SciencesPo

Observatoire sociologique du changement
Centre de données socio-politiques

cnrs

Lockdown for All, Hardship for Some
Insights from the First Wave of the CoCo Project

Ettore Recchi, Emanuele Ferragina, Emily Helmeid, Stefan Pauly
Mirna Safi, Nicolas Sauger, Jen Schradie

Summary
How disruptive is Covid-19 to everyday life? How is the French population experiencing the lockdown? Is it magnifying existing inequalities and affecting social cohesion? The CoCo project sheds light on these pressing questions by comparing living conditions in France before and after the lockdown. This is the first of a series of research briefs that we will publish in the forthcoming weeks. We will explore this new experience of "sheltering-in-place" and its impact on family life, schooling, work, health and well-being. This brief explores how French society has coped with the first two weeks of the lockdown. We find that the virus has rapidly become a tangible threat, as more than forty percent of the population knows someone who has been infected. Despite this, three out of four persons say that they do not feel overly stressed out. In certain cases, the reaction has been almost philosophical -- long hours spent at home allow people to slow down and think about the meaning of life. More than anything else, it is having access to green spaces and nature which provides some relief to those attempting to cope with this home-based social organization. Still, some cracks have appeared. Women, foreign-born residents, and individuals facing financial hardship are subject to greater emotional strain than the rest of the population. Gender inequalities have been particularly reinforced during the lockdown: women have been spending even more time than usual cleaning and taking care of others. Although the Covid-19 virus tends to disproportionately strike men, the consequences of the lockdown more intensely affect women.

Coping with Covid-19

Social distancing, cohesion and inequality in 2020 France

n° **1**

Not just in the news, Covid-19 is also in our communities

In the first week of April 2020, 41% of French residents knew someone who is or has been ill with Covid -- 15% have someone in their own family and 31% in their larger social circle (figure 1). Moreover, 6%[1] said they themselves have contracted the virus, either because they have tested positive (0.2%, in line with official estimates[2]) or because they have experienced the key symptoms associated with it. Finally, 3.5% of the population said that they know somebody who has died from Covid-19.

Our data are in line with existing statistics and confirm that the virus is particularly impactful among the elderly and men as well as within certain regions. Geography and population density have driven the initial spread of the virus: in the Paris region almost 10% of our sample declared that they have likely been infected by the virus, compared to less than 1% in the Southwest.

While the virus outbreak is, so far, only slightly connected to socioeconomic status, the subsequent spread may affect social groups differently, as there is considerable variation across occupations in the share of people working from home. Whereas more than three-quarters of managers work exclusively from home, only around a quarter of clerical workers and just 6% of blue-collar workers do so. As a result, clerical and blue-collar workers are likely to become more exposed to the virus over time. The longitudinal nature of our data will enable us to monitor this evolution as the crisis unfolds.

> "*The fact of watching the news every day and seeing the death toll in France and abroad. I find it too morbid, even if it can serve as an electric shock to certain people who don't seem to realize how dangerous the situation is*"

1.   Grosso modo as predicted by epidemiological estimates: https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3557360.
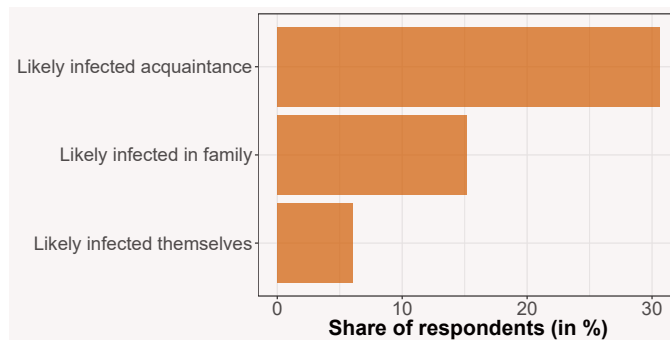2.   https://www.data.gouv.fr/fr/reuses/covid-19-taux-de-population-infectee-par-pays/.

Figure 1. Source: Coping with Covid-19 – 1st wave (CoCo-1), April 1-8 2020, ELIPSS/CDSP.
N=1074. Reading: 31% of respondents have an acquaintance who has likely been infected by Covid-19. This combines those who have been tested positively and those who have had strong symptoms.

Lockdown for all, anxiety for some

The mood of the population is, overall, rather calm and composed. Although this may come as a surprise, three-quarters of the population considers the lockdown as either "a moment for reflection" (52%) or a way to "focus on essential aspects of life, like family, friends and children" (23%). Those who qualify the lockdown as a "source of stress" (19%) or a "a waste of time" (6%) represent the remaining quarter (figure 2). Being a woman or foreign-born increases the likelihood of considering the lockdown a source of stress.
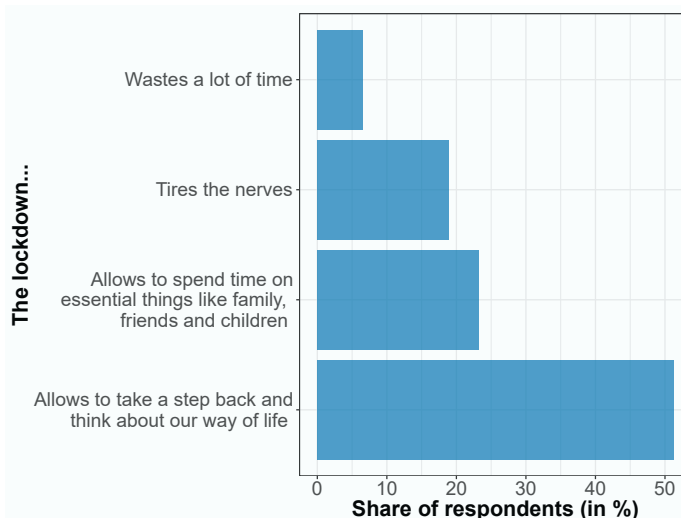

Figure 2. Source: Coping with Covid-19 – 1st wave (CoCo-1), April 1-8 2020, ELIPSS/CDSP.
N=1074. Reading: For 6% of respondents the lockdown is "a waste of time"

> *"Yesterday I took the time to play online scrabble with one of my sisters living on the other side of France. I had a lovely time and, on top of that, I won the game! Life is also about capturing these little joys of daily life!"*

While most of French society seems to be coping rather well, there are cracks showing at the margins. Asked how much the lockdown "takes a toll on them" on a scale from 0 to 10, the average response is close to 5. Nevertheless, nearly one in five respondents positioned themselves between 8 and 10, indicating that severe fatigue is setting in. This proportion rises to almost one in three among foreign-born respondents and one in four among the most financially vulnerable[3].

What are people most worried about? When asked whether they are more concerned about the health or economic consequences of the epidemic, 25% of the sample chose 'health' and 18% the 'economy'. The majority of the population, however, is equally concerned with both. Women are more likely than men to say that they are most worried about health. The most financially vulnerable are the most likely to place themselves at one extreme or the other of the scale.

Since we also surveyed our panelists in 2019, we are able to explore both general and mental health in the population before and after the outbreak of the epidemic. Surprisingly enough, our results reveal that, compared to one year earlier, 36% of respondents report being in a better state and only 7.5% a worse state of 'general health'. This finding hints at the relative nature of self-assessing one's health: when confronted with a deadly, rapidly-spreading illness, people tend to rate their
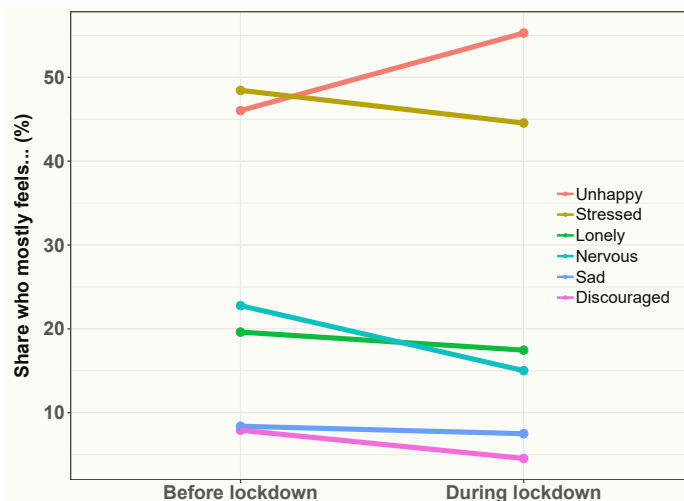

Figure 3. Source: Coping with Covid-19 – 1st wave (CoCo-1), April 1-8 2020, ELIPSS/CDSP.
N=1074. Reading: The proportion of respondents who say that they are "always or often nervous out" was 23% in April 2019, it is 18% in April 2020.

own general health more positively. As for mental health, our findings show contrasting patterns. We measure a considerable drop in well-being with a question on 'happiness': the share of respondents who declare feeling happy 'often' or 'all the time' decreased from 54% in 2019 to just 45% in April 2020. Other mental health indicators, in fact, are not negatively affected by the lockdown, or at least not yet (figure 3). The number of those who feel nervous has gone down, while the share of those who feel relaxed has gone up. As individual-level factors (such as gender, age, and socioeconomic status) may be driving these overall trends, we have conducted some additional analyses to identify the groups that have been the most psychologically impacted during the lockdown. We use the whole range of mental health variables covered in our data (six variables) and construct an indicator of overall subjective well-being. High values correspond to a positive mood (happy, relaxed, etc.) and low values to a negative mood (sad, nervous, lonely, etc.)[4]. We find that subjective well-being during the

---

3.   We have asked our sample whether they could afford to pay upfront a €400 unexpected bill. We consider 'most financially vulnerable' the 15% of respondents who answered 'no' to this question.

4.   The Subjective Well Being Index is constructed as follows: We first compute z-scores for all six mental health questions. Then, we take the average of these six scores. The index is the z-score of this average. It is thus centered around zero and assigns equal weights to all six aspects of mental health.
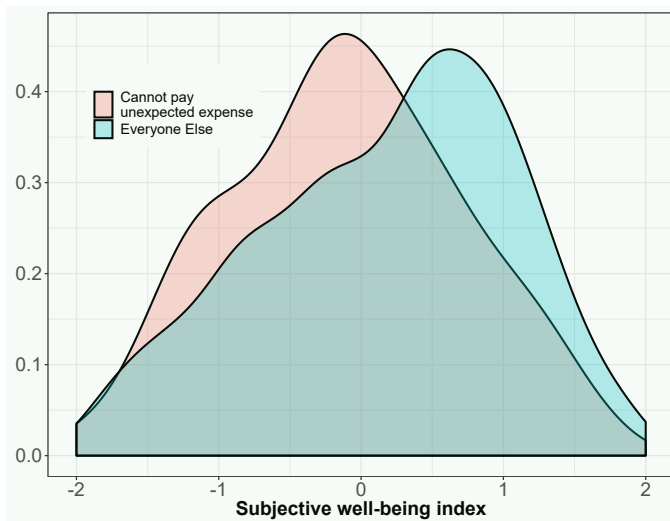
Figure 4. Source: Coping with Covid-19 – 1st wave (CoCo-1), April 1-8 2020, ELIPSS/CDSP.
N=1074. Reading: On our standardized index of subjective well-being based on six indicators of self-assessed mental health, the general population has higher scores (in green, leaning more to the right) than the financially vulnerable (in pink).

lockdown is lower for women, members of single households, and people living in smaller apartments. Figure 4 sheds light on the gap in subjective well-being between people experiencing financial hardship and the rest of the population.

> "*No more bread, saving my milk, empty fridge and no one to do my grocery shopping… feeling of total isolation and of complete disinterest from the community*"

The lockdown is also a potential source of family-related stress. Among those who do not live alone, 40% say that they 'never' have tensions at home and 34% only 'rarely'. Analyzing household and context-related characteristics, we find that the main explanatory factor for these tensions is the size of one's home. Younger respondents are also likely to report family strains during the lockdown.

Coping with the lockdown: finding relief in green spaces and virtual interactions

Since mid-March, public spaces and social lives in France have been abruptly lost or dematerialized. The lockdown is disrupting sociability as no other

event has since WWII. During the first fortnight, 60% of the population left their homes two times or less (14% never left); 90% did not see their friends and 82% their family (apart from household members). Smartphones and computer screens helped, however, to partially compensate for this lack of in-person social interaction: 41% of respondents were able to spend time virtually with their friends and 55% with their family members at least three times a week.

In this context, an important way to cope with the hardship of lockdown is to access green spaces (either private or public). All things held equal, those with such access demonstrate a significantly higher level of well-being. Not surprisingly, people living in dense urban areas have fewer opportunities to enjoy this amenity -- on the rare occasion that they are able to leave their homes. Reading, gardening, and engaging in intimate relations are positively correlated with our measure of subjective well-being and this to a greater extent than before the lockdown. Conversely, watching television more than usual is associated to lower subjective well-being.

Same old, same old: people may be working less, but women and the economically disadvantaged are spending even more of their time on cleaning and care-giving

How does the lockdown affect people's time use? Are there significant changes to their routines? Talking on the phone, viewing social media, and watching television have run away with the race: between one-half and two-thirds of respondents say that they are engaging in these activities even more often than before. A majority of parents (55%) are spending more time than usual on taking care of their children, and nearly half of respondents (47%) on caring for vulnerable people. In all likelihood, these are mostly elderly family members. More time is also being devoted to cleaning the house (38%) and sleeping (27%). By contrast, as one might expect, people are doing fewer sports and outdoor
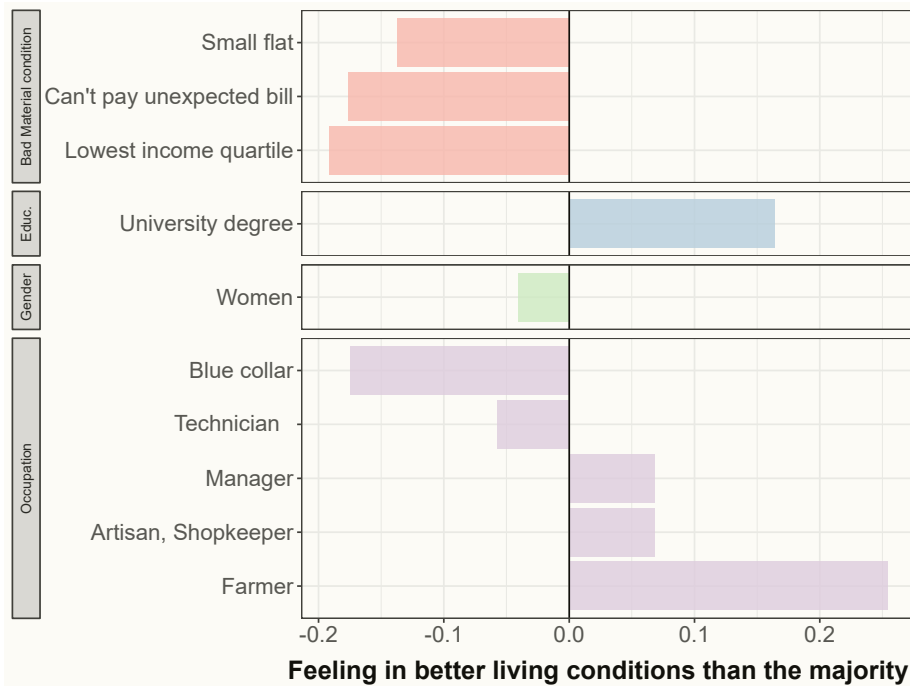
Figure 5. Source: Coping with Covid-19 – 1st wave (CoCo-1), April 1-8 2020, ELIPSS/CDSP. N=1074. Reading: Average marginal effects of different social categories to answer 'yes' to the following question: "Do you think that your life under lockdown is better than that of the majority of people in France?". Reference groups: people with a house over median size (in sqm per household member), people who can pay an unexpected €400 bill, people with average household income, people with a lower than university degree, men, clerks (for occupations). Based on a logit regression with other multivariate controls: regions, urban areas, household size, current employment status, foreign born and age groups.

activities (43% of respondents) and working less (40%). Perhaps unexpectedly, they are also having less sex (28%).

Gender and income play a striking role in explaining changes in one's activities, as a series of regression analyses make clear. Women are spending significantly more time than before on 'cleaning the house' and 'taking care of the vulnerable' -- further widening pre-existing gender gaps in these activities. Women are also spending more time than usual on social media and on the phone. Most remarkably, 70% of women say that they supervise their children's school work daily, as opposed to 32% of men (28% of men say that they never perform this task, as opposed to 12% of women). It seems that these gender gaps are also indirectly exacerbating differences in subjective well-being. For example, spending more time than usual on cleaning the house or speaking on the phone is associated with lower subjective well-being as compared to 2019. Time use during the lockdown also varies with material wealth. In this regard, individuals experiencing financial difficulties are more likely to care for vulnerable people, to use social media and to watch TV.

Clearly seeing the color of their grass: perceptions of relative living conditions

Finally, we ask respondents to assess their position during the lockdown relative to the rest of the population. Perhaps unsurprisingly, we find that those who are materially well-off and more highly educated think that their living conditions during lockdown are better than those of most French residents. On the contrary, those who live in small flats, fall at the bottom of the income distribution, or are experiencing financial hardship estimate that their living conditions are similar or worse than those of the majority of the population. While these findings confirm classic social stratification research, what seems new during the lockdown is the self-perceived position of farmers. While they would generally consider themselves to be struggling in a 'brave new world' where they are often seen as a relic of the past, they feel more advantaged during the lockdown compared to others. Perhaps, the epidemic is reshuffling some of the established social hierarchy, leading to a re-evaluation of the importance of proximity to nature, open spaces and sources of food.

Methodology

Data for this Brief come from the first wave of the CoCo survey, which is part of the project "Coping with Covid-19: Social Distancing, Cohesion and Inequality in 2020 France", funded by the French Agence nationale de la recherche (Flash Covid-19 call).
For details on the project:
https://www.sciencespo.fr/osc/fr/content/faire-face-au-covid-19.html

The CoCo survey is part of ELIPSS, a probability-based panel launched in 2012 thanks to ANR support (Grant for infrastructures ANR-10-EQPX-19-01). ELIPSS is maintained by CDSP, the Center for Socio-Political Data of Sciences Po. ELIPSS currently relies on a sample of 1400 French residents. The sample has been drawn from census data collected through face-to-face interviews at the initial stage with an acceptance rate superior to 25 per cent. Panelists participate in about 10 surveys a year, with a response rate close to 85 per cent on average. Data from ELIPSS is calibrated through a combination of various weighting strategies. Final weights, as used in this brief, have been computed to take into account design effects from the initial stage, bias due to acceptance rate in the enrollment phase, and post-stratification taking into account sex, age, education and region. Detailed information regarding this procedure is available here:
http://quanti.dime-shs.sciences-po.fr/media/ckeditor/uploads/2018/03/21/ponderationselipss_documentation.pdf.

The quotes in the text have been extracted from respondents' answers to three open-ended questions asked at the end of the survey.

How to cite the data: Ettore Recchi, Emanuele Ferragina, Mirna Safi, Nicolas Sauger, Jen Schradie, ELIPSS team [authors] : "Coping with Covid-19: Social distancing, cohesion and inequality in 2020 France – 1st wave" (april 2020) [computer file], Fondation Nationale des Sciences Politiques (FNSP) [producer], Center for socio-political data (CDSP) [distributor], Version 0.