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## **Transmission Prevention Behaviours in Young People from NI/Rol. Report No: 7, COVID-19 Behaviour Change Cell**

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## HSC R&D Behaviour Change Group

# Transmission Prevention Behaviours in Young People from NI/ROI

## Report No: 7, COVID-19 Behaviour Change Cell

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### **Key findings**

- Many young people practise social distancing regularly, however females social distance slightly less often than males
- Young females tend to have occasional to frequent contact with a smaller number of relatives/friends outside their household/support bubble
- Young females tend to meet relatives/friends outside their household/support bubble in an indoor setting such as a house
- Young males appear to have more frequent contact with a greater number of friends outside their household/support bubble
- Young males tend to meet relatives/friends outside their household/support bubble in public places/parks
- Young people generally find it hardest to social distance when the in-person contact is with close family or friends
- Key challenges voiced by young people related to transmission-preventative behaviour include:
  - The unhelpful impact of others not following the guidelines on social distancing/mask-wearing
  - Certain situations where it is difficult to social distance (environments not supportive of social distancing/mask-wearing and when meeting close persons)
  - The physical and psychological impact of long-term social distancing and mask-wearing

## Background

The rationale for this research arises from the need to examine current transmission-preventative behaviour (namely social contact) in the context of the vaccine rollout and since the increasing spread of the COVID-19 variants. Moreover, this research explores perceived challenges of maintaining transmission-preventative behaviours in the future, which is important to consider given the predictions of seasonal surges in cases ([Baker et al., 2020](#)).

## Aim and Methods

This report presents key insights on social contact behaviour and perceived behavioural challenges vocalised by young people/adults from Northern Ireland and Republic of Ireland. Data was collected between 14th April 2021 – 24th May 2021 via a Qualtrics survey disseminated via social media and email. Participants were eligible to take part if they were aged 16-45 years and living in NI or RoI.

## Results

A total of 215 people responded to the survey; after data cleaning N=150 were deemed suitable for quantitative analysis, of which N=128/150 provided text responses to the open-ended questions for qualitative analysis. The majority of respondents were female (73%), aged between 21 and 34 years (59%), most were living in Northern Ireland (90%), and most were in employment (non-students) (57.2%) or studying (36.9%). Less than ¼ of respondents (20.7%) lived with a chronic health condition, a small number were shielding themselves (5.1%) or someone else (7.2%), 16.7% reported that they had experienced symptoms of COVID-19, while 9.5% had been diagnosed with COVID-19.

Of the total 150 survey completers, N=105 were aged 18 to 40 years (72% were female). For the purposes of this report, responses within this subsample are presented as the percentage of replies received and broken down by gender.

### *Social distancing behaviour in young people from NI/RoI*

As shown in Table 1, males and females were similar in their social distancing behaviour when meeting up with friends/family members outside their household/support bubble, although female respondents engaged in social distancing slightly less often (21.2% vs. 24%).

Similarly, as demonstrated in Table 2, slightly less females reported that they had been trying to maintain a distance during in-person with people outside their household/support bubble (11.8% vs. 4%). However, males tended to report stronger responses in both directions i.e. *strongly* agree or *strongly* disagree that they have been maintaining a distance during in-person contact with people outside their household/support bubble.

**Table 1.** Responses to the question “when you meet up with friends or family outside your household/support bubble, how often do you keep your distance from them?”

	Overall (%)	Male (%)	Female (%)
Always	22.9	24.0	21.1*
Most of the time	36.2	36.0	36.8
About half the time	13.3	12.0	14.5
Sometimes	23.8	24.0	23.7
Never	3.8	4.0	3.9

Note. Asterisk denotes % of interest

**Table 2.** Responses to the statement “In the last month, I have been keeping my distance from others outside my household/support bubble as much as possible”

	Overall (%)	Male (%)	Female (%)
Strongly agree	38.1	44*	35.5
Agree	39.0	28	43.4
Neither agree nor disagree	9.5	16	7.9
Disagree	9.5	4	11.8*
Strongly disagree	3.8	8*	1.3

Note. Asterisk denotes % of interest

### *Social contact with relatives outside household/support bubble*

The data in Table 3 suggests that a greater number of females met up with at least 2 relatives from outside their household/support bubble on a weekly basis, however these contacts generally do not surpass four unique contacts per week (38.2% vs. 12%). On the other hand, a greater number of males reported one of two extremes i.e. they did not meet up with *any* relatives from outside their household/support bubble on a weekly basis (56% vs 40.8%) or that they met up with *more than five* relatives each week (8% vs 1.3%).

Furthermore, a greater percentage of females than males reported that this contact with relatives outside their household/support bubble changed ‘occasionally’ and *to a lesser extent* ‘frequently’ each week (38.1% vs. 25%) (Table 4). As suggested in Table 5, females reported that they most frequently met up with these relatives inside a house (47.9% vs. 29.2%), while a greater number of males more frequently met up with these relatives in a park/public place (29.2% vs. 13.7%).

**Table 3.** Responses to the statement “How many relatives from outside your household/support bubble do you see “in person” at least once a week?”

	Overall (%)	Male (%)	Female (%)
0	44.8	56*	40.8
1	21.0	24	19.7
2	19.0	4	23.7*
3-4	12.4	8	14.5*
5-8	1.9	4*	1.3
9+	1.0	4*	0

Note. Asterisk denotes % of interest

**Table 4.** Responses to the statement “Do these in person contacts with relatives typically change from week to week?”

	Overall (%)	Male (%)	Female (%)
Frequently (I see different relative(s) each week)	1.9	0	2.6*
Occasionally (I mostly see the same relative(s) but it sometimes changes)	31.7	25	35.5*

Never (always see the same relative(s))	66.3	75	61.8
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Note. Asterisk denotes % of interest

**Table 5.** Responses to the statement “Where do these “in person” contacts with relatives mostly take place?”

	Overall (%)	Male (%)	Female (%)
Inside a house	17.7	29.2	47.9*
Other indoor locations	2.1	4.2	1.4
In a garden	6.3	12.5	20.5
In a park or other public place	57.3	29.2*	13.7
Other	16.7	25	16.4

Note. Asterisk denotes % of interest

#### *Social contact with friends outside household/support bubble*

Similar to the pattern observed with relatives, Table 6 shows that a greater number of females met up with at least 2 friends from outside their household/support bubble on a weekly basis, however these contacts generally do not surpass 4 unique contacts per week (38.1% vs. 20%). Whereas, a greater number of males reported one of two extremes i.e. they did not meet up with *any* friends from outside their household/support bubble on a weekly basis (40% vs 32.9%) or that they met up with *more than five* friends each week (12% vs 3.9%) (Table 6).

Furthermore, a greater percentage of males than females reported that this contact with friends outside their household/support bubble changed ‘frequently’ (12% vs 8.2%). Whereas more females reported that contact with friends changed occasionally (42.5% vs 36%) (Table 7). Comparable to the pattern seen with relatives, females reported that they most frequently met up with these friends inside a house (20.6% vs 12.5%), while a greater number of males more frequently met up with these friends in a park/public place (52.9% vs 70.8%) (Table 8). In fact, males reported that they seldom met with friends indoors (house or other venue) or private gardens (12.5% vs 32.3%).

**Table 6.** Responses to the statement “Considering your friends (including those in your neighbourhood), How many of your friends from outside your household/support bubble do you see “in person” at least once a week?”

	Overall (%)	Male (%)	Female (%)
0	35.2	40*	32.9
1	25.7	28	25
2	18.1	16	19.7*
3-4	15.2	4	18.4*
5-8	4.8	8*	3.9
9+	1	4*	0

Note. Asterisk denotes % of interest

**Table 7.** Responses to the statement “Do these “in person” contacts with friends typically change from week to week?”

	Overall (%)	Male (%)	Female (%)
Frequently (I see different friends each week)	8.8	12*	8.2
Occasionally (mostly I see the same friend(s) but sometimes it changes)	40.2	36	42.5*
Never (always see the same friends)	51	52	49.3

Note. Asterisk denotes % of interest

**Table 8.** Responses to the statement “Where do these “in person” contacts with friends mostly take place?”

	Overall (%)	Male (%)	Female (%)
Inside a house	17.7	12.5	20.6*
Other indoor locations	2.1	0	2.9
In a garden	6.3	0	8.8
In a park or other public place	57.3	70.8*	52.9
Other	16.7	16.7	14.7

Note. Asterisk denotes % of interest

*Perceived challenges of maintaining transmission-preventative behaviour for young people/adults*

Table 9 captures circumstances when it is most challenging to maintain a physical distance relatives/friends outside household/support bubble in order of most to least commonly reported. The top two most challenging situations reported were when in person contact is with close family members (22.9%) or close friends (18.4%). Although times when individuals are feeling sad (11.7%) or at the point of leaving (11.7%) were identified as most challenging, however to a lesser extent.

**Table 9.** Responses to the statement “When do you find it most challenging to keep a distance when meeting family and friends outside your household/support bubble?”

	Overall (%)
when these “in person” contacts are with close family members e.g parents, siblings, kids	22.9
when these “in person” contacts are with close friends	18.4
when I am feeling sad	11.7
when these “in person” contacts are with my partner (girlfriend/boyfriend)	11.7
when I am saying goodbye to these individuals (the point before leaving)	11.7
when I am meeting up with these individual (initial greetings)	9.9
other scenario	8.5
when I am feeling happy	4.0
when those in my company are not keeping a distance from me/others	1.3

Note. Asterisk denotes % of interest

In response to the open-ended question “From your perspective what are the main challenges of sticking to the guidelines regarding wearing a face covering and physical distancing?” three themes extracted provide useful insights into perceived behavioural barriers for young people/adults. As captured in Table 10, the most commonly reported concern centred on the challenge of other people not social distancing and/or not wearing a mask or when others lacked acceptance/understanding of the need to maintain such behaviour when appropriate.

Another commonly reported concern was the challenge of maintaining a distance and/or wearing a mask in certain situations. Examples of this include circumstances when there is insufficient space to maintain an appropriate distance, contexts where social norms do not favour these behaviours, and when contact is with close persons e.g. family/friends.

The third most commonly reported concern was the perceived physical and psychological challenge of long-term social distancing and mask-wearing. In particular, respondents discussed the physical impact of long-term mask wearing on skin health and the psychological impact of long-term social distancing on relationships and communication (which masks also further strained).

**Table 10.** Themes capturing perceived barriers to maintaining transmission-preventative behaviour for young people/adults from NI/RoI

<b>Themes</b>	<b>Subthemes</b>	<b>Sample comments</b>
<b>‘Divergent actions/perceptions of others’</b> (52 comments)	Others not following guidelines	<i>“when other people wear masks or come too close in shops/ work” (P.2)</i>
	Others not believing in the need to maintain behaviours	<i>“Turning down hugs/visits from friends and relatives who do not want to respect the guidelines. Making them understand it is because I want to protect my loved ones.” (P.7)</i>
<b>‘Maintaining behaviour depends on the context’</b> (49 comments)	Difficult to wear a mask/distance in certain places/situations	<i>“I currently work in a small area and it’s hard to keep my distance from my coworkers. They also don’t tend to wear face coverings and will only put it on if I ask them to as I will wear one.” (P.66)</i>
	Keeping a distance can be challenging depending on the company	<i>“Distancing yourself from those you care most about. Close friends and family is the most difficult to distance from and wear a mask too.” (P.53)</i>
<b>‘Physical and psychosocial challenges of maintaining behaviour’</b> (45 comments)	Physical discomfort of masks	<i>“I do stick to the guidelines but wearing the facemasks for long periods in work has caused a significant amount of acne and scarring, I therefore wear them for as short a period as I can. Also communication issues when wearing masks.” (P.61)</i>
	Social and emotional impact of maintaining behaviour	<i>“With physical distancing, the challenges mainly come with activities with friends, (eg sport, bowling, swimming, even getting coffee), with empathy, with kids and youth work, with making friends at uni etc. It is difficult to get to know people from a distance.” (P.51)</i>

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