Lockdown in the Lothians: Insights from the Lothian Diary Project

On 23 March 2020, Nicola Sturgeon announced the first national lockdown. Little did the residents in Scotland know that this would be be the first of a series of lockdowns. However, as the COVID-19 pandemic continued for another year (and is still ongoing today), Scotland went in and out of multiple phases of lockdowns until April 2021.

This POSTnote gives an overview of how Edinburgh and Lothian residents experienced the COVID-19 lockdowns and restrictions. The findings shed light on how these people have coped with mental health challenges and caring responsibilities, particularly in their responses to the Scottish Government's health measures.

Introduction

This POSTnote sheds light on the experiences of Edinburgh and the Lothians residents of the various lockdown periods imposed in this area during the COVID-19 pandemic. It draws from findings of a University of Edinburgh study, *The Lothian Diary Project,* which ran from May 2020 to July 2021. For this study, participants submitted self-recorded audio/video diaries about their experiences, and completed an online survey, and in the following sections, we report on the common struggles that residents shared through these diaries and questionnaires. Mental health challenges and caring responsibilities remained the biggest challenges, as they are most frequently mentioned by the participants.

We also share insights into how participants perceived the Scottish Government's restrictions. Various demographic factors played a role in how participants experienced the lockdowns, as well as the Government's responses to COVID-19. Preliminary findings raise implications for areas to which the Scottish Government needs to remain alert when combating future public health emergencies.

Box 1: Timeline of the COVID-19 pandemic in Scotland

- The first Scottish lockdown began on 23rd March.
- Regulations were gradually relaxed from 10th May 2020 (when the restriction on being outdoors only once a day was lifted) to July 2020.
- New restrictions were gradually introduced from July 2020 (e.g. mandatory wearing of masks on public transport).
- Differential restriction by region was then introduced
- B.1.1.9 ('UK Variant') was identified in December 2020
- Scotland re-entered lockdown on 5th January as Scotland's vaccine roll-out was announced
- Lockdown rules began to ease again from 22nd February, starting with resumption of childcare services

About *The Lothian Diary Project*

The Lothian Diary Project was conducted by a multidisciplinary team of 14 researchers at the University of Edinburgh between May 2020 and July 2021 with various sources of support from the University of Edinburgh, UKRI, and ESRC. Collaboration with 13 community partners, including local charities, the Leith Walk Police Box Popup Space, and Museums and Galleries Edinburgh, made the research possible. This cross-disciplinary research project investigates 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 draws 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 aims to understand the impacts of the COVID-19 lockdown (and other similar) measures, with a goal to helping enhance government responses to future public health emergencies, including mechanisms of distributing health-related public information. Ample evidence prior to this study 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.

In *The Lothian Diary Project*, we examine Edinburgh and Lothian residents' experiences of the Scottish Government's stay-at-home order by analysing their audio and video diaries and their responses to survey questionnaires. We recruited participants through leaflets, newspapers, radio, social media (Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram), and promotion by local community partners.

Our data analyses address short-term and long-term questions about how lockdown measures affect individuals and communities, and in ways that are context-sensitive to identity, demographics, background, and location. Methods include data mining, speech and textual analysis, and statistical analysis to address various questions according to our respective research areas of politics, psychoanalytic theory, social network analysis, and sociolinguistics.

Sample description

Our sample consists of 195 residents in Edinburgh and the Lothians who completed our survey questionnaires and submitted an audio or video diary. roughly half (N=91) from May 2020 and July 2020, roughly another half (N=88) from May 2021 to July 2021, and a few (N=16) from the months in between. The data include both current descriptions of lockdown experiences and retrospective descriptions of earlier experiences. The sample offers a good representation of the different parts of the city of Edinburgh, but only a few of the participants were from the Lothian counties. Submissions are mainly in English or Scots, with some in Scottish Gaelic, Mandarin Chinese, Cantonese, and American Sign Language.

The demographics of the Lothian Diary Project sample are unbalanced but include many individuals who are part of marginalised communities and who may be under-represented in other reports (see Box 2). The sample has a greater-than-proportionate representation of people of colour (16% vs 8% of Edinburgh's population). Immigrants are also well-represented 21% vs 16% of Edinburgh's population), as are those who are LGBTQA+ (15% vs unknown population statistics). The proportion of those who have a disability (11%) is comparable to the city population. Finally, as is typical of survey studies, there are more female participants (57%) than others (40% male; 2% prefer not to say; 1% other).

The Lothian Diary Project sample is also unbalanced due to the over-representation of those groups which already distinguish Edinburgh from the rest of Scotland. For example, more participants (50%) indicated having post-secondary education than in the population as a whole (41%), and more speakers aged between 44 (36%) versus in the city population (34%). With respect to COVID-19 experience, the sample also consists of individuals who may be more privileged in certain ways. Most participants had stable wages and were neither care workers nor essential workers, and most had the same job and pay that they had prior to COVID-19.

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

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

- **Socioeconomic status:** 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.

- **Location:** 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.

- **Education:** 50% of participants held a tertiary degree, 19% had completed Highers or NVQs and 10% had completed GCSEs or lower education levels.

- **Ethnicity:** 84% of participants identified as white while 16% of participants indicated that their ethnic background as Black, Asian or minority ethnic.

- **Disability:** 11% of participants reported that they considered themselves to be disabled

Governmental public health restrictions and participant responses

Edinburgh and Lothians residents experienced multiple lockdowns with various degrees of restrictions since March 2020. Both the general public and policymakers may be concerned about the effectiveness of such measures, especially with a focus on how likely people are to understand and follow these guidelines. *The Lothian Diary Project* survey asked 195 residents about their thoughts on the restrictions imposed and their understanding and observance of them. Our findings reveal some of the factors that may play a role in determining responses to governmental public health restrictions.

At a glance:

- 82% followed guidance on social distancing, staying at home and handwashing 'most of the time'. 20% always followed this guidance. 20%
- said they never followed self-isolation restrictions.
- 39% found Scottish Government restrictions 'extremely easy' to understand. 12% said it was 'somewhat difficult'.
- 9% found U.K. Government restrictions 'extremely/somewhat easy' to understand. 40% said it was 'somewhat difficult'.

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.

Although the majority indicated that they followed the Scottish Government guidance, not all felt that the rules were easy to understand. 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.

Insights from the Lothian Diary Project

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.

Although some experienced challenges in following the Scottish Government's guidelines, many participants still felt that they were easier to understand than the U.K. restrictions. When compared to the U.K. Government's COVID-19 guidance, 40% of Lothian and Edinburgh residents represented in our sample indicated that the U.K. guidance on COVID-19 was somewhat difficult to understand. On the contrary, significantly fewer participants (9%) indicated that the U.K. guidance was extremely easy or somewhat easy to understand.

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. However, the lack of 100% compliance rate may also be explained by individuals' own factors, for example, their employment and income statuses might prohibit them from self-isolating when required.

Edinburgh and Lothians Residents experiences of the Lockdowns

A number of barriers existed when individuals in Scotland were required to stay home to help protect the health of the public. The challenges did not pertain only to their employment or education but also to their living arrangements at home. From the audio and video diaries that 195 participants submitted, telling their own stories about their struggles, we found that there were patterns in what people spoke about and in what their concerns were during the lockdowns. We also found that while common themes emerged, residents' demographic backgrounds (e.g., age, socioeconomic class, gender, etc.) played a major role in how they experienced the lockdowns. In this POSTnote, we focus specifically on two broad themes that emerge in residents' stories: mental health challenges and tackling caring responsibilities.

At a glance:
- Participants struggled with isolation, lack of social contact and uncertainty about when they would next see their families
- The pandemic aggravated pre-existing mental health conditions
- Prior self-care strategies were often impossible during the pandemic
- Some participants developed new coping strategies such as new hobbies, spending time outdoors, connecting with loved ones (even those living far away) and volunteering

Impact on mental health

Mental health issues remain one of the biggest challenges faced by residents in Edinburgh and the Lothians as many diary contributors talked specifically about mental health struggles during the pandemic.

Some factors of mental health struggles include 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. Feelings of isolation, caused by missing family and friends, was also one of the main factors affecting the mental health of our participants, as well as the exacerbation by the pandemic of pre-existing mental health conditions.

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. Participants also highlighted the loss of freedom to perform self-care as needed. These issues became more salient during the lockdown periods as previously-used coping strategies became unavailable during these times, due to often involving going out and being around other people (e.g., with friends and family or in more structured settings such as exercise classes).

Although maintaining good mental wellbeing became a challenge for many Lothian residents, the lockdown also provided opportunities for reshaping the negative discourses surrounding mental health. 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 class people, in particular, took advantage of the lockdown to explore the city.

While the lockdown might have provided new experiences and insights to residents, 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 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.

Some participants also gained positive experiences through volunteering. 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.

Impact on Caregiving

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. Caregiver burden (e.g. 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. However, 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. This indicates that adaptive and positive coping strategies were able to mitigate and help prevent poor mental health outcomes in vulnerable groups.

Emerging issues affecting specific demographics

Various demographic factors influenced how residents of Edinburgh and the Lothians experienced the COVID-19 lockdowns and restrictions. What follows are initial findings; ongoing work will shed further light on each of these factors.

Gender: Men talked more frequently about their wives and partners than women did. Men discussed the notion of 'choice' whereas women did not mention 'choice' at all. Men were also more likely than women to talk about their friends, the changes they had made or endured, and what they had read, while women were more likely to focus on their emotions, motherhood, school, and caregiving.

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. Middle-class people spoke more about their work-related experiences. Other frequently discussed topics for participants in lower middle-class positions include their dogs whereas those of an upper-middle class background spoke more frequently about schools.

Disability: Disabled participants highlighted additional challenges in accessing support during the pandemic. For example, face-to-face meetings, support groups, and house visits were replaced with phone or video calls.

Conclusions

Lockdown experiences differed across age, gender, class, race and ethnicity, education, income, and other demographic traits. Government guidance was perceived as easier to understand than the U.K. guidance; however, work is still needed 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. In addition, the lockdown periods – and particularly the isolation they encouraged – were mentally challenging for many residents, but access to outdoors activities helped.

Multiple demographic factors also shaped how Edinburgh and Lothians residents experienced the lockdown. For example, 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 was the biggest predictor for caring responsibilities. Furthermore, 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.

Box 2: Summary of Findings

- The majority of Edinburgh and Lothians residents in the sample collected indicated having followed the Scottish Government guidance.
- A participant's 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 residents in Edinburgh and the Lothians
- Many individuals developed ways to cope with the pandemic, including outdoor exercises and hobbies, which were also largely dependent upon one's socioeconomic capital.
- Caregivers were also primarily responsible for household chores. Support for caregivers who care for children with disabilities was the most needed in lockdown.

Recommendations

In light of these findings, and in order to enhance preparations for future public health emergencies, we recommend that the Government:

- ensure that public health restrictions and guidance remains clear and accessible to all.
- ascertain exact contributing factors to non-compliance with self-isolation restrictions.
- consider how progress towards gender equality might have been slowed or reversed during the pandemic, as well as appropriate mitigation strategies for this.
- reflect on creative ways to encourage outdoor activities, as well as ensure and broaden access to them, while maintaining public safety.
- ensure that respite services remain operational throughout public health emergencies to mitigate psychological distress among caregivers.

Lothian Lockdown:
The Lothian Diary Project
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