

The Covid Year in France: A Tale of Two Lockdowns

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In the beginning of 2020, the idea of a worldwide pandemic was not on most people's minds, let alone the concept of a lockdown. But as this Covid-19 year comes to a close, governments around the globe have instituted stay-at-home orders and other restrictions. In France, people have now experienced two national lockdowns. The first spring lockdown, lasting two months, was severe with schools, outdoor public spaces, and most workplaces closed. The second fall lockdown was less drastic, as schools and many businesses stayed open. Yet for both lockdowns, everyone in France needed a self-written authorization to go outside only for essential outings. Public gatherings, bars, and restaurants remained shuttered.

This policy brief analyzes how people in France navigated this past year, comparing the spring and fall lockdown experiences, with an eye toward tracking inequalities. As with previous Policy Briefs, we leverage the power of repeated surveys with the same pool of respondents who are all part of a longitudinal sample of the French population (ELIPSS).

Coping with Covid-19

Social distancing, cohesion and inequality in 2020 France

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Summary: Transformations Between the Spring and Autumn Lockdowns¹

- During the spring lockdown, well-being actually increased, albeit unequally. However, the autumn lockdown showed a drop in well-being and an increase in stress.
- Women experienced lower levels of well-being during both lockdowns and found the second lockdown worse than men did.
- Through both lockdowns, the poor and most financially vulnerable reported lower levels of well-being than the rest of the population.
- People whose lives were personally touched by the Covid-19 virus did not just suffer physically but psychologically as well, with lower self-reported well-being measures.
- Those living in rural areas continue to be left behind without basic internet connections, despite the digital acceleration during the pandemic.
- People reported lower levels of social connections throughout the pandemic but particularly in the latter half of the year.
- Over the past year, people's concerns shifted from health towards the economy, even more so among the most privileged social strata, including conservatives.

The paradox of increased well-being in the first lockdown dissipated in the second one

When the pandemic broke out and the French government imposed a lockdown from mid-March to mid-May, we found, rather surprisingly, that on average people in France felt *less* lonely, unhappy, discouraged, nervous and stressed than in the previous three years. At the same time, self-perceived health *increased*. All of these indicators, which we synthesized in a single 'Subjective Well-Being' Index, went progressively up during the lockdown period². In October, when we interviewed our panel again, and it was clear that the pandemic was accelerating

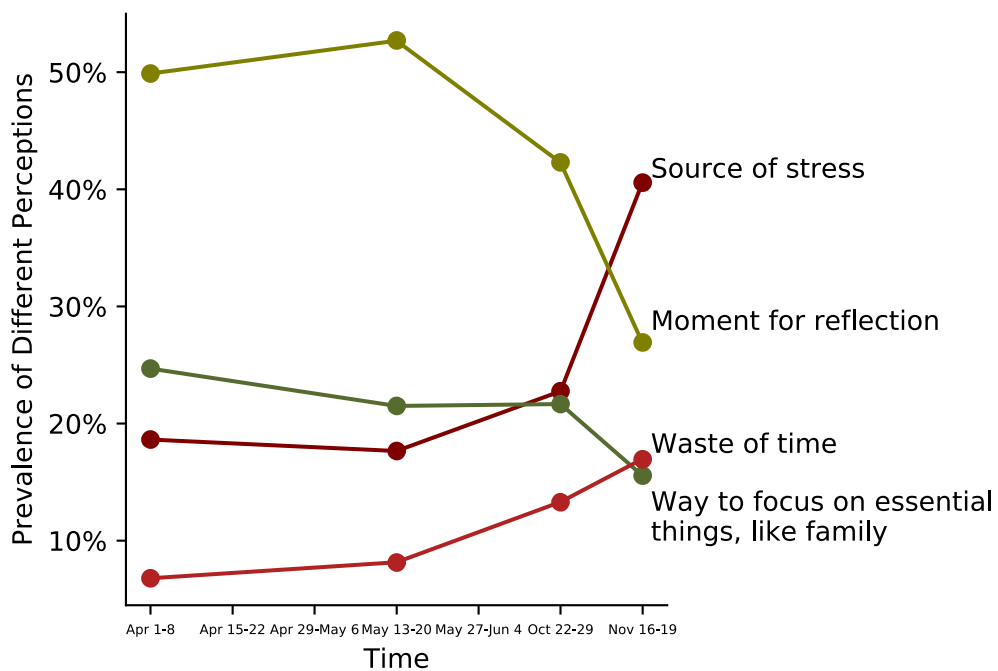
1. The first lockdown, from March 17 to May 11, ended with a slow reopening of schools and services. The second lockdown, from October 30 to December 15, was also accompanied by other restrictions, including local, regional, and national nightly curfews before and after the lockdown, the ongoing closure of non-essential shops and restaurants, and the shuttering of university campuses. Although the second lockdown officially ended in mid-December, strict mitigation measures are likely to be in place well into 2021.

for a second time, the first lockdown optimism had diminished. The Subjective Well-Being Index was back to the April, 2020 level. Following this declining trend, when the second lockdown was declared, we recorded a further drop in the index. With the onset of this second lockdown the drop in well-being was slight, however, and the index remained above the 2019 benchmark. The collective positive emotional reaction to the shockwaves of the 2020 pandemic had mostly been exhausted.

The prevailing view of the lockdown has also changed radically. In early April, most people framed the situation as an occasion to step back from their usual routine and take time to enjoy family life and philosophize; in November the bulk of respondents associated the second lockdown as a 'nerve-

2 See Recchi, E., Ferragina, E., Helmeid, E., Pauly, S., Safi, M., Sauger, N., & Schradie, J. (2020). The "Eye of the Hurricane" Paradox: An Unexpected and Unequal Rise of Well-Being During the Covid-19 Lockdown in France. *Research in Social Stratification and Mobility*, 100508.

Figure 1. Perception of the two lockdowns



Sources: *Coping with Covid-19 - 1st, 4th, 6th, 7th wave (2020)*, ELIPSS/CDSP.

N=2338. Weighted share for the different answer options to the question "How would you describe your lockdown experience?"

Reading: The lockdown experience is perceived as stressful by more than 40% of people in November, up than less than 20% in April.

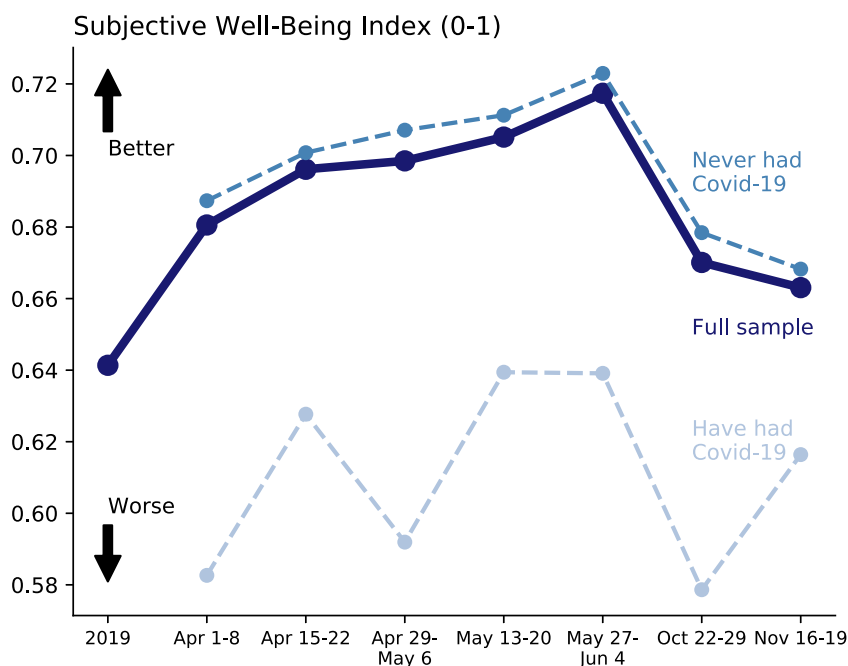
wracking situation' and a 'loss of time' (figure 1).

It is possible that the fatigue of more than six months under the pandemic was further exacerbated by the return of daily routines and the simultaneous deprivation of amenities like eating out, going to the movies, and meeting with friends.

But throughout our tracking of well-being before and during the pandemic, what has been persistent is the inequalities. Consistently reporting lower levels of well-being are the poorest and most financially vulnerable, people living alone and in smaller homes, those who were not born in France, and women. In addition to these socio-demographic factors is a new category: those who have had Covid-19 or have a family member who had it. This group experienced a consistently lower than average level of subjective well-being. On top of the illness, those who had the virus and their family also face higher psychological costs of the pandemic (figure 2).

Along the same lines, a barometer of lockdown-related stress on a 0-10 scale, which had oscillated between 4 and 5 on average through the spring, went up to over 6 in autumn. Not surprisingly, people who had Covid-19 themselves or in their family are significantly more likely to indicate a higher level of stress.

Figure 2. Self-Reported Well-Being based on having had Covid-19



Source: *Coping with Covid-19 (CoCo) - Waves 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, (2020), Wave ELIPSS (2019), ELIPSS/CDSP*. Weighted means for a "Subjective Well-Being" - Index, comprising measures for nervousness, discouragement, relaxation, defeativeness, happiness, and loneliness, and respondents' self-assessment of their general health. Rescaled from 0 (lowest) to 1 (highest positive affect). Calculated for the full sample (N= 7989) for 2019 and wave 1 to 7 in 2020; and the subset of people reporting that they "think to have or have had Covid-19" (N = 505), or "think not to have or have had Covid-19" (N= 6441) for wave 1 to 7 in 2020. Reading: People who have never been affected by Covid have a well-being index that is significantly higher than those who have been affected, regardless of the date of the investigation, although it tends to decline in October, then in November.

For Better and For Worse: Changes in Risk, Work, and Social Connections

In trying to understand the differences people experienced between the two lockdowns, we asked the respondents directly. Only a minority declared that they felt better, in November (15% slightly better and 7% much better) even though people were allowed to move around more in the second lockdown. Those who were more likely to describe this improvement between the first and second lockdowns were men, people with kids, and people doing paid work. It is possible that the reopening of schools played a role in improving the living conditions of parents with children. The financially vulnerable were one of the groups with the most significant sense of a worsening personal situation.

We also tracked how the French population perceives the risks posed by the virus. Certainly, the ability of the French health system to manage the cri-

sis changed between the two lockdowns. Covid-19 tests are now more available, and health authorities have been able to better track the virus. From the end of the first lockdown on May 11 to late October, about 25% of respondents had been tested at least once. While the overwhelming majority of the population (90%) thinks that contracting Covid-19 entails serious health consequences, most people are not that concerned about being infected (19% not at all concerned and 52% slightly concerned). Nonetheless, about 50% are concerned about their family members contracting the virus and more generally about the virus spreading more in society.

Work situations have also changed. During the first lockdown, people spent less time working and experienced greater well-being, but during the second lockdown, working remained constant. A much higher proportion of workers in France continued to commute to their workplace during the second

lockdown, compared to the first one. During the spring lockdown, 42% of workers were doing so from home but during the fall lockdown, this was the case for only 14% of them. This second lockdown did not deter workers from commuting to work like the first one. However, managers and professionals, people with high education levels, and those living in the largest urban areas, continued to work from home at significantly higher proportions from the spring to the autumn.

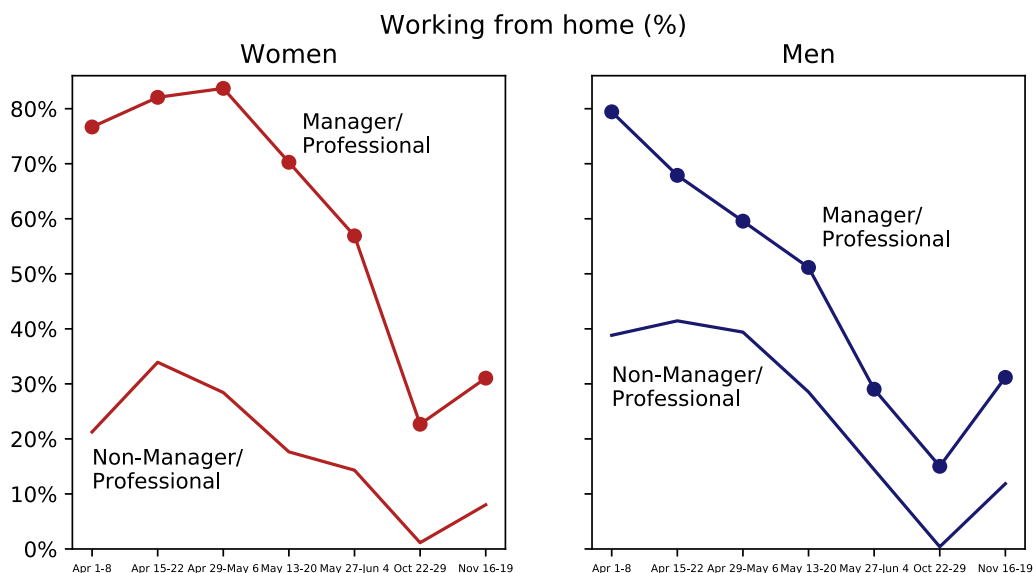
Despite a general return to the workplace, the lack of social connections remained a constant reality throughout the two lockdowns and seems to have even intensified in October and November. People spent less and less time keeping up with family and friends, even through virtual interactions. The average time per day on social media dropped from nearly 2.3 hours in early April after the beginning of the first lockdown to 1.6 hours in mid-November after the beginning of the second lockdown. Time spent talking on the phone also dropped from about 1.9 hours to 1.5 hours in that same period. Social isolation also occurred at work. For example, in the

fall, 25% of workers reported fewer interactions with their colleagues (both in person and virtual).

Zooming Unequally

Aside from work, a great deal of schooling, shopping, and socializing moved online during the two lockdowns. Thus, having reliable digital devices and connections became more vital than ever before. Digital inequalities along class and urban/rural lines were consistent throughout the year. We asked whether people had found their internet to be sufficient for these activities. Even in October, a full 14% of the population reported that they did not, with most of these respondents belonging to less privileged classes. We also saw a striking divide between residents of rural and urban areas. Nearly one-third of people living in rural areas with populations less than 2,000 residents reported problems with their internet connection while only 8% of those from larger cities (greater than 100,000 residents) had connection problems (figure 4).

Figure 3. Attitudes to globalization and environmentalism in 2018 and after the lockdown



Sources: *Coping with Covid-19 (CoCo), Waves 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7 (2020)*, ELIPSS/CDSP.

N=2338. Weighted means for having "mostly" worked from home in the past two weeks. Calculated for those in active employment before and during the lockdown periods.

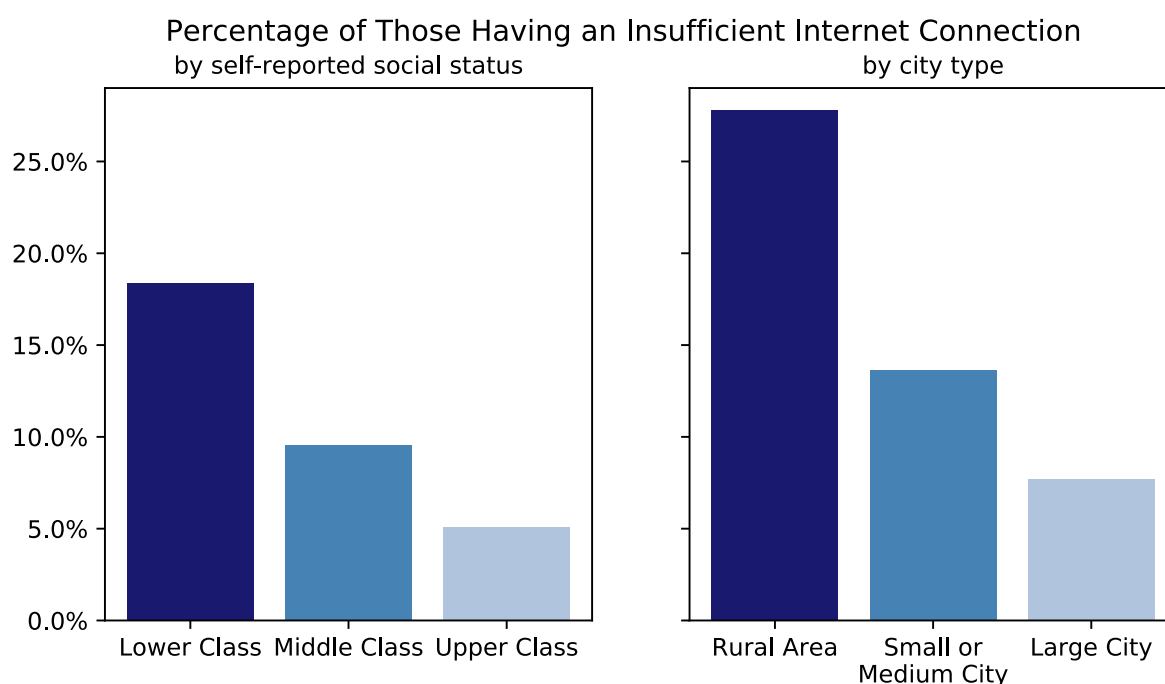
Reading: For both women and men, managers and higher professions have used telework more than other professions. The number of teleworkers fell significantly at the end of the first confinement (from 80% to less than 20% for men at managerial / professional), before rising again.

One might expect that people without adequate internet capacity would need to upgrade in the digital era for survival. But our data suggest that individuals with more digital skills are more likely to have kept up with the fast changing digital environment. The highly educated are significantly more likely to have started using new software since the first lockdown (8% among people with some college education as opposed to only 3% among those with lower-level degrees). Furthermore, higher internet skills before the lockdown significantly increased the probability that someone would start using new software, all of which can exacerbate existing digital inequalities.

Economy versus Health

Since its beginning, the Covid-19 pandemic has posed a challenge to politicians, businesses, workers, and the public at large. How much of the economy are we willing to give up in order to save the maximum number of lives? Or more cynically, how ready are we to sacrifice a certain number of lives in order to keep the economy afloat? We tested this trade-off among the general public over the seven survey waves — from March to November — asking respondents whether they were more concerned with health or the economy. We devised a barometer expressing the concern for health versus the concern for the economy on a 10-point scale. The value 0 indicates an extreme concern for health and the value 10 an extreme concern for the state of the economy.

Figure 4. Social Status and Geographical Differences in Internet Connection



Sources: Coping with Covid-19 - 6th wave (CoCo-6), October 22-29 2020, ELIPSS/CDSP.

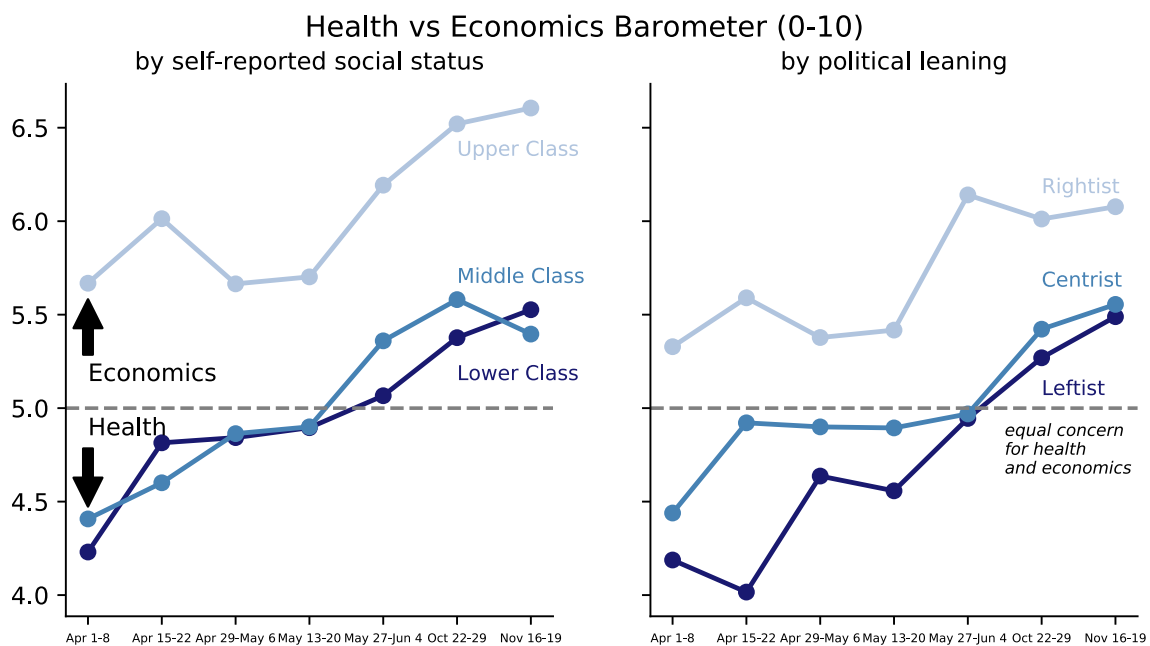
Weighted means for answering "No" to the question "Do you have an Internet connection of sufficient quality to do what you want online?". Social Status is based on a self-positioning on a Scale from 1-10 (1-4 is classified as "Lower Class"; 5-6="Middle Class"; 7-10="Upper Class") for subjective positioning in society. "Small or Medium" cities are urban areas with less than 100k inhabitants, "Large" cities those with 100k and more inhabitants. N= 809 for the subplot by Subjective Social Status; N= 1030 for the subplot by City type.

Reading: Three times more people report internet connection problems if they live in a rural town than in a large city.

Since the onset of the pandemic, people's concern has shifted progressively towards the economy. Figure 5 plots the average score of our barometer for each wave. The average has increased by more than one point over time, from 4.67 to 5.75. We anticipated this result in April³ and proposed an experimental treatment warning half of respondents about the danger of an imminent economic crisis. The experiment showed that when people received an authoritative piece of information about the economic risks of a prolonged lockdown, they radically switched their initial concern for health to a concern for the economy. Reality is rapidly catching up with our gloomy economic prediction from April as people progressively display a higher concern for the economy.

If the Covid-19 crisis is a double-edged sword for both governments and its citizens, it is clear that in France the worry over a dramatic economic crisis has been progressively overcoming the worry for people's health. At the same time, the country is clearly divided along gender, class, and political lines. Those who are privileged (intended in a broader sense, considering class, wealth, gender, and education) and leaning to the right of the political spectrum care more for the state of the economy, while others are more ready to make an economic sacrifice in order to preserve people's lives. This is an intersectional division among the French population that could further lead to social conflict during and in the aftermath of the pandemic crisis.

Figure 5. Concern over Health vs Economics by social class and political orientation



Sources: *Coping with Covid-19 - 6th wave (CoCo-6), October 22-29 2020, ELIPSS/CDSP*. N= 6903. Weighted means for answers to the question "Are you more concerned about the health or economic consequences of the Covid-19 epidemic? : 0 - Health consequences [...] 10 - Economic Consequences". Political orientation is derived from 2019 ELIPPS/ CDSP, self-positioning on a left-right scale for political orientation, ranging from 0 (left) to 10 (right). Left={0,1,2,3,4}, Centre={5,6}, Right={7,8,9,10}. Reading: People with right-wing political views have been concerned primarily with economic issues since the beginning of our waves.

3. Ferragina, E., Barone, C., Helmeid, E., Pauly, S., Recchi, E., Safi, M., Sauger, N. and Schradie, J. (2020). *In the eye of the hurricane. French society a month into the lockdown*, Policy Brief 2. Paris: Sciences Po - Observatoire Sociologique du Changement. DOI: [10.5287/zenodo.3783990](https://doi.org/10.5287/zenodo.3783990).

Methodology

Data for this Brief come from the seven waves 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.

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, 2nd, 3rd, 4th, 5th, 6th, 7th wave” (April-November 2020) [computer file], Fondation Nationale des Sciences Politiques (FNSP) [producer], Center for socio-political data (CDSP) [distributor], Version 0.

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