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Compliance with COVID-19 rules on intimate physical contact between households

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Despite concerns about COVID-19 ‘lockdown fatigue’ affecting compliance, most people adhered to the rules on intimate physical contact (ie, sex) between households. Four months after the first lockdown started, ~10% of survey participants in the Natsal-COVID wave 1 study reported sex outside the household in the 4 weeks prior to interview (quasi-representative web panel of 6654 British residents aged 18–59 years; July–August 2020).^{1,2} Those in steady relationships but not living with their partner (7.6% of sample) were most likely to report sex outside the household (56.8% of this group). Qualitative interviews identified careful consideration of risks and benefits, suggesting decisions were not taken lightly.³ One year later—when indoor mixing was again largely prohibited—we found a small increase in reporting sex outside the household (12.2% (95% CI 11.3% to 13.1%) compared with 9.9% (9.1% to 10.6%)), but associations by age and other characteristics remained stable (Natsal-COVID wave 2; 6658 residents aged 18–59 years; March–April 2021) (figure 1).⁴

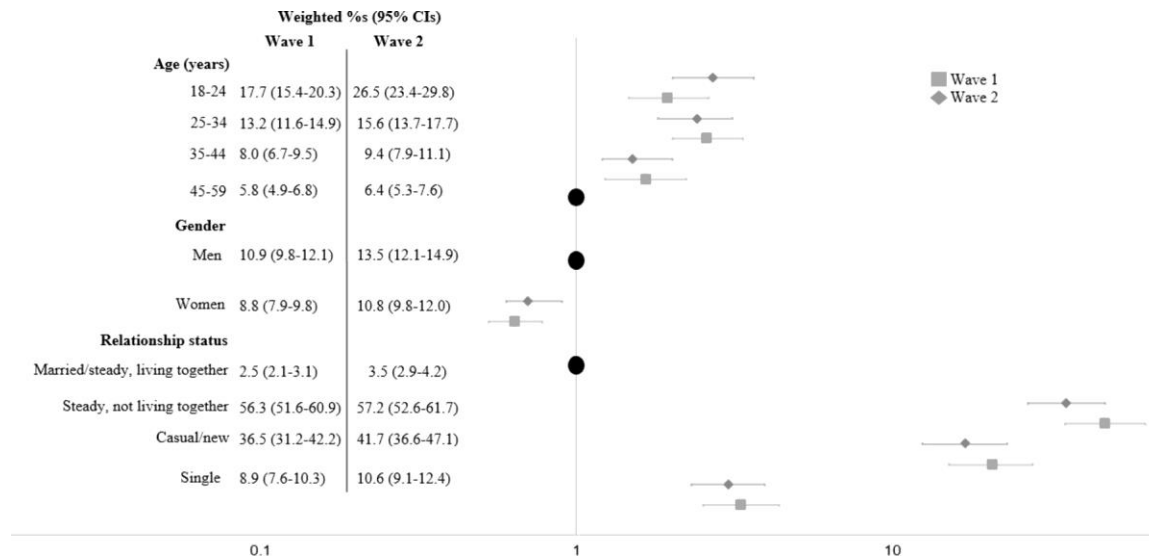


Figure 1: Adjusted odds ratios for reporting sex outside the household for Wave 1 and Wave 2 of the Natsal-COVID study, with corresponding weighted percentages and 95% confidence intervals.

Ethics statements

Patient consent for publication

Not required.

Ethics approval

This study involves human participants and obtained ethical approval from the University of Glasgow (20019174) and the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine (LSHTM) (22565). Participants gave informed consent to participate in the study before taking part.

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Footnotes

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Contributors: The paper was conceived by DM, PS, CHM, KM and NF. Statistical analysis was done by DM with input from MW. DM and NF wrote the first draft with further contributions from PS, CHM and KM. PS and CHM are principal investigators (PIs) on Natsal, while NF and KM are PIs on Natsal-COVID. NF is responsible for overall content as the guarantor.

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