

Researchers find that COVID restrictions were not directly linked to levels of distress in England

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People in England continued to experience high levels of psychological distress even after all legal COVID restrictions ended in February 2022, finds a new study led by researchers from UCL and King's College

London.

The findings, part of the COVID-19 Rapid Survey of Adherence to Interventions and Responses (CORSAIR) study, were published in *Journal of Psychiatric Research* and examined data collected from online surveys of over 41,000 participants over the age of 16 years between April 2020 until April 2022.

The study found that psychological distress was consistently higher than normal throughout the pandemic and broadly mirrored the pattern of restrictions and COVID-19 case numbers. However, there were notable exceptions which indicated that other factors may have been at play.

Between April 2020 and April 2022, approximately 50%-60% of women and 40%-50% of men reported signs of psychological distress as measured by the Patient Health Questionnaire 4, such as uncontrollable worrying, little interest or pleasure in doing things and feeling depressed or anxious.

This is compared to 25%-30% of women and 20%-25% of men prior to the pandemic.

Emotional well-being also deteriorated throughout the pandemic and was lowest in the first and third lockdown.

Neither psychological distress nor emotional well-being were exclusively linked to harsh restrictions, such as lockdowns, which limited people's ability to meet up with loved ones or friends, meant having to isolate for up to two weeks if infected with COVID-19, and forced some businesses to close.

For example, the researchers highlight how levels of distress increased following the reopening of hospitality venues on 4 July 2020.

Levels of distress in women also increased after legal restrictions were lifted on 19 July 2021, and after the removal of additional restrictions put in place to prevent the spread of the Omicron variant on 27 January 2022.

In addition, well-being peaked in June 2020 while the English population were still under strict lockdown measures, although previous research has suggested that this may have been down to the warm and sunny weather experienced at that time.

Senior author Professor Henry Potts (UCL Institute of Health Informatics) said, "Rates of psychological distress in the English population have been high and stayed high during the pandemic with only minor fluctuations.

"Some politicians and commentators have concluded that [mental health problems](#) are a result of [lockdowns](#). However, our research shows that there is not a simple relationship between the two.

"And, as levels of psychological distress continued to be high up until as recently as April 2022, we urge that more needs to be done to support the mental health and well-being of the population following a turbulent two years."

First author Dr. Louise Smith (KCL) said, "The COVID-19 pandemic had a lasting impact on people's psychological distress and well-being, with distress remaining notably higher than the pre-pandemic norm in April 2022. It is important that people receive the help they need to support their mental well-being."

Study limitations

The sample population used included a slightly higher percentage of

women than men, and respondents were more likely to be white than the general population.

The researchers cannot be certain that the experiences of people who complete online surveys are representative of the general population.

There was also no pre-[pandemic](#) data and well-being was not measured during the second national lockdown.

More information: Louise E. Smith et al, Psychological wellbeing in the English population during the COVID-19 pandemic: A series of cross-sectional surveys, *Journal of Psychiatric Research* (2022). [DOI: 10.1016/j.jpsychires.2022.06.040](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jpsychires.2022.06.040)

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