Lockdown in the Lothians:

Insights from the Lothian Diary Project

A report on the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on residents of Edinburgh and the Lothians

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Lothian Lockdown: The Lothian Diary Project

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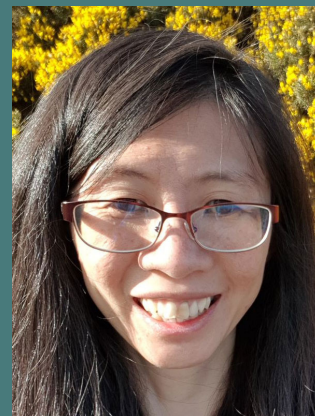
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Support from the ESRC Festival of Social Sciences and the Being Human Festival has also given us an opportunity to connect with local communities. Such partnerships have enabled us to reach out to a wider audience, particularly those who have long been marginalised and whose voices it is imperative to represent.

The PI also wishes to extend her gratitude to the co-investigators on this research team who have worked tirelessly to recruit participants, analyse data, present findings, secure funding, and host knowledge exchange and impact activities. Many of them managed all these impossible tasks while also teaching and supporting students, fulfilling administrative responsibilities, and generally learning to cope with the pandemic, themselves.

The lockdown restrictions during the pandemic have isolated us from others in many ways. At the same time, the pandemic has also made us aware of the importance of remaining connected with others, both in our own lives and in our research communities. We hope the work we have done with the Lothian Diary Project has helped shed a light on such importance. Our research will also continue to honour such human connections and community engagement as we go on collecting and sharing more stories of the Lothian lockdown.

— Lauren Hall-Lew (PI), Shan-Jan Sarah Liu, Stephen Joseph McNulty, Nina Markl, Catherine Lai, Beatrice Alex, Clare Llewellyn, Karri Gillespie-Smith

Executive Summary

Background

- The Lothian Diary Project was conducted by a multidisciplinary team of 14 researchers at the University of Edinburgh between May 2020 and July 2021, and supported by various organisations, including the University of Edinburgh, UKRI, and ESRC. 13 community partners, including local charities, the Leith Walk Policebox Popup Space and Museums and Galleries Edinburgh were also instrumental in making the research possible.

- This cross-disciplinary research project investigated questions of public health, communication, and social variation in relation to COVID-19 among residents of Edinburgh and the Lothians.

- As a rapid research project, designed to respond to the immediate experiences of COVID-19, the study drew on individuals' personal accounts of the pandemic, in the form of video and audio diary data, as well as survey questionnaires. The intimate, immediate, and spontaneous nature of video or audio diary self-recordings, in particular, makes this project a unique, time-sensitive data resource for assessing drivers of individual experience of the lockdown in Scotland.

- The project aimed to understand the impacts of COVID-19 lockdown (and other similar) measures, with the goal of helping to enhance government responses to future public health emergencies, including mechanisms of distributing health-related public information.

- Ample evidence had already shown the various impacts of COVID-19 on different groups of people across the world; lacking was a specific understanding of the experiences of residents in Edinburgh and the Lothians. This project gave residents a platform to define their own challenges and express their opinions and concerns regarding the lockdown measures implemented in the local area.

Methodology

- Methods of investigation included: (1) self-recorded audio/video diaries and (2) online surveys.

- The study recruited participants through leaflets, newspapers, radio, social media (Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram), and promotions by local community partners.

- Data analysis addressed short-term and long-term questions about how lockdown measures affect individuals and communities. Diaries revealed how individuals were affected by the crisis in ways that were context-sensitive to identity, demographics, background, and location.

- The study employed data mining, and speech, textual and statistical analyses to address various questions according to our respective research areas of politics, psychoanalytic theory, social network analysis, and sociolinguistics.

Video/audio diaries

The study involved participants creating an audio or video recording of themselves, lasting approximately 5 minutes or longer. While they had the the freedom to decide on the structure and content of their recordings, the website provided the following prompt questions:

- How has your life changed during lockdown?
- What was a typical day like before lockdown? What is it like now?
- What has been the hardest part for you during lockdown?
- Have you learned any new skills or taken up any new hobbies?
- Have you been working from home? Has it been challenging?
- Have there been any bright spots about the lockdown?
- Who are you in lockdown with, and how are they doing?

Survey

The study conducted an online Qualtrics survey, and asked questions on the following topics:

- Living environment, relationship status, and caregiving responsibilities
- Emotions experienced during the pandemic and the lockdown periods more specifically
- Impact of the pandemic on participants' daily routine, employment, education, and leisure activities
- Opinions of and adherence to UK and Scottish governmental restrictions, advice, and handing of the Covid-19 pandemic
- Methods of accessing information about Covid-19
- Communication methods and habits
- Political action before and during the pandemic
- Demographic information
- Pre-existing mental health conditions

- 16% of participants reported a household income between £20,000 and £50,000; 15% reported less than £20,000; and 9% reported more than £50,000.

- 50% of participants held a tertiary degree, 19% had completed Scottish Higher/A-level/AS-level qualifications or NVQs, and 10% had completed GCSEs or lower education levels.

- 22% of all participants lived in postcodes EH6 or EH7; another 25% resided in EH10, EH11, EH14, EH16, and EH17; less than 10% of participants resided outside of Edinburgh.

- 11% of participants reported that they considered themselves to be disabled.

- 18% of participants stated that they were living alone at the time of answering the survey.

- In addition to Edinburgh and locations in the Lothians, in Scotland, and across the U.K., international cities were frequently mentioned, in particular Hong Kong, Italy, China, Peru, and Australia.

- Participants mentioned these locations in the context of discussing place(s) of origin, news from other locations, missing their families abroad or online communications with friends living in different international locations.

- Designing a web-based tool allowed the collection of raw, time-sensitive experiences. Participants made and uploaded diaries, and responded to survey questions by following written guidance on our website, https://lothianlockdown.org/.

Participants

- The *Lothian Diary Project* sample consists of 195 residents of Edinburgh and the Lothians, who both completed our online survey and submissed an audio or video diary.

- 57% of participants identified as women; 40% men; 1% identified as non-binary; and 2% preferred not to share their gender identity.

- 24% of participants were under 21; 40% were aged 20-40; approximately 30% were aged 40-60; and 9% were over 60.

- 84% of participants identified as white while 16% of participants indicated that their ethnic background as Black, Asian or minority ethnic (BAME).

Cross-Cutting Issues

Overview of Findings

- The majority of Edinburgh and Lothians residents in the sample collected indicated having followed the Scottish Government guidance.

- Participants' level of education influences the extent to which they found the Scottish Government guidance's on COVID-19 easy to follow.

- Mental health issues remain one of the biggest challenges faced by participants in Edinburgh and the Lothians.

- Participants developed ways to cope with the pandemic, including outdoor exercises and hobbies. However, access to these opportunities often hinged on participants' socioeconomic class and employment status. Those from middle-class backgrounds and not on furlough were more likely to find ways to cope with the pandemic.

- Caregivers were also primarily responsible for household chores during the lockdown and throughout the various transition periods. Caregivers, especially those caring for children with intellectual disabilities, reported experiencing psychological distress. Participants also identified respite services and social support as the most helpful means of alleviating burnout.
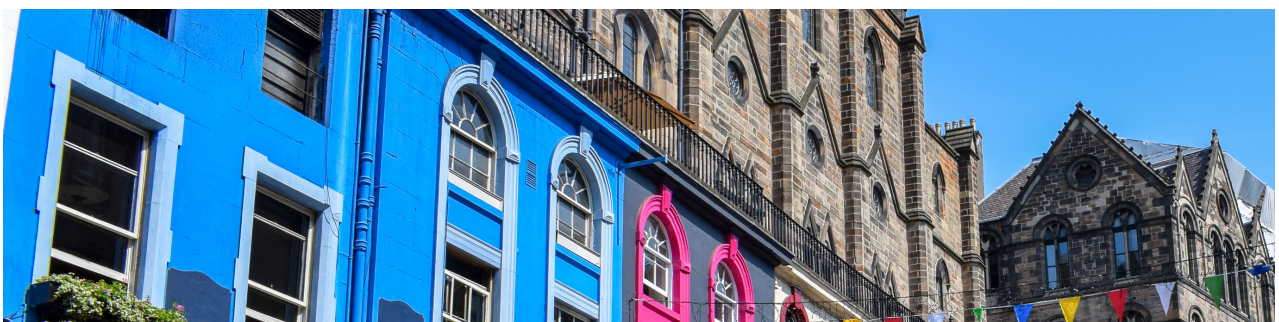
Quotes from our participants

I've never really been comfortable with the word 'lockdown'. It just seems like something that's out of a science fiction movie.
I've always felt 'social restrictions' is a little bit of a nicer... not a great word, but [a] kinder phrase than 'lockdown'. And, as soon as it was announced, [...] that was what first came into my mind [...]: 'I will be restricted socially.'

One of the [parts of the] pandemic [that] was amazing was being able to be part of a new way of showing solidarity and taking collective action for human rights [...] During the Black Lives Matter protest of 7th June, you know, we were able to come together in a different way. For those of us who weren't able to be in a crowd under the pandemic and maybe were higher risk – that was really good.

At the start of the lockdown I was [...] in a part-time job and in the temporary accommodation system. Financially that was quite a struggle. The physical side of things was also a struggle because of the bus pass I could could now not afford, having some health issues with walking et cetera. And mentally, my mental health got affected by these circumstances within the first few weeks.

Responses to Government Guidance and Policies

- The majority (82%) of participants indicated that they had followed Scottish Government guidance on social distancing, staying at home as much as possible, and washing hands 'most of the time' while 20% of the survey respondents indicated that they always did. However, the older generations were also more likely to be strict about following guidance than younger groups of adults.

- The Government's guidance on self-isolation seemed to be the most challenging rule for residents of the Lothians and Edinburgh to follow, as more than 20% of the participants indicated that they had never followed the Scottish Government's advice on self-isolation.

- 39% of participants indicated that they found it extremely easy to understand the guidance of the Scottish Government on COVID-19 whereas 12% of the participants indicated that it was somewhat difficult.

- Compared to the U.K. Government's COVID-19 guidance, though, fewer participants (9%) found the U.K. guidance extremely easy or somewhat easy to understand. On the contrary, 40% of Lothian and Edinburgh residents represented in the sample indicated that the U.K. guidance on COVID-19 was somewhat difficult to understand.

- Education seems to have played a role in how easy Edinburgh and Lothian residents found the Scottish Government's COVID-19 guidance to follow. The higher the level of education held by participants, the more likely that they were to indicate finding the guidance easy to follow.

Mental Health and Coping Strategies

Challenges

- Many diary contributors talked specifically about mental health struggles during the pandemic.

- Some factors of mental health struggles included anxiety over the uncertainty of the pandemic, missing family; and not knowing when participants could next see family, especially when living far away from them.

- Isolation, caused by missing family and friends, was also one of the main factors affecting the mental health of our participants, as well as pre-existing mental health conditions exacerbated by the pandemic.

- Previous coping strategies became unavailable during the pandemic, as these often involved going out and being around other people (e.g., with friends and family or in more structured settings such as exercise classes)

- Participants highlighted the loss of freedom to perform self-care as needed.

- Some participants also struggled with carrying on as normal in the face of a global pandemic, especially when reconciling this with being in a relatively privileged position.

Opportunities

- Lockdown removed some stigma around mental health issues, and increased empathy around feelings of loneliness.

- The pandemic, although causing some to feel isolated, also provided an opportunity for individuals to connect with family and friends, even those living far away.

- Middle-class people, in particular, took advantage of the lockdown to explore the city.

Quotes from our participants

Because I live on my own, I think I feared that I wouldn't be able to cope more than I feared the lockdown itself, if you know what I mean.
However I've surprised myself, and after about week four I was into a routine.

Since the lockdown started, I've been doing my daily exercise walking, without any goal. I just really walk aimlessly and allow my feet to take me wherever without any plans. So it's been a good experience. It's been liberating.
Again it's very ironic that the lockdown has freed me. That's my experience of it.

Certainly I do feel like I'm a lot more aware or sensitive to how people are looking at me on the streets [...] I always feel like I'm in like fight or flight mode - whether or not, you know, somebody is gonna heckle me in the streets because I'm Chinese.

It seems inevitable that we're gonna go back down into lockdown again, and that would be really important for saving lives, but for the mental health of our children, for their future, I am not sure that this is sustainable.

- Successful strategies for coping with the pandemic varied for different Edinburgh and Lothian residents.

- Some people noted that hobbies helped them cope, in particular developing new and existing skills in activities such as cooking, baking, gardening, crafts and exercising.

- People who mentioned hobbies as a successful coping strategy tended to be from younger (born after 1990) and older age groups (born before 1970).

- Positive experiences through volunteering were also gained by some participants. These experiences gave them a sense of purpose and structure, and a legitimate reason to leave their home.

- Despite this, only middle-class people indicated that they had engaged in volunteering.

- People from all age groups found that outdoor exercise and exploration also helped them cope with the pandemic. Several mentioned that they explored new places during lockdown and that they feel more connected to nature and to the city itself.

- People with more flexibility over how they could spend their day were more likely to indicate successful coping strategies, while furloughed workers or those working from home found it more challenging to maintain good mental health.

Care-giving Responsibilities

- Caregivers undertook more household and support responsibilities during lockdown and throughout the various transition periods.

- These pressures were further compounded if caregivers looked after people and children with intellectual disabilities, who may have complex needs.

- Perceived caregiver burden (i.e. feeling overloaded, guilty, and resentful) was a source of psychological distress in caregiver groups.

- Caregivers identified that respite services and social support were the most helpful services received and contributed to preventing or lessening caregiver stress and burnout.

- The pandemic and restrictions caused many of these respite services and social support to be reduced or stopped altogether.

- Caregivers of children with and without intellectual disabilities who had high levels of 'denial' (defined as trying to act like the stressor is not real or refusing to believe that the stressor exists) and 'behavioural disengagement' (defined as a form of helplessness or giving up on attaining goals to solve the problems) during lockdown showed higher psychological distress.

- Coping strategies were able to mitigate and help prevent poor mental health outcomes in vulnerable groups.

Quotes from our participants

[Support] groups have stopped and that [...] makes you feel sad cos you [...] kinda get to see your friends as well.

I haven't been able to go to the hospital to do my voluntary work [because] it's gonna be a really high risk place to go, and I've got a high risk person at home to look after and mum as well. So really my whole life is just look[ing] after mum and dad.

In fact [we] don't have a break from the kids ever; from, you know, five thirty in the morning to ten p.m. we're busy with the kids.

I've concentrated more on my hobbies making cards for people. I'm very very big on craft. I have a mental health problem and the craft i find, I would call it therapy.

Key Demographic Analyses

Class

People living in more working-class conditions tended to discuss their family, friends, and time (that they had either lost or gained during the pandemic), while middle-class people spoke more about their work-related experiences.

Other frequently discussed topics for participants in lower middle-class included their dogs, whereas those of an upper-middle class background spoke more frequently about schools.

Gender

Participants identifying as men tended to talk more frequently about their wives and the notion of 'choice', while those identifying as women did not mention 'choice' at all.

Additionally, men also talked more frequently about their friends, the changes they have made or endured, and what they have read, while women focused on topics such as their emotions, motherhood, school, and care.

Disability

Several disabled participants highlight additional challenges in accessing support during the pandemic as face-to-face meetings, support groups and house visits were replaced with phone or video calls.

Implications and Conclusions

- Lockdown experiences differed across age, gender, class, race and ethnicity, education, income, and other demographic traits.

- Participants perceived Scottish Government guidance as easier to understand than the U.K. Government guidance; however, the Scottish government still needs to make it even easier to understand, especially for those who have not received higher education degrees.

- One fifth of participants never self-isolated, prompting the need for deeper inquiries into why this was the case. For example, employment status and job characteristic/type may explain why some people were not able to self-isolate.

- Many participants found isolation and lockdown mentally challenging, but access to outdoor activities helped. The Government should thus consider creative ways to encourage outdoor activities while maintaining public safety. The Government also needs to ensure and broaden access to spending time outside, while maintaining social distance and safety, in future lockdown restrictions.

- Employment status and income remained strong predictors of how people were able to manage and cope with the pandemic.

- Women and men had different concerns during the lockdown. Gender remained the biggest predictor for caring responsibilities. Therefore, the Government needs to consider how progress towards gender equality might have been slowed or reversed during the pandemic.

- Caregivers experienced high pressure but were able to prevent burnout through respite services and social support. However, many of these services were paused during the pandemic. Therefore, in combatting future health emergencies, Governments need to ensure that these services remain operational to ensure to mitigate psychological distress among caregivers.

Next Steps

Our findings thus far provide important insights into how residents of Edinburgh and the Lothians have experienced the pandemic and the lockdown.

Data collection is ongoing, however, and further insights can be expected in the near future.

For example, more recent contributions have highlighted the psychological toll of long-term social distancing. Despite the evident positive responses accompanying the region's move into Tier 2 of the Government's Covid-19 restrictions, many participants continued to struggle more than they did prior to the beginning of the pandemic.

An indication of this is the fact that our charity partners that rely on in-person volunteer assistance have witnessed a dramatic drop in that assistance and are feeling overwhelmed as a result.

The next steps for the Lothian Diary Project are to track community experiences over time and more deeply by demographic and by individual.

We hope to report on these findings in the future.

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