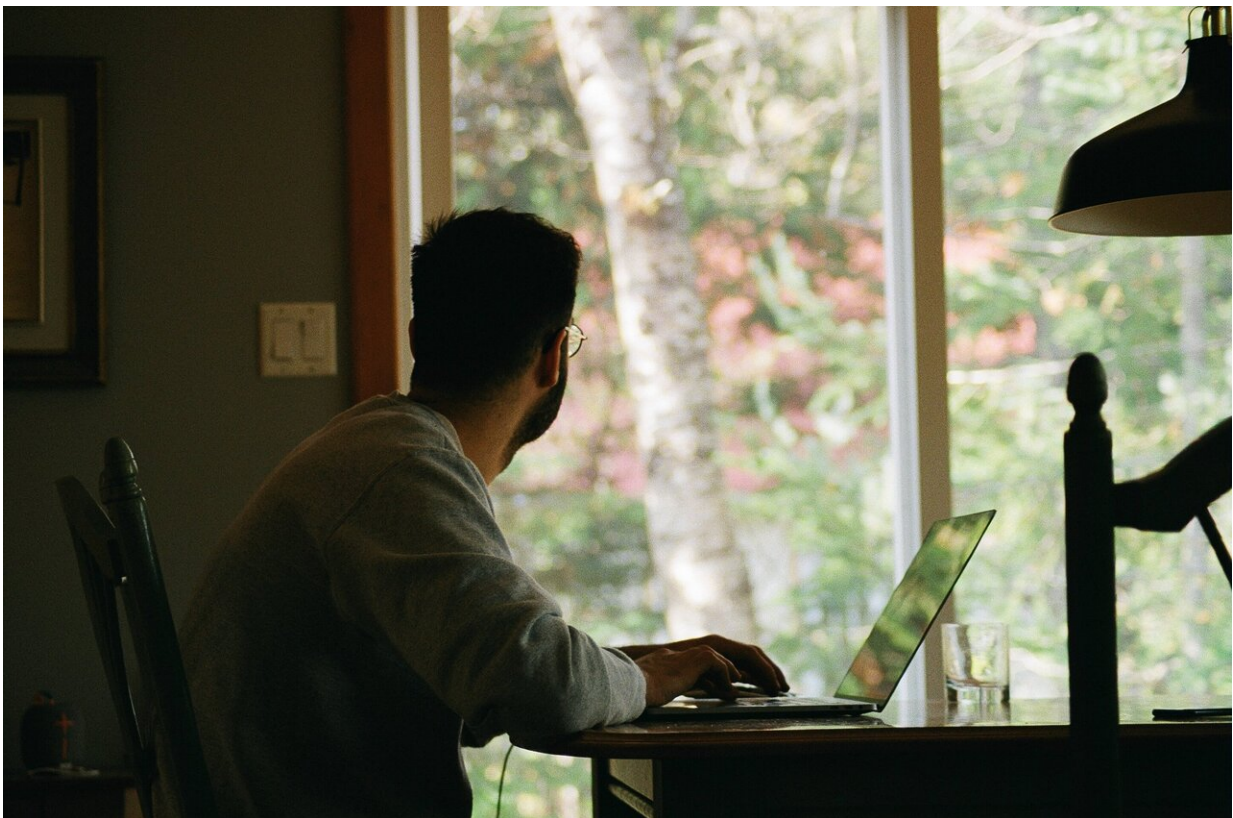


Studies find Swiss lockdown was especially stressful for women and students

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The Swiss federal government put the country in lockdown from 16 March to 19 June 2020 in order to stem the rapid increase in COVID-19 infection rates. Three EPFL studies have examined how Swiss residents

experienced the lockdown in terms of psychological stress and their priorities for housing. The findings show that 60% of respondents changed their definition of the ideal home, and that women and students suffered the most psychologically—indicating that policymakers should pay closer attention to the needs of these groups should lockdowns be required in the future.

According to the first study, appearing in *Frontiers in Psychology*, Switzerland's [lockdown](#) was hardest for students, women who found themselves juggling work-from-home demands with household tasks, and people living alone. Among the people surveyed, the increase in [stress](#) levels was 42% higher among women than men, and 29% higher among students than the actively employed, unemployed and retired. These findings are consistent with those from neighboring countries, even though the lockdowns in France and Germany were more severe.

No difference between urban and rural areas

The study also revealed the important role that type of housing played during this period. Respondents who lived in a home with a yard, or with a combination of outdoor spaces like a yard and balcony, had a 23% lower increase in stress levels. "This shows that inequality is still an issue when it comes to housing, and that this inequality is having a real, negative impact on people's well-being," says Livia Fritz, a postdoc at EPFL's Human-Environment Relations in Urban Systems Laboratory (HERUS) and one of the study's authors, along with Ralph Hansmann, an environmental systems scientist at ETH Zurich. "However, we were surprised to see that there was no major difference in the increase in stress levels between urban and rural areas during the first wave."

In addition to personal circumstances and living conditions, another factor affecting respondents' experience was the kind of activity they engaged in while locked down. Some activities proved to be more

effective in attenuating psychological strain. Those who got regular exercise or who cooked more, for instance, reported feeling less stress than those who spent most of their time watching TV or on social media.

Saturated living areas

The second study, appearing in *Revue des politiques sociales et familiales*, looked at the "plasticity" of housing, or to what extent respondents were able to adapt their living areas to their locked-down lifestyles. Here the EPFL scientists identified six categories of people based on responses from the cantons of Geneva, Vaud and Valais. At one extreme were the "exhausted," generally people under 44 who worked from home during the lockdown and had small children. These individuals had to make the most adjustments to their homes, as living in a small space made it even harder to manage their jobs and family constraints. They reported struggling with a large number of tasks and felt their living areas had become "saturated." This corroborated the findings of a 2020 study by EPFL's Urban Sociology Laboratory (LASUR) (see additional reference at bottom). The "exhausted" category consisted mainly of women (67%) and people with a lower level of education.

Pre-existing inequality

At the other extreme were the "laid back," or people who neither felt lonely nor struggled with an excessive workload during the lockdown. Some respondents in this category reported even better working conditions than before. This category consisted mostly of people who are over 55, male (55%) and have a university degree; they also tended to live in large homes with a yard. "Our study showed that having a higher level of education protects people from the financial insecurity that can arise in these kinds of situations," says Garance Clément, a postdoc at

LASUR and a co-author of the study. "It also underscores the housing inequality that already existed in our society."

The scientists found that students and the elderly suffered the most from loneliness during the lockdown, and especially students in smaller residences without outdoor spaces. These students made up 13% of the "isolated" category and 17% of the "exhausted" category, yet just 9% of the "laid back" category.

A new ideal housing

At a time when most functions of a city were condensed into an individual's dwelling, 60% of respondents changed their perception of what their ideal home would be. This is one conclusion of the third study, appearing in *Cities & Health*. It found that women, those with a large burden of housework, and those who were forced to forgo cultural activities placed a greater emphasis on finding "a place for expression, for satisfaction of aspirations." The scientists categorized these individuals as the "trapped" group. On the other hand, the "pragmatic" group—mainly single men, people living alone and people in temporary housing (e.g., a hotel or friend's house)—displayed a greater desire for a home that fills the basic function of a place to eat, sleep and work.

Rooms for rent and balconies

The findings of these studies call for different actions. "Our findings should encourage public-health officials, architects and property developers to provide residential spaces that meet residents' different needs and dynamics, as highlighted by the lockdown," says Anna Pagani, a Ph.D. student at HERUS and co-author of two of the studies. "This could include, for example, making common rooms accessible in a building that can be shared or used individually—such as workshops,

libraries and workspaces. Such spaces would help reduce conflict among activities that are inherently incompatible. Furthermore, outdoor spaces such as balconies could address the need to interact safely with the community, thereby reducing loneliness and improving the well-being of occupants at risk of social and spatial isolation."

Special consideration for women and students

The scientists also stress that in light of their findings, policymakers should pay closer attention to the needs of [students](#) and [women](#) during any future lockdowns. "It's policymakers' duty to think about what these groups will need and take the necessary measures," says Fritz. "That will require taking account of how different people experience a lockdown and drawing on diverse forms of knowledge and expertise."

Clément adds, "This will be especially important since—unlike what we expected at the beginning of the lockdown—people have not dramatically changed their [lifestyles](#) or living habits."

Pagani believes that the pandemic, which is now dragging on, is an opportunity to make lasting improvements to the way housing is designed. "It's a chance for us to rethink our living spaces—but it'll be a while before we see a concrete change in residential buildings, because there's a lot of inertia in the construction industry."

More information: Ralph Hansmann et al, Activities, Housing Situation and Other Factors Influencing Psychological Strain Experienced During the First COVID-19 Lockdown in Switzerland, *Frontiers in Psychology* (2021). [DOI: 10.3389/fpsyg.2021.735293](https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.735293)

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