10 sections, which collected information about individual characteristics of the respondents, how they felt during lockdown, what kind of precautions they were adopting, their accommodation and working arrangements before and during the lockdown, their outdoor activities during the lockdown, and a series of information about their personal relationships. In particular, we asked the names of up to six people with whom, during lockdown, respondents became closer or increased contact, who these people are, and why contact had increased. We also asked if, during lockdown, respondents' relationships with people they were or were not confined with improved or deteriorated, and why; and if they had formed new relationships or lost contact with old ones.

The questionnaire was distributed online via social media and blogs, and received ethical approval from the University of Manchester (Ref: 2020-9811-15758; 15/06/2020).

The UK questionnaire replicated, in part, a survey that was distributed in March and April 2020 in France: '[La vie en confinement](#)', for which [preliminary findings](#) are also available.

## Key findings

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Overall, our results show that the first national lockdown was experienced differently across our sample, with major implications for inter-personal relationships.

Our data show significant levels of relational change during the lockdown.

- Almost half of respondents reported reduced levels of contact with friends and this was especially the case for men in the younger and older age groups. Moreover, over 1/3 of respondents reported that a relationship had deteriorated often because of making too many demands or due to disagreements.
- Nonetheless, we also observed a pattern of increased relationality as people formed new connections especially with neighbours.
- In terms of people with whom they shared a home and were confined together, roughly half of respondents reported that relations in general had improved. Nonetheless, almost one in five of respondents, who lived with a partner, said the relationship had deteriorated during lockdown.
- Our survey found a significant decrease in life satisfaction during the lockdown. Overall, 2/3 of respondents reported a drop in satisfaction, but interestingly a small proportion (less than 1/5 – but mainly men) reported their levels of life satisfaction had increased.
- We also found that those working entirely from home, during the lockdown, were very likely to report stress and tiredness.
- Those with children at home were also more likely to report having less free time.
- These negative outcomes were especially associated with income levels and suggest that those in the lowest income bracket, among our sample, were more likely to experience decreased levels of life satisfaction.

## Sample composition

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Overall we received 954 completed questionnaires; participants were able to skip questions they preferred not to answer, so the totals presented in the tables below are, in some cases, smaller.

The respondents were largely female (80%) and most were aged between 30 and 59 years (52%), with 22% being adults under 30 and the remaining 20% aged 60 and over. Overall, our male participants tended to be older than the female participants with over 25% being in the over 60s category compared to 18% of female respondents in that age group (see Table 1).

In terms of ethnicity, our respondents were largely white (75%) and British, which is in line with the overall UK population data ([census, 2011](#)). The vast majority (80%) were UK born, with just under 10% born in the EU and the remaining 10% born outside the EU.

Almost 2/3 of our respondents described themselves as being of 'no religion', while just under 1/3 (30%) said they were Christian and 8% said they belonged to other religions, though in each case the numbers were very small. In that sense, our findings are markedly different from overall population figures which suggest that roughly 1/4 of the population of the UK describe themselves as being of 'no religion' (Census, 2011).

A large percentage of our respondents (almost 80%) were educated to degree level or above. This is significantly above the UK population average of 42% ([HESA 2017](#)). Thus, overall our sample represents a particular section of the UK population, as well as being disproportionately female, and we make no claims our findings are representative of the wider population.

Respondents were predominantly active in the labour market prior to lockdown (66%). However, 15.8% were retired and 13.4% were students or apprentices. During the lockdown the majority of those employed were mainly or entirely working from home (69%). Such characteristics may be significant when we consider the way in which the lockdown impacted upon their relationships and overall sense of life satisfaction, as discussed below.

Despite their high levels of education, it is noteworthy that respondents had very varied levels of household income. Over ¼ (27%) had annual household income of less than £30,000, and hence below the national average, while just under 1/5 (19%) had household income in excess of £80,000 and thus more than double the national average ([ONS 2020](#)). This suggests that our respondents present some diversity of circumstances despite their rather skewed gender and higher education levels.

Finally, just over half (56%) of our respondents were in a relationship with someone in the same household. Over half of respondents had no children, nonetheless over 40% did have children the majority of whom were still living at home.

Having briefly described our respondents' demographic characteristics, in the following sections we begin to explore in more detail the ways in which lockdown impacted on their social relationships.

**Table 1. Sample composition by Gender and Age**

		18-29	30-59	60+	Total
Male	#	38	96	46	180
	%	21.1%	53.3%	25.6%	100%
Female	#	226	379	135	740
	%	30.5%	51.2%	18.2%	100%
Total	#	266	478	181	925
	%	28.8%	51.7%	19.6%	100%

## Changes in social relationships during lockdown

Our data show significant changes in relationships and amount of social contact during the lockdown. As shown in table 2 below, almost half of all respondents (43%) reported having less contact with friends during the lockdown; although almost 1 in every 3 stated that their levels of contact had not changed at all. Moreover, it is notable that over a quarter reported having increased frequency of contacts (27.6%).

Overall these patterns are pretty similar across gender groups, though it is worth noting that younger people (18-29) are more likely to report less frequent contacts (49.6% among all young people and 61% among young males); whilst the 60+ categories suggests some notable gender differences – e.g. males are more likely to report a reduction in social relationships (52%) than women (38%).

**Table 2 – Change in relationships with friends; by Gender and Age**

		18-29		30-59		60+		Total
		Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	
More often	#	7	57	24	115	10	38	251
	%	19.4%	25.2%	25.8%	30.4%	21.7%	28.4%	27.6%
About the same	#	7	61	24	121	12	45	270
	%	19.4%	27.0%	25.8%	32%	26.1%	33.6%	29.5%
Less often	#	22	108	45	142	24	51	392
	%	61.1%	47.8%	48.4%	37.6%	52.2%	38.1%	42.9%
Total	#	36	226	93	378	46	134	913
	%	100.0%	100.0%	100.00%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Next, we asked respondents about changes in their relationships with those people they were 'confined with' during the lockdown. Overall, out of 810 who answered the question, 670 people were confined with at least one other person, whilst 140 respondents reported being alone during confinement (there are 144 missing data for this question).

Among those who were confined with at least one other person, 58% (387) stated relationships had improved. Of the (486) people who lived with a partner during lockdown, 47.7% (232) said relationship improved, particularly, among the (183) women aged 30-49, 49% (90) stated the relationship with their partner had improved. However, this proportion falls to 34% among women

aged 50+ (45/133). As for people living with children, among women aged 30-49 (110), 43% (47) stated their relationship with them had improved. The proportion is even higher (51%) among women aged 50+. Only 7.6% of the people with children at home reported a deterioration in their relationship (18 out of 237).

However, a significant proportion of respondents reported other types of relationships which had deteriorated. In particular, of the 804 people who answered the question, 163 (20%) reported some relational deterioration. Specifically, 18% (89/486) of those who lived with a partner reported a deterioration in that relationship. Among women aged 30-49 this proportion was pretty similar (18%; 33/183), but slightly smaller among women aged 50+ (17%; 23/133). Also among men, 20% of those aged 30-49 and living with a partner reporting deterioration in this relationship. A small proportion of women also reported deterioration in their relationship with their children: 9% among women aged 30-49 (10/110) and 4% among women aged 50+ (3/60).

The most common reasons given for deteriorating relations within households were: not giving each other space (102; 59%), talking about negative things (77; 44.5%), fights (83; 48%) or disagreements (66; 38%), making too many demands (54; 31%). These reasons provided were similar overall between male and female respondents; although women were much more likely to mention 'disagreements' (41.3%) than men (25.7%). Our findings chime with other studies that found lockdown placed a significant [strain on couples' relationships](#) and even led to an increase in [couples splitting](#).

The questionnaire design allowed people to write in explanatory comments to open questions. These comments provide insights into some reasons for deteriorating relationships with partners. For example, some female respondents wrote about tensions around the domestic chores: 'having to experience more domestic traits than usual i.e. not washing dishes on the same day' and 'imbalance of household responsibilities such as childcare, working from home, cleaning and cooking.' Another woman referred to 'personality clash' with her partner. One woman remarked that during the prolonged lockdown she 'realised we have little in common and he can't give me what I need'. A male respondent referred to a sense of 'resentment', while another described irritation caused by his partner 'ignoring lockdown rules and covid hygiene'. Another male respondent stated that his 'wife didn't want to spend time with me'.

Beyond those who were confined together, respondents also reported **wider relational changes**. In particular, among the 834 people who answered this question, 37.4% (312) stated a relationship outside the household had deteriorated. Of these, 190 mentioned friends, 106 family members, 28 neighbours, 77 colleagues, 50 '*groups or association in which they were involved*' and 26 others.

Respondents could also use the open box to add an explanation of these deteriorating relationships. Frequent comments were made regarding difficulties in maintaining relationships without face-to-face contact, and the inability to call everyone. One respondent stated 'my inner circle has become a lot smaller', whilst another wrote they had 'lost opportunities to see people from wider networks e.g. sports activities, voluntary work'.

Among those who reported a deterioration in relationships, many reported that people had made too many demands on them (33%), disagreements (30%), difficulties to maintain communication (25%), 'Negative talking' (22.5%), and 'fights' (21.5%), with women being nearly twice as likely than men to report these last two reasons. Women were also more likely than men to report deterioration in relationships because of being asked to help (11% for women, 5% for men) or

because of other people being unsupportive (10% for women; 3.5% for men). It is noteworthy that, of those who spent lockdown confined on their own, almost half (47%) reported that a relationship had deteriorated, compared to just over a third (35%) of those who were confined with others. This may suggest that those who were confined alone felt unsupported or perhaps placed higher demands on their social contacts resulting in relational tension and deterioration.

Nonetheless, despite the number of relationships that deteriorated, it is notable that a significant number of respondents reported the **formation of new relationships** especially with neighbours. In particular, about 48% of respondents reported some kind of new relationship and 21% referred to new relationships with neighbours and 10% with colleagues (the proportions are pretty similar between gender and age groups). While a small proportion of our respondents said they **met new people online** (6.8%), most new contacts were not virtual and thus local connections became more salient during the lockdown. This finding reflects [other research results](#) that show increased levels of contact with neighbours, in particular to provide support to vulnerable people.

Finally, during lockdown, 42% of our respondents were also **active on social media** (forum, online groups, mailing lists), mainly in topic-oriented groups, but also in family, friends, professional and neighbourhood groups. As we are unable to compare our results with social media activity pre-lockdown, it is unknown whether or not lockdown increased participants' online social contacts, but we can conclude that for nearly half of our sample online tools were a source of social contact.

## **Impact of the lockdown on work and free time**

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The work situation of our participants was impacted strongly by the lockdown with over 60% reporting that they now worked fully at home, with a further 9% working mainly from home. Taking into account that over 20% of our participants were not in paid work at all, the proportion working mainly or fully from home was actually very high among our working population. This again suggests that our sample was skewed towards highly educated professionals in jobs with the option to work from home. The very high numbers of respondents working from home may also help to explain the significant proportion who reported relationship tensions and, as discussed below, high levels of stress and tiredness.

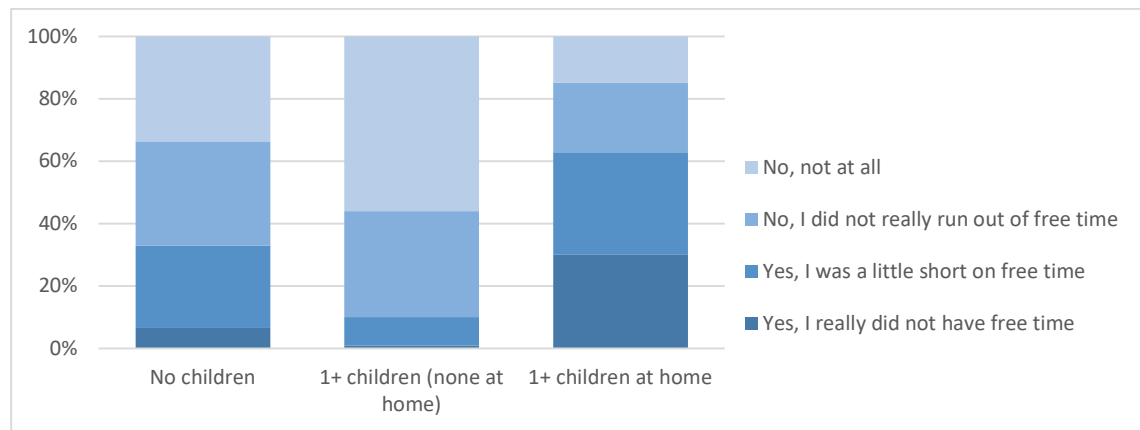
Overall, 23% of our respondents were not in employment; unsurprisingly, this proportion was significantly higher for the older age group (58% among those aged 60-69, and 83% among those aged 70+), whilst for the younger groups the proportion was 10.8% (and particularly 15% among those aged under 30 and between 8-10% for the others). Of those who were in employment, 79% were working fully from home and 12% mainly from home; with only the remaining 10% working out of home all of the time. The proportion of people *not* working from home was higher for men aged under 50 than for women.

**Table 3 – Work location by age**

		18-29	30-39	40-49	50-59	60-69	70-89	Total
Outside fully or mainly	#	18	14	12	12	1	1	58
	%	9.2%	8.8%	9.1%	9.8%	1.3%	1.3%	7.6%
Mainly at home	#	18	12	17	16	5	0	68
	%	9.2%	7.5%	12.9%	13.1%	6.3%	0.0%	8.9%
Fully at home	#	131	119	93	81	27	12	463
	%	66.8%	74.8%	70.5%	66.4%	34.2%	15.8%	60.6%
I don't work	#	29	14	10	13	46	63	175
	%	14.8%	8.8%	7.6%	10.7%	58.2%	82.9%	22.9%
Total	#	196	159	132	122	79	76	764
	%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

In terms of free time, 13% said they had no free time at all, while a further 26% said they had less free time than they would like. As shown in the graph below, lack of free time was an issue particularly among those with children living at home: 30% stated they “really did not have free time”, compared to 6.6% among those with no children. [Other research](#) has also found that women, in particular, took on the responsibility for home schooling and as a result had significantly less time for themselves.

**Figure 1 – “During lockdown, did you feel you didn’t have free time?”**





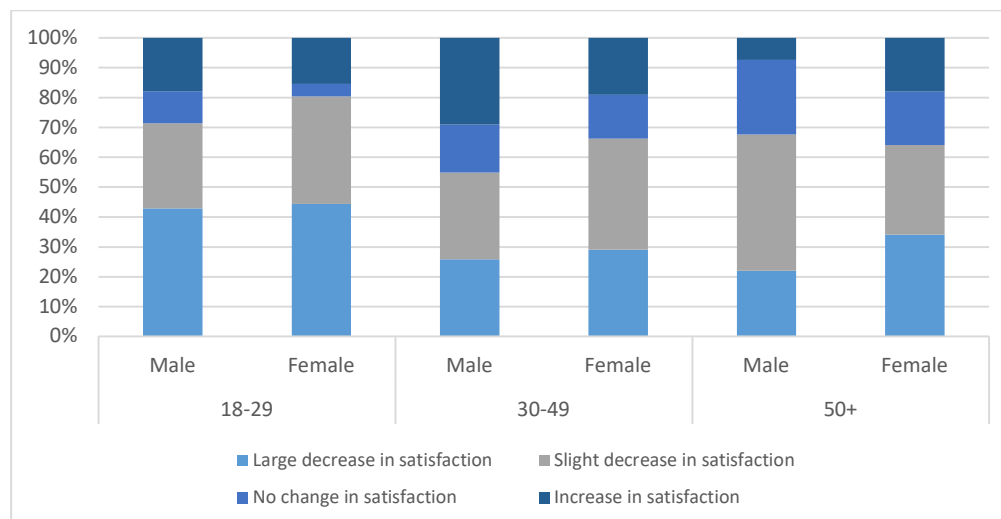
## Change in life satisfaction

Our survey found a significant decrease in life satisfaction during the lockdown.

Precisely 1/3 of respondents reported a large decrease in satisfaction, while a further 1/3 reported a slight decrease. Thus in all, 2/3 of all respondents reported a drop in life satisfaction during the lockdown restrictions. Interestingly, 18% reported an increase in life satisfaction, while the reasons for this are not entirely clear, it could be related to more time spent at home with loved ones or a lack of time spent commuting to work every day.

The people more likely to report a large decrease in life satisfaction are those aged 18-29, a pattern very similar among both males (43%) and females (44%). However, in terms of increase in life satisfaction, the highest proportion is found among men aged 30-49 (29%). Interestingly, among those confined alone, 41% reported a large decrease in satisfaction, compared to 32% who were confined with others. This may suggest how factors such as [social isolation and loneliness](#) especially affected those who were alone during lockdown.

**Figure 2 - Change in satisfaction by gender and age**



As shown by **table 4** below, the negative impact of the lockdown on people's satisfaction appears to be pretty similar irrespective of whether people are working from home or not (or not working at all). However, interestingly, those working 'fully outside the home' were slightly more likely to report an increase in satisfaction (23%, against an average of 18%).

There did not appear to be any significant difference in changing levels of life satisfaction during the lockdown between those with or without children. Instead, we found that income levels appeared to be strongly associated with decreasing levels of satisfaction. People with lower income levels are those more likely to report a large decrease in satisfaction, i.e. 37% among those below £30,000, as opposed to 25% for those with a household income of £80,000 or more.

**Table 4 - Change in satisfaction by Work-location**

		Outside fully or mainly	Mainly at home	Fully at home	I don't work	Total
Large decrease in satisfaction	#	20	24	145	64	253
	%	35.71%	34.78%	31.05%	36.36%	32.94%
Slight decrease in satisfaction	#	16	26	169	61	272
	%	28.57%	37.68%	36.19%	34.66%	35.42%
No change in satisfaction	#	7	9	60	31	107
	%	12.50%	13.04%	12.85%	17.61%	13.93%
Increase in satisfaction	#	13	10	93	20	136
	%	23.21%	14.49%	19.91%	11.36%	17.71%
Total	#	56	69	467	176	768
	%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%

Overall, respondents also reported significant stress levels. In particular of the 808 people who answered a question on the kind of emotions felt during lockdown, 83% said their were tired (672), 76% said they were stressed (616) and 80% said they were sad (643). As noted above, a very high proportion of our respondents were working mainly or fully from home during the lockdown. Other [research](#) has also noted an increase in stress levels among those working from home during the pandemic restrictions.

## Concluding thoughts

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The lockdown has been a unique social situation which meant that most of the population were largely confined to their homes for months on end. Beyond the narrative that 'we are all in this together' or that the pandemic is a great leveller, it is clear that the impact is being felt differently across a range of demographic variables.

Our survey has the limitation of not being a representative sample. Moreover, our respondents were largely female and highly educated. Nonetheless, we observe several interesting patterns in our data that chime with findings from other research.

As discussed in our report, the lockdown, for some may have afforded an opportunity for a reduced pace of life and a chance to spend more time with loved ones.

Nonetheless, it is apparent that some relationships have deteriorated including among those who share a household, particularly partners, as well as with friends outside the home. However, it is also the case that new relationships were formed, especially with neighbours.

Overall, we have found that most respondents to our survey reported decreased levels of life satisfaction, especially those in the lower income brackets. Furthermore, for those with children at home, and who are working entirely at home, the lockdown resulted in having less free time.

It should be noted that the first national lockdown in Spring 2020 coincided with a prolonged period of unusually warm, sunny weather. Subsequent lockdowns have taken place in Winter 2020-21. Moreover, the infection rates and death rates have been far higher in the second wave of the pandemic. Therefore, we now plan to undertake a follow up survey in winter 2021 to assess how our respondents are feeling during the current lockdown and whether the relationship changes observed in the first survey have endured over time.



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