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In the eye of the hurricane

French society a month into the lockdown

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

How disruptive is COVID-19 to everyday life? How is the French population experiencing the lockdown? Is it magnifying inequalities and affecting social cohesion? The CoCo project sheds light on these pressing questions by comparing living conditions in France before, during, and after the lockdown. This is the second of a series of research briefs that we will publish in the forthcoming weeks. In this brief, we explore how French society has coped with the first month of the lockdown, particularly with the economy, self-reported health and well-being, and homeschooling.

Coping with Covid-19

Social distancing, cohesion and inequality in 2020 France

n°

2

Summary

Are people more concerned with protecting each other from a deadly virus or minimizing the economic damages of a protracted lockdown? Compared to two weeks ago, people are more worried about the economy than they are about health, especially in the case of those living in high-income households. When looking ahead to the partial re-opening that the government has set for 11 May 2020, French residents show a high degree of uncertainty. People waver in their commitment to this date depending on which aspect of the crisis they are taking into consideration. Only 35% of the population would want to end the lockdown on 11 May knowing that the virus is still running rampant in the country. When made to consider a potential catastrophic economic scenario, however, the share of those wishing to follow through on this date rises to 65%. Those in high-income households also prioritise the possibility of adopting a mobile app to help control the spread of the epidemic.

How do people assess their health and stress levels? The lockdown is not leading the French into depression. In self-assessments of their general health and well-being, people indicate higher scores than in previous years. We label this phenomenon the “eye of the hurricane” paradox: when a disruptive event breaks out, people seem to better appreciate their relative ‘good health’. However, the lockdown seems to psychologically distress individuals who are both working from home and going out less.

What are the main features and challenges of homeschooling? Two-thirds of parents, regardless of their educational background, supervise their children’s school work daily. The additional burden is a source of stress for some parents but is also contributing to parents’ understanding of their children’s learning needs.

Between a rock and a hard place: should we worry more about health or the economy?

In France, as in other countries strongly affected by the epidemic, public opinion is split over the best approach to a phased re-opening of the country. How can we move from lockdown to a well-ordered re-start of economic and social activities? How do people view the inherent trade-off between saving human lives and rescuing the economy from complete collapse? To tackle these issues, we first posed a direct question on whether people are more concerned by the consequences of the Covid-19 crisis on ‘health’ or ‘the economy’. We then attempted to disentangle the one from the other via an indirect experimental question. Our analysis leads to two main findings: **concern is growing over the economic impact of the lockdown and public opinion about re-opening is highly volatile.**

To begin with, at both two weeks and four weeks into

the lockdown, our panelists were asked if they were more concerned by the health or economic dimensions of the Covid-19 crisis. To do so, they were presented with a scale from 0 (concerned entirely with health) to 10 (concerned entirely with the economy) on which they had to position themselves. Many feel equally worried about both dimensions of the crisis. However, in only two weeks’ time, 67% of respondents have changed their mind: 41% have become increasingly concerned with the economic consequences and 26% with the health consequences. Only 33% maintained the same view. Uncertainty looms large.

Figure 1 illustrates how people have moved along this scale, broken down by income level and gender. Households positioned in the top-third of the income distribution are increasingly worried about the economy. While this was the case for 35% of them after two weeks, it is now the case for 49%. Households in the bottom tertile have a more balanced view of the

issue, with the share of those that put equal weight on the health and economic dimensions growing from 27% to 33%. This finding is counterintuitive, as one might expect the most disadvantaged to focus primarily on the economy given that any loss in income could put their material well-being into jeopardy. In reality, the poorest third of the population seems to have the most balanced perspective. In looking at the difference between men and women, we see a similar pattern. Four weeks into the lockdown, 41% of men are most concerned by the economic impact of the crisis, compared to 27% of women. Women are more likely than men to have changed their stance on this issue and to place equal weight on health and the economy (34% compared to 24%).

To delve further into the inherent trade-off between the health and economic dimensions of the epidemic, we administered an experiment during the second wave of our survey (15-22 April). Panelists were randomly divided into two groups and asked to

consider the issue of a partial re-opening of France starting on 11 May 2020, as announced by the President of the Republic. The first group was provided a scenario in which the number of infected persons had not diminished as much as foreseen and asked if partial re-opening on 11 May should still occur or if a strict lockdown should be continued. The second group was provided with the same scenario but was also told that “experts fear that continuing with the lockdown could further aggravate the economic crisis, leading to millions of unemployed and the bankruptcy of up to 25% of all companies”.

Despite the fact that this trade-off has been a recurrent topic in the news, the result of our experiment is striking. Support for partially re-opening the economy on 11 May regardless of the number of active cases was at only 35% in the first group, but it jumped to 65% for those in the second group who had been warned of the damage a protracted lockdown could do to the economy. Our findings suggest that

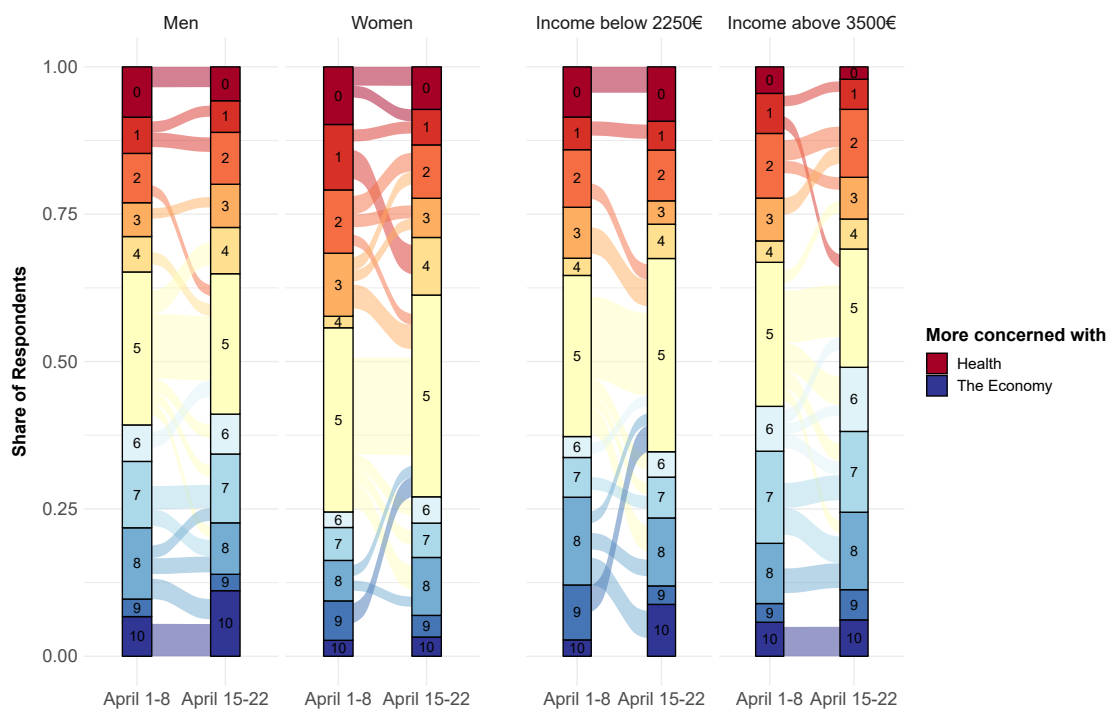


Figure 1. Sources: *Coping with Covid-19 – 1st & 2nd wave (CoCo-1&2)*, April 1-8 & 15-22 2020, ELIPSS/CDSP. N=816 for gender and 610 for income. Reading: Respondents were asked whether they are more concerned about health or economic consequences of the current crisis. The answer is based on a ten-point scale where 0 indicates the highest relative concern about health and 10 the highest relative concern about the economy. The chart displays the share of respondents for each of the two survey waves. For example, the first bar on the left displays the share of answers among men on the ten-point scale in the first survey. The second bar shows the share of answers among men in the second survey. The flows between the two bars indicate the share of respondents that change their opinion from the first to the second survey (to improve visibility only the largest flows are plotted).

public opinion on the matter is highly susceptible to manipulation. In the current climate of uncertainty and confusion, in which contradictory information is widespread and policy decisions by the government are being continuously adjusted, our experiment demonstrates that receiving information from a seemingly authoritative source can easily sway public opinion.

Figure 2 illustrates the result of our experiment across gender, income levels, political preferences, and households with and without children. Among the first group only 30% of women and 41% of men support partial re-opening. However, women tend to react more strongly than men to the prospect of a potential economic crisis. When presented with additional information on the economic consequences of a continued lockdown, the share of women in support of re-opening as planned is 11 percentage points higher than that of men. This translates into

65% of both men and women in the second group who support re-opening. While high-earners and low-earners are similarly likely to support the partial re-opening (39% and 35%, respectively), support among high earners is significantly higher when they receive more information about the potential economic crisis (75% against 65%). Left-leaning people are much less in favour of re-opening than those positioned on the right (25% and 45% in the first group), and although this difference shrinks in the second group it remains considerable (with 59% support on the left and 70% on the right)¹. People with children seem to place more emphasis on economic risks as compared to the rest of the population, and this is even more the case when they are confronted with the possibility of catastrophic unem-

¹ Survey participants position themselves on a scale from the far political left (0) to the far political right (10). We define a respondent as left-leaning left if she/he answers between 0 and 4 and as right-leaning if the answer is between 6 and 10.

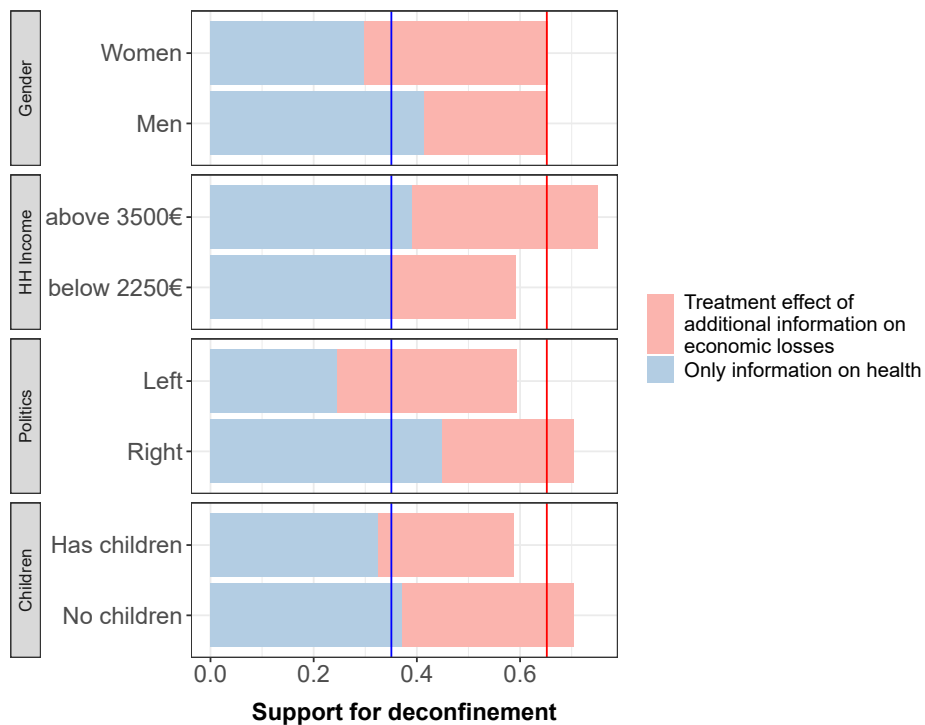


Figure 2. Source: *Coping with Covid-19 – 2nd wave (CoCo-2), April 15-22 2020, ELIPSS/CDSP* N=880, 559, 665 and 908. Reading: The vertical lines represent the support for deconfinement in the whole sample by experimental group (35% and 65%, respectively). Then, for example, the blue part of the bar at the very bottom indicates the share of respondents without children that answered supporting deconfinement on 11 May when told that the number of Covid-19 cases is higher than what the government predicted. The blue and red part jointly represent the share of respondents that expressed their support for re-opening when presented with additional information on the potential economic losses when continuing in confinement (see the text for a description of this experiment).

ployment levels and widespread bankruptcy. In sum, regardless of individual characteristics, having additional information on the potential economic damage from a protracted lockdown has a strong effect on people's support for re-opening the country as planned on 11 May.

Views on ending the lockdown vary by age and income levels

Government digital surveillance? By mid-April, 63% of French people had favorable views on adopting a mobile phone app to fight contagion, 62% would be willing to install it (58% would encourage others to install it), and 37% would like its usage to be compulsory. Holding everything else equal, **high-income earners have a more positive attitude towards an app** and would be more prone to install it on their phones as well as encourage others to do so (but not to make it compulsory).

Age matters. Older people and those with a chronic disease are particularly hostile towards continuing the lockdown for the most fragile social categories (to which, presumably, the respondents themselves belong). They are also more inclined to say that everybody should be treated equally in the face of the lockdown, although they are open to making traveling conditional on a medical certificate until the epidemic subsides.

What should re-open? We also asked our panelists which economic activities should be allowed to re-open the soonest. Almost unanimously, 95% of our respondents want the construction industry to re-open before the summer -- a sign perhaps that the public considers this industry easier to regulate in a situation of continued social distancing or that they think that it is essential for the economy. The majority of French residents (57%) want restaurants and bars to be re-opened before the summer as well -- perhaps signalling the need to renew formal and informal connections with friends and acquaintances

after so many virtual meetings. Less important for re-opening in the short term are airports (46%), schools (45%), and museums (34%).

“Eye of the hurricane” paradox: faced with a deadly virus, people realize they feel pretty good

In the aftermath of the earthquake that hit Japan in 2011, which led to a tsunami and the Fukushima nuclear accident, researchers compared the levels of subjective well-being of young people to those before the disaster. They were surprised by what they found: instead of a dramatic drop in well-being, there was an improvement in overall morale.² Similarly, we find **that average perception of both health and well-being in the French population during the epidemic has improved in comparison to previous years.** We name this counterintuitive phenomenon the “eye of the hurricane” paradox: the vast majority of individuals who are not infected by the virus may be seeing their general good health in a more positive light than they normally would.

Our dataset allows us to track indicators of our respondents' health beginning in 2017 and through the second wave of our survey. Whereas in 2017 and 2019 only 11% of respondents reported being in very good health, in our latest survey from mid-April, this percentage more than doubled (25%). Nevertheless, this dramatic increase is not uniform across society. As the top left panel in figure 3 illustrates, managers and farmers experience the sharpest increase in reported good health. Respondents in high income households experience a similarly sharp increase in the likelihood of reporting being in very good health (figure 3, top-right panel).

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² Uchida, Y., Takahashi, Y., & Kawahara, K. (2014). Changes in hedonic and eudaimonic well-being after a severe nationwide disaster: The case of the Great East Japan Earthquake. *Journal of Happiness Studies*, 15(1), 207-221.

To compare subjective well-being over time, we constructed an index that combines six questions and ranges from 0 (lowest well-being) to 1 (highest well-being). In mid-April (second wave of the Coco survey), subjective well-being had increased by 7.6 points in comparison to 2019. The relative increase is more pronounced for clerks and farmers (see the bottom left panel in figure 3). If we differentiate by income levels, we can clearly see that respondents in low-income households exhibit the lowest levels of subjective well-being over the years. However, they have experienced the highest relative increase during the lockdown, with a rise of more than 7 points since 2019. Overall, occupational and income differences are less marked in subjective well-being than in self-assessed health.

Not surprisingly, subjective well-being is affected by

lockdown-related stress (“Has the lockdown taken a toll on you?”, measured on a 0-10 scale), a measure which has been rather stable over the first two waves of our survey. More than anything else, lockdown-related stress reflects workload and how often one is able to leave home. Those who work remotely from home and rarely go out are at particularly high risk of lockdown-related stress. For teleworkers who leave home only once a week or less, each additional hour of daily work means an increase of stress levels by around 4%. Nevertheless, going out more frequently is not a panacea for dealing with lockdown-related stress. Here again there appears to be a trade-off. For those who are teleworking, the positive boost to their psyche of going out seems to far outweigh the risks. For the rest of the population, however, the opposite appears to be true, and they experience an increase in stress levels the more they go out.



Figure 3. Sources: Coping with Covid-19 – 1st & 2nd wave (CoCo-1 & 2), April 1-8 & 15-22 2020, Annual Survey 2017, 2018, 2019, ELIPSS/CDSP N=834. Reading: The green line in the top left panel shows that 10% of clerks reported being in “very good” health in the 2017 survey and almost 20% in the latest survey. The left column plots time trends by occupation and the right column by tertiles of disposable household income. The upper row plots the share of respondents who report being in “very good” health and the lower row shows the evolution of the subjective well-being index. This index is an average of six questions that touch upon feeling nervous, discouraged, relaxed, sad, happy and lonely. The answers are normalized to be between 0 and 1, with 0 indicating the lowest and 1 the highest possible well-being level.

Homeschooling: stressful yet informative

During the lockdown, typical schooling has been replaced with homeschooling, necessitating more direct involvement from parents, especially for younger children. **Most parents, regardless of educational background, are currently supervising their children's school work on a daily basis.** This is a surprising finding if we consider that the education literature for 'normal times' generally indicates that more educated parents tend to devote significantly more time to their children's learning than other parents. Our data cannot, however, capture the 'quality' of educational support. It is likely that more educated parents are better equipped with the tools needed to support their children's learning.

Two-thirds of parents with children attending preschool, elementary or middle school supervise their children on a daily basis, while another 13% do so at least twice a week. In fact, 60% of parents declare that they are supervising their children's school work more often than usual. Children belonging to households where parents have higher educational levels seem to be more autonomous and require less supervision time as a result.

School supervision is a stressful activity for one-third of all parents. A quarter of them declare that it is also a source of stress for their children. Teleworking parents are more likely to supervise their children's schoolwork than non-teleworking parents (79% versus 59%), but they also tend to find it more stressful (55% versus 39%). Despite the increased level of stress, a third of parents appreciate that homeschooling provides an opportunity to spend more time with their children. 40% of parents claim that homeschooling gives them the chance to better understand their children's learning needs. In sum, there is variability in the reactions of parents and children to homeschooling, but overall this experience does not seem to be perceived too negatively by the majority of parents.

Educational software and websites offer interesting learning environments, giving children new opportunities to work independently and offering their parents a much-needed respite from supervising them. It is not surprising that the use of these tools has massively increased since the beginning of the lockdown. 58% of parents report an increase in online learning during the lockdown, and only 20% of parents report never having used such tools. In this case, we find some evidence of socioeconomic disparities between parents. Parents with a university degree are more likely to report an increase (63%) in the use of these online tools than other parents (53%). They are also more likely to report that their children are spending more time than usual talking to their friends and classmates using various chat services and the internet (50% versus 44%). At the same time, 65% of all parents admit that their children are spending more time than usual watching TV (but in this case parental education level does not seem to make a difference). The increased time spent in sedentary activities is matched by a massive decrease in physical activity involving almost half of all children (48%).

Methodology

Data for this Brief come from the first and second 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 and 2nd wave” (april 2020) [computer file], Fondation Nationale des Sciences Politiques (FNSP) [producer], Center for socio-political data (CDSP) [distributor], Version 0.

ELIPSS team [authors] : Annual survey - 5th, 6st, 7th wave (2017, 2018, 2019) [computer file], Fondation Nationale des Sciences Politiques (FNSP) [producer], Center for socio-political data (CDSP) [distributor], Version 1.

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