

SPI-B insights on public gatherings

Date: 12 March 2020

- SAGE has asked its subgroups to reconsider advice on public gatherings, including risk to individuals and the impact of restricting gatherings on UK epidemic evolution.
- SPI-B cannot comment on the impact of gatherings on disease transmission. In this report, we list behavioural factors to weigh-up when making decisions. In particular, we reiterate our point from 4 March that, if a decision is made not to ban or discourage public gatherings, a clear explanation should be given to the public.
- We continue to have very limited data on the psychological or behavioural aspects of banning or discouraging public gatherings in this context. Our comments are largely based on expert opinion and should be evaluated with this caveat in mind.

Public expectations

- In our report to SAGE on 4 March, we noted that:

“Expectations of how the Government will react will be set by media reports of public health strategies in other countries. This increases the risk of public concern if interventions that are perceived to be effective are not applied. A clear explanation as to why expected interventions are not being implemented may be necessary. Data from the Department of Health and Social Care [DHSC] weekly polling suggest that this may be particularly true for banning mass gatherings”
- Since then, public gatherings have been banned or discouraged to varying degrees in multiple European countries [1]. This has received substantial attention in the UK press.
- DHSC have been conducting weekly polling of approximately 2,000 people since early in the outbreak. Since 10 February, surveys have asked respondents to state whether they agree or disagree that keeping away from crowded places generally is a good way to prevent the spread of coronavirus. The most recent survey (9 to 11 March) suggested that 73% of respondents agree with the statement. This proportion has risen since our last report to SAGE.
- In a YouGov survey of 1,618 people in the UK (28 Feb to 1 March), 36% reported thinking that the UK Government should “Cancel large sporting events, concerts or other large events” [2]. A separate UK survey at around the same time (n=2,031, 27-29 Feb) found that 22% felt the Government should cancel the Euros 2020 football tournament [3]. Note that these surveys are now somewhat dated. Sentiment is likely to change as media reporting changes, and as fatalities mount.
- Acting in a way that does not meet expectations poses a risk that a section of the public will view Government actions as incompetent or not in the public’s best interests. It may also be taken as signifying that the situation is not expected to be severe for the UK. This could have knock-on implications for public attitudes to other recommendations made by Government.

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- In our report of 25 February on the risk of public disorder, we noted that the risk of public disorder would be higher if there was a perception that the Government's response was not competent.
- We reiterate our point from 4 March that, if a decision is made not to ban or discourage public gatherings, a clear explanation should be given to the public.

Perceived legitimacy

- We have previously noted that if a decision to prevent or discourage public gatherings is made, it will be important to clearly communicate the legitimacy of / reasoning for this intervention. Interventions that are disruptive and are not seen as legitimate may increase levels of dissatisfaction among those affected.
- The polling referred to above [2,3] suggests that a large section of the public do not believe that such interventions are necessary.

Impact of not discouraging mass gatherings, while encouraging isolation

- On 4 March, we noted that:

“SPI-B have divergent opinions on the impact of not applying widescale social isolation at the same time as recommending [protective] isolation to at-risk groups. One view is that explaining that healthy members of the community are building some immunity will make this acceptable. Another view is that recommending isolation to only one section of society risks causing discontent.”

This position has not changed.

Displacement of activity

- We have previously noted that there is a risk that cancellation of some large events may result in displacement of the activity to other venues. For example, holding a football match behind closed doors may lead fans to congregate in pubs or houses rather than at a stadium. We defer to modelling colleagues as to whether this increases or decreases risk.
- In our 4 March report, we highlighted the risk that applying multiple interventions concurrently (including the suspension of public gatherings such as football matches or restrictions of pubs or restaurants) could have complex and unforeseen effects, including the displacement of social activities to other venues. This would require careful management to avoid confrontation or community tension. This point still stands.

Perceived equity

- We previously advised that policy makers should be alert to unintended community tension that could arise if specific types of public gathering are discouraged or banned. We gave the example of large gatherings (pop concerts, football matches) vs small gatherings (theatre, tennis matches).
- We also advised that policy makers should be aware that ambiguity or loop-holes in advice about public gatherings could give rise to tension, for example if small businesses are seen to be particularly affected.
- Our advice to be alert to how different policies may be perceived or affect different sections of society still stands.

Social distancing addendum to 12 March report

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Following yesterday's decision by COBR, the two questions many members of the public have are:

1. "Will reducing my social contacts limit my risk" and
2. "Why is the Government not recommending specific social distancing measures when other countries are."

Both are legitimate questions.

With regards to the first, the answer from both modelling reports circulated on 12 March appears to be "yes." Government should therefore communicate this, and help members of the public make rational decisions to manage their personal risk. While there may be concerns about the sustainability of adherence for difficult behaviours such as entering isolation for weeks or months, it is not clear that these concerns apply to the specific context of making day-to-day adjustments to reduce social contact. We are concerned that our comments about the difficulty of maintaining behaviours should not be used as a reason for not communicating with the public about the efficacy of the behaviours.

With regards to the second question, SPI-B has pointed out repeatedly that trust will be lost in sections of the public if measures witnessed in other countries are not adopted in the UK and that not pursuing such routes needs to be well explained. Communications is not within SPI-B's remit, but this point bears repeating again.

References

1. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/10/coronavirus-several-eu-states-ban-mass-events-after-italian-lockdown>
2. <https://yougov.co.uk/topics/health/articles-reports/2020/03/02/coronavirus-how-britain-reacting>
3. <https://www.brandwatch.com/blog/react-british-uk-public-coronavirus-survey/>