

Trust in government and others during the COVID-19 pandemic

Initial findings from the COVID-19 Survey
in Five National Longitudinal Studies

By Sam Parsons and Richard D. Wiggins

Access the survey data

The COVID-19 survey data analysed in this briefing have been de-identified and are available for researchers. To download the data (SN: 8658), visit the UK Data Service website (ukdataservice.ac.uk).

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This briefing is one of a series produced by the Centre for Longitudinal Studies in collaboration with the MRC Unit for Lifelong Health and Ageing (LHA) using data from the [COVID-19 Survey in Five National Longitudinal Studies](#).

Acknowledgements

This work was supported by the Economic and Social Research Council under the Centre for Longitudinal Studies, Resource Centre 2015-20, grant number ES/M001660/1, and by the Medical Research Council, grant MC_UU_00019/1.

We are extremely grateful to all the members of our studies for their contribution to this special COVID-19 survey and for their ongoing participation in our studies.

Citation

Parsons, S., and Wiggins, R.D. (2020) *Trust in government and others during the COVID-19 pandemic - Initial findings from the COVID-19 Survey in Five National Longitudinal Studies*. London: UCL Centre for Longitudinal Studies.

Published by the UCL Centre for Longitudinal Studies, October 2020

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Executive Summary

Trust in government, and in others, during the lockdown in May 2020

- There were much higher average levels of 'trust in others', than 'trust in the government', expressed across all generations taking part in the survey. On a scale from 0-10, the average rating of trust in government given was between 5-6, and the average level of trust in others was between 7-7.5 across the different generations taking part.
- Across generations, it was the older generations, currently aged 74, 62, and 50, who exhibited the highest average levels of trust both in government and in others, compared to 30- and 19-year-olds. Among the two younger cohorts surveyed, it was 30-year-old millennials who were the least trusting, both in government and in others.
- Younger Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) participants, aged 19 and 30, exhibited much lower levels of trust in government and in others than their White counterparts. The contrast between BAME and White respondents in trust in others is less pronounced in 30-year-olds but is quite evident among the 19-year-olds.

Change in trust from before the lockdown, to during

- A majority of respondents reported no change in their level of trust in the Government (54-60% depending on cohort) or in others in their local area (60-75% depending on cohort) in May during lockdown, compared to how much trust they had just before the coronavirus outbreak in March 2020.
- However, among the notable minority who had changed their level of trust in government, in all generations there were many more who reported a decrease

in trust in government than an increase. This was most marked in the two younger generations (aged 19 and 30) where around double the number of respondents reported a reduction in trust compared to an increase.

- Among those who changed their assessment of trust in government, in the younger generations (aged 19 and 30) BAME respondents were more likely than their White counterparts to express 'less' trust.
- Among those changing their level of trust in others, change was more frequently in a positive direction: greater numbers reported more trust than less trust in others in their local area, across all generations.

Compliance in social distancing guidelines

- People in all generations reported remarkably high levels of compliance with social distancing guidelines in May. The average self-rated compliance was 9.3 for age 74, 9.4 for age 62, 9.2 for age 50, 9.1 for age 30 and 8.9 for age 19 (on a scale ranging from 0-10, where 0 was not at all compliant and 10 was completely compliant).
- Women were more likely than men to report they had been completely compliant in all but the youngest generation, and older women were the most likely of all to report they had been completely compliant: 77% age 74; 70% age 62.

About the survey

This briefing is based on data from a web survey of over 18,000 people, collected between 2 and 31 May 2020. The survey participants and their families are members of five nationally representative cohort studies that have been collecting data since childhood. These were:

- The [Millennium Cohort Study](#) (MCS), born in 2000-02, part of 'Generation Z'. They have been followed since birth and were age 19 at the time of the survey;
- [Next Steps](#), who were born in 1989-90, so-called 'Millennials'. They have been followed since adolescence and are now age 30;
- [1970 British Cohort Study](#) (BCS70) who were born in 1970, part of 'Generation X'. They have been followed since birth and are now age 50;
- [National Child Development Study](#) (NCDS) who were born in 1958, into the later part of the 'baby boomers' generation. They have been followed since birth and are now age 62;
- [National Study of Health and Development Study](#) (NSHD) who were born in 1946, at the start of the 'baby boomers' generation. They have been followed since birth and are now age 74.

The survey was designed to help researchers understand the economic, health and social consequences of the coronavirus outbreak, to give a unique insight into how people's experiences during the pandemic vary depending on their earlier lives, and to be able to track the impact into the future.

The questionnaire covered a range of topics and also included an open question, which allowed participants to express in their own words the main ways the coronavirus outbreak has affected their lives.

Introduction

This study focuses on the concept of trust and compliance: trust in government, trust in others and compliance with the Government's social distancing guidelines during the COVID-19 pandemic for five distinct British cohorts born in 1946, 1958, 1970, 1989-90, and 2000-02. The concept of trust is multi-layered^{1,2} and we recognise that where government is the object of trust it may also cover trust in the Prime Minister, the cabinet, or politicians in general or the role of government advisors.

Equally, trust in others can have different meanings for different people and is likely to include a specific person or persons, family, friends and/or neighbours, depending on how 'others' is interpreted by the respondent. Put another way, having effective social ties can help create a sense of 'trustworthiness' and mutual obligation towards others as a dimension of social capital.^{3,4}

This analysis refers to a period of time covering most of the month of May 2020, several weeks into national 'lockdown', and beginning just days after the UK Statistics Authority Chief rebuked the Health Secretary for inadequate data on tests⁵, a change of governmental advice from 'stay at home' to 'stay alert'⁶ and ending within days of breaking news about Dominic Cummings' trips to Durham during

¹ Bovens, M & Wille, A. (2013). Falling or fluctuating trust level? The case of the Netherlands. Chapter 3 in [political trust: why context matters](#) eds. Zmerli, S. and Hooghe, M. ECPRE Press, University of Essex, UK.

² Calman, M, Williams, S.J. & Gabe, J. (2020). [Uncertain Times: trust matters during the pandemic](#). Discover Society. Social Research Publications.

³ Giddens, A. and Sutton, P.W. (2013) [Sociology](#), 7th Edition, Polity Press

⁴ Misztal, B., (1996), [Trust in Modern Societies](#), Oxford, Blackwell.

⁵ Fletcher, M. (2020). [Chronicle of incompetence](#). [Anatomy of a crisis](#), pp. 25-30, 3-9 July New Statesman.

⁶ Sullivan, R. (2020). The Independent, [Coronavirus: Timeline as UK reaches 100 days in lockdown](#), 30 June 2020.

lockdown^{7,8,9}. Research has shown how levels of trust have changed in the UK following country specific government advice and lockdown easing measures, and that there was a steep decline in trust following the failure of Dominic Cummings to justify his trip and for the Government to ask for his resignation, particularly in England, with differences in levels of trust between the UK countries widening¹⁰.

⁷ itvNews.(2020) [Dominic Cummings' Durham trip: Timeline of events as minister resigns over No 10 response](#), 26 May 2020.

⁸ Sullivan, R. (2020). The Independent, [Coronavirus: Timeline as UK reaches 100 days in lockdown](#), 30 June 2020.

⁹ Rutter, J. (2020) [Remembering the kindness of strangers: Division, unity and social connection during and beyond COVID-19](#). *British Future*, Editor, Steve Ballinger.

¹⁰ Fancourt, D., Steptoe, A. & Wright, L. (2020). [The Cummings effect: politics, trust, and behaviours during the COVID-19 pandemic](#). *The Lancet, Correspondence*. Published online August 6, 2020.

Methods

There are five outcome measures in this analysis: two capture levels of trust where both assessments are based on a subjective positioning of trust in British governments or others on an 11-point visual analogue scale, where 0 indicates no trust at all and 10 represents complete trust. A further two examine how reported levels of trust changed during the first two months of lockdown. The final outcome concentrates on compliance with the Government's social distancing guidelines, with assessment again based on a subjective positioning along an 11-point visual analogue scale. Question wording is given below in Box 1.

Box 1: Questions on trust and compliance

Levels of trust

On a scale from 0-10 where 0 means you are 'not at all trusting' and 10 means you are 'extremely trusting', how trusting are you that British Governments, of any party, place the needs of the nation above the needs of their own political party? (TRUSTPOLP)

On a scale from 0-10 where 0 means you are 'not at all trusting' of other people and 10 means you are 'extremely trusting' of other people, how trusting of other people would you say you are? (TRUST)

Change in trust

Since the Coronavirus outbreak please indicate how the following have changed.

The amount of trust I have in the Government (CVDCHNG2)

The amount of trust I have in people in my local area (CVDCHNG3)

Answer categories: 1=More than before; 2=Same - no change; 3=Less than before

Compliance

The next question is about the extent to which you are complying with the social distancing guidelines issued by the Government. On a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 means that you are 'not complying at all' and 10 means you are 'fully complying', how much would you say you are complying with the guidelines? (COMPLIANC)

Socio-demographic comparisons are made using binary contrasts based on biological sex, social class and highest level of qualification attained. Social class is captured from parental occupation when study members in all generations were aged 10 or 11. For the youngest generation (MCS), highest qualification refers to their parents' qualifications, as at 19 they have not yet achieved their highest qualification. Ethnic comparisons are provided for the youngest two cohort groups only, since it is only in these cohorts that there are reasonable sub-sample sizes for exploring minority ethnic group differences in trust and compliance, and the

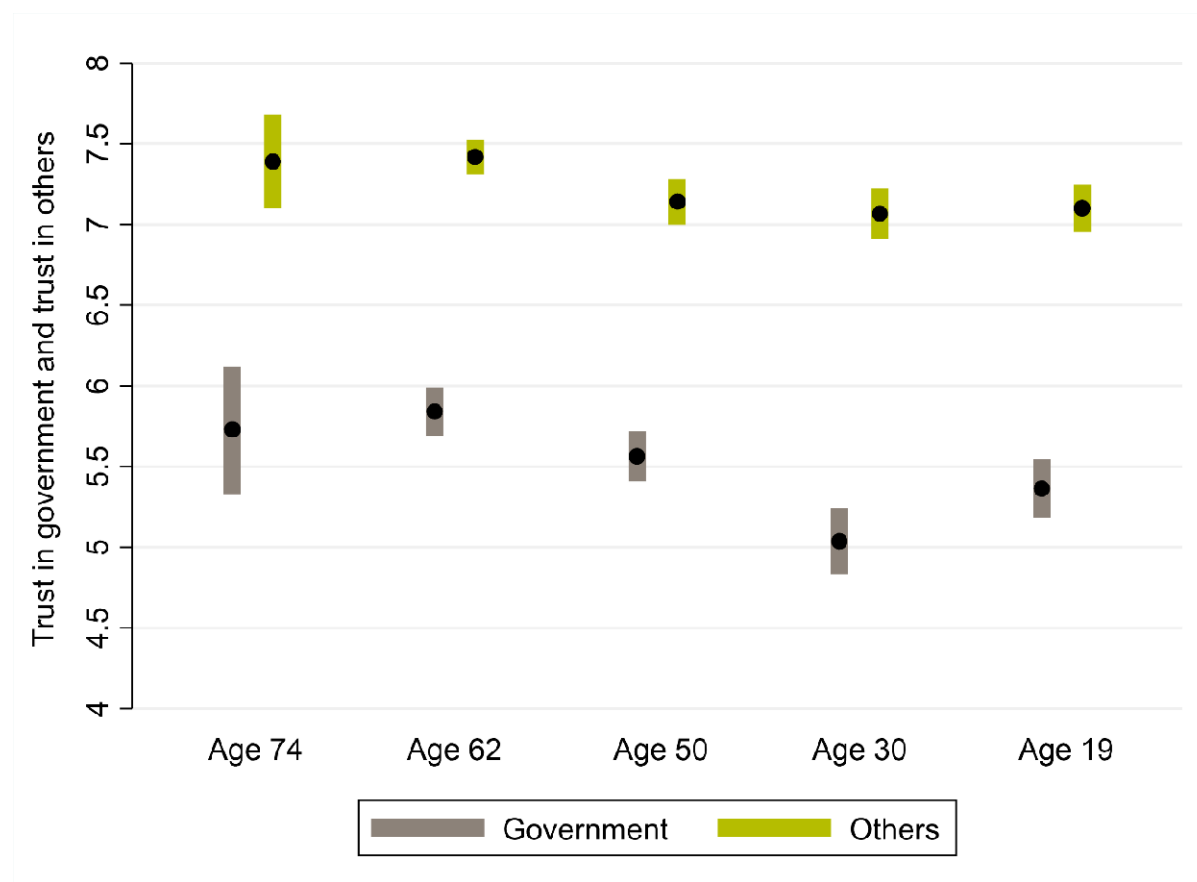
comparison is limited to the categories Black and Asian Minority Ethnic (BAME) and White for these individuals.

Results

Trust: an overview

During the lockdown in May, people reported higher levels of trust in others than trust in government, with average levels of trust in government at around 5-6 (on a 0-10 scale) and average levels of trust in others around 7-7.5 (the range showing lowest and highest average trust levels by generation). There was a difference of 2-points in average trust in government and trust in others, which was fairly consistent across each generation surveyed.

Figure 1: Trust in government and trust in others: mean scores (0-10) by cohort



Note: Mean scores based on weighted survey responses, the bars (whiskers) reflect 95% confidence intervals

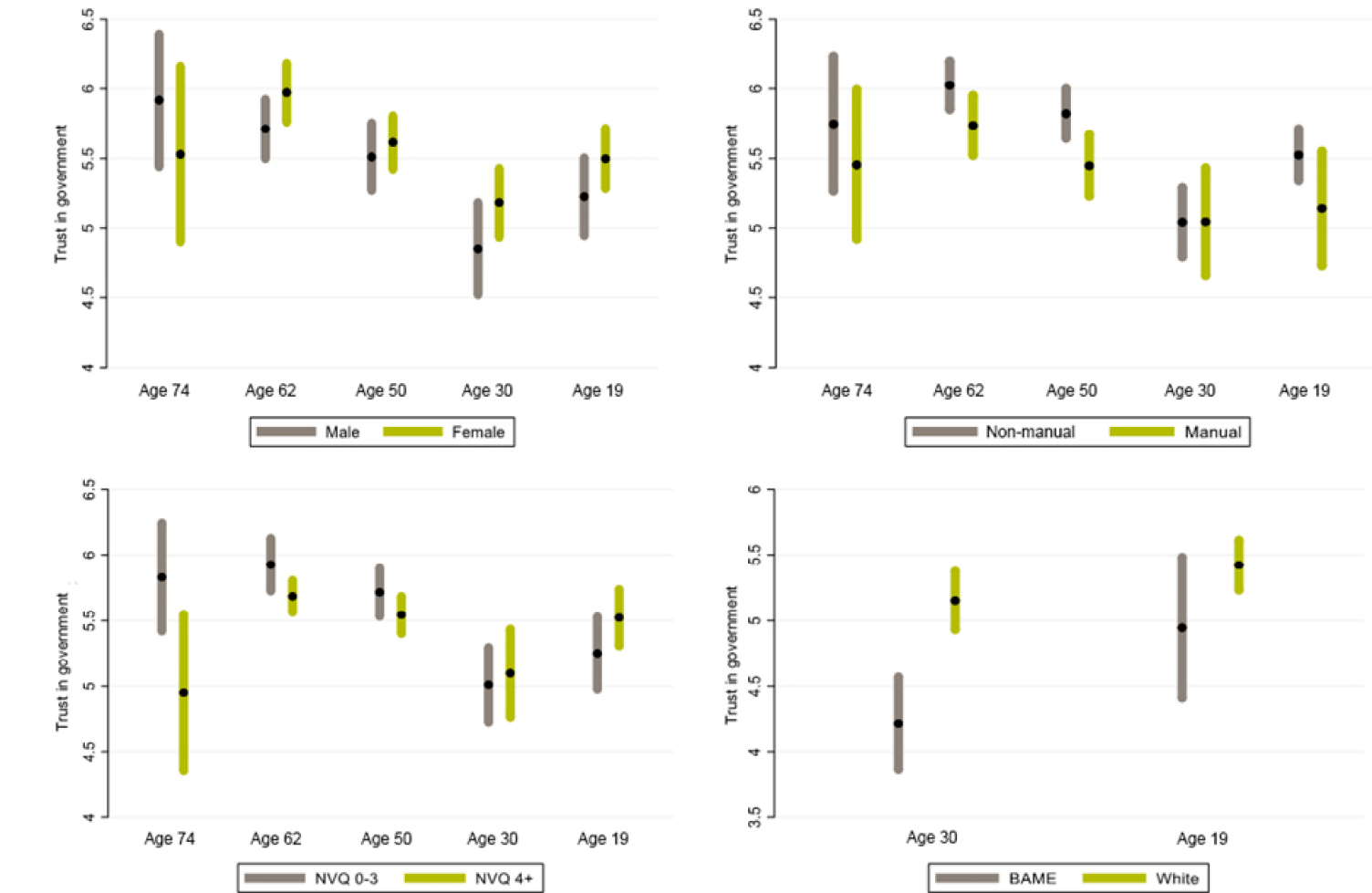
Trust in government

Members of the three older generations surveyed (ages 74, 62 and 50) reported the highest levels of trust in government in contrast to their younger counterparts (ages 30 and 19). The 30-year-olds reported the lowest average trust levels.

For the younger two cohorts, the sample numbers permit an analysis by broad ethnic groups. BAME cohort members, ages 30 and 19, exhibited much lower average levels of trust in government than their White counterparts.

Average trust in government did not differ by gender or social class, although women in their 60s and 50s tended to have higher average scores for trust in government compared to men. The more educated members of the older cohorts (ages 74, 62 and 50) had less trust in the Government than their less educated counterparts, and the small number of respondents with a degree or higher (NVQ 4+ equivalent qualification) in the oldest cohort (age 74) reported the lowest level of trust in government in any cohort. For those aged 30 or 19, the direction of this difference was reversed.

Figure 2: Trust in government: mean scores (0-10) by socio-demographic characteristics



Note: Mean scores based on weighted survey responses, the bars (whiskers) reflect 95% confidence intervals

Trust in others

As shown in Figure 1, expressions of trust in others follows a similar pattern to trust in governments, with the older two cohorts having slightly higher scores than the younger cohorts.

The more highly educated have higher levels of trust scores in each generation and these differences approach statistical significance for 62- and 50-year olds.

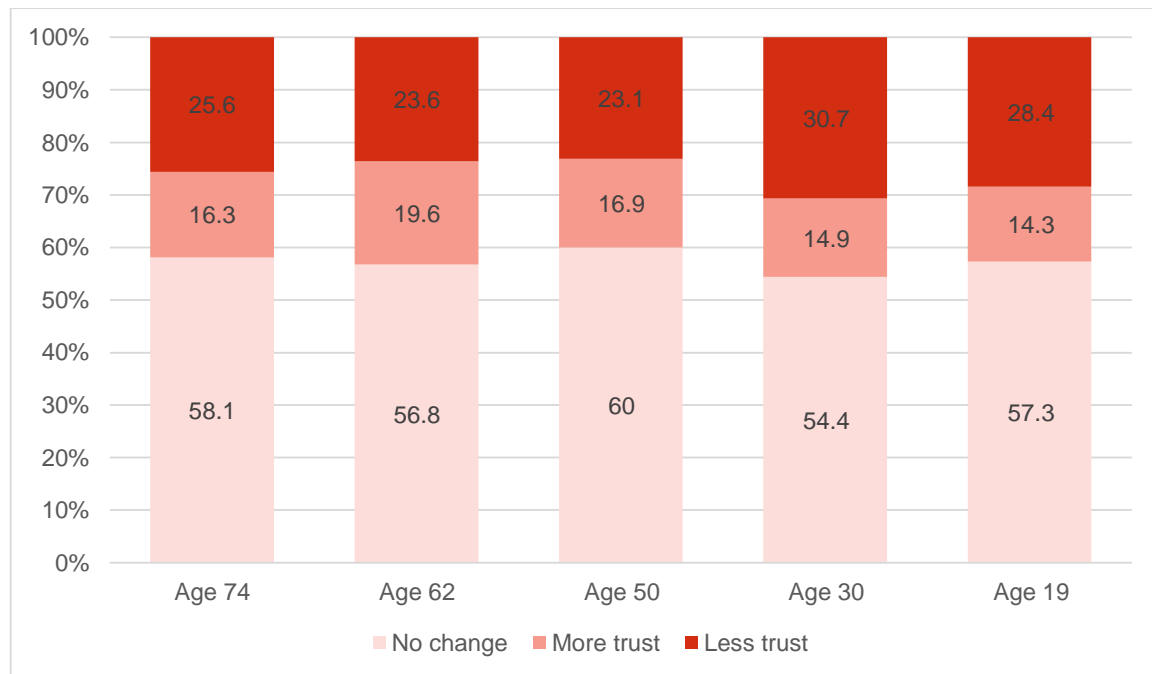
Interestingly, those from manual working-class backgrounds now aged 62 and 50 have a slightly higher trust score in others compared to those from non-manual backgrounds; this difference is reversed in the three younger cohorts.

In contrast to the findings for political trust in government, when it comes to trust in others, there is little difference in mean trust scores between BAME and White respondents among 30-year-olds. BAME 19-year-olds have much lower scores than their White counterparts although differences do not differ significantly due to relatively small sample sizes.

Change in trust in government

We now turn our attention to how reported levels of trust changed over time. A majority of respondents reported no change (between 54-60% across the generations) in their trust of the Government since the outbreak of COVID-19 in March until the survey was completed in May. However, among the notable minority who changed their level of trust (between 40-46% across the generations), Figure 3 shows that there were many more people in all generations who reported a decline in trust in government than those who reported an increase.

Figure 3: Change in trust in government by cohort

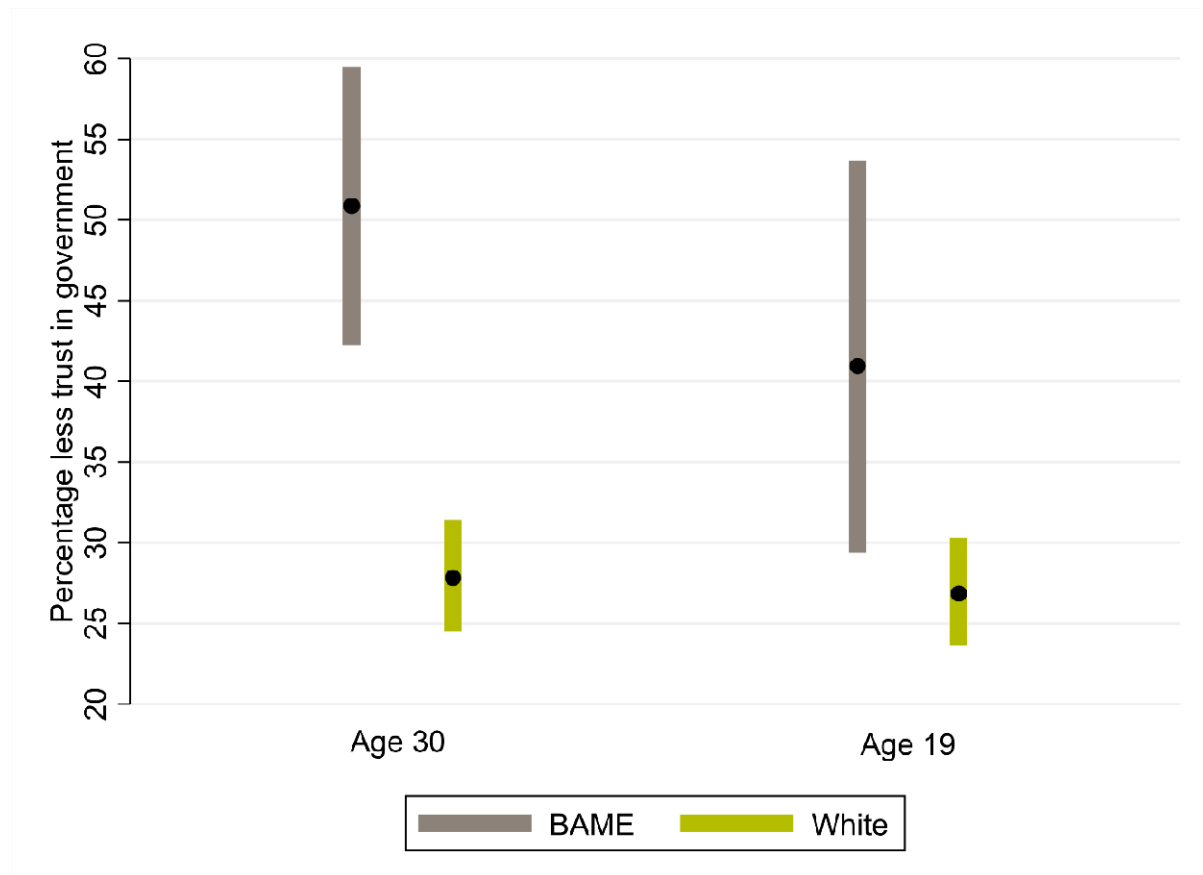


Note: Percentage based on weighted survey responses.

To show the general direction of change, we calculate the ratio of those who reported more trust compared to those who reported their trust had reduced, within population groups. Among the younger generations (ages 19 and 30) more than twice as many reported a reduction in trust in government, than reported an increase (ratio <0.5), whereas in the older three generations (ages 50, 62, and 74) the ratio was somewhat closer to balanced between those reporting more and less trust in government.

Although there were few differences by sex, class and education to report in any generation, among the younger generations, the changing evaluations of trust were marked by ethnicity. Among BAME 30- and 19-year-olds, 51% and 41% respectively reported less trust in the Government from just before the lockdown to during lockdown in May, compared with 28% of White 30-year-olds and 27% of White 19-year-olds. Similarly, 16% and 15% of White respondents reported more trust, whereas this was just 5% and 7% among BAME respondents.

Figure 4: Percentage less trust in government by ethnicity



Note: Percentage based on weighted survey responses; the bars (whiskers) reflect 95% confidence intervals using the Agresti-Coull method.

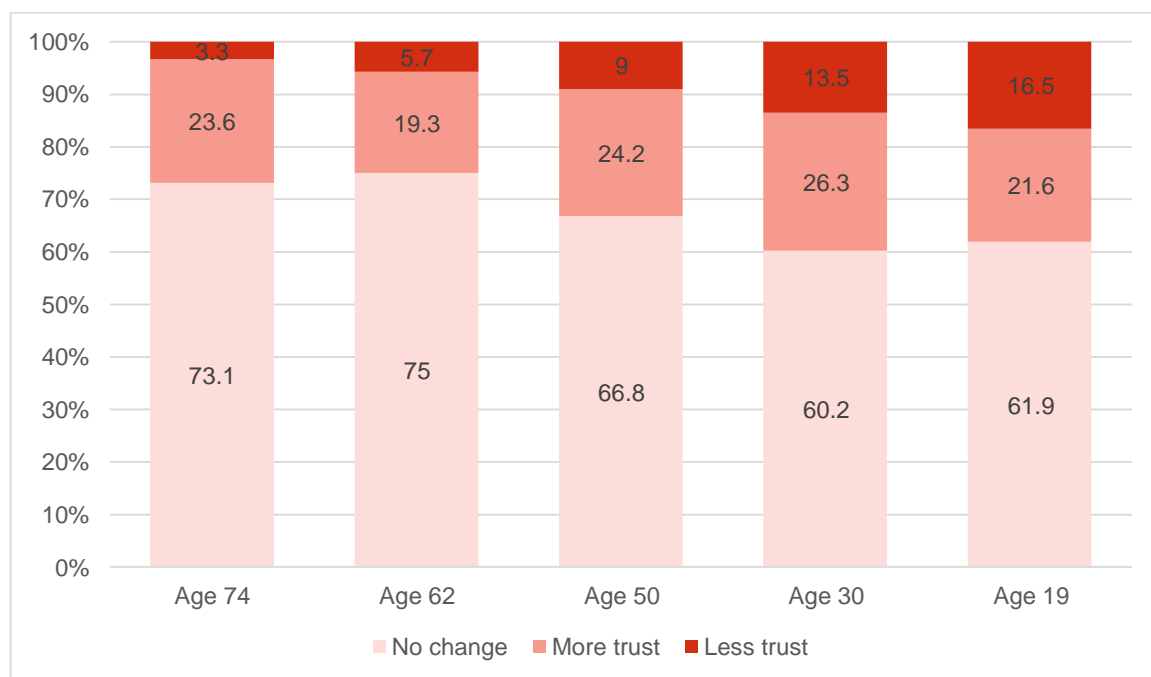
Change in trust in others in local area

The proportion of respondents reporting no change in their trust towards others in their local area, between the outbreak in March and when surveyed during the lockdown in May, is high across all generations (60-75%).

For those who did report change, unlike for trust in government, much more change was reported in the positive direction ('more trust' in people in the local area) than the negative direction ('less trust'). However, figure 5 shows that where there is change, change to having less trust is increasingly evident as the age of the cohort decreases. We again calculated the ratio of those who reported more trust in others compared to those who reported their trust in others had reduced. Among the older

generations these are between 4:1 (age 50) and 6:1 (ages 74 and 62), although this finding is less strong among the younger cohorts around 2:1 (age 30) and 3:2 (age 19).

Figure 5: Change in trust in others in local area by cohort



Note: Percentage based on weighted survey responses.

Those increasing their trust were more likely to be more educated and from non-manual backgrounds (apart from among 74-year-olds where there was no discernible difference between the classes). Slightly higher percentages of White respondents than BAME respondents reported having less trust in others than they did before lockdown: 14% compared to 10% of 30-year-olds, 18% compared to 10% of 19-year-olds). Apart from this, there were no other differences by ethnic group.

Compliance with social distancing

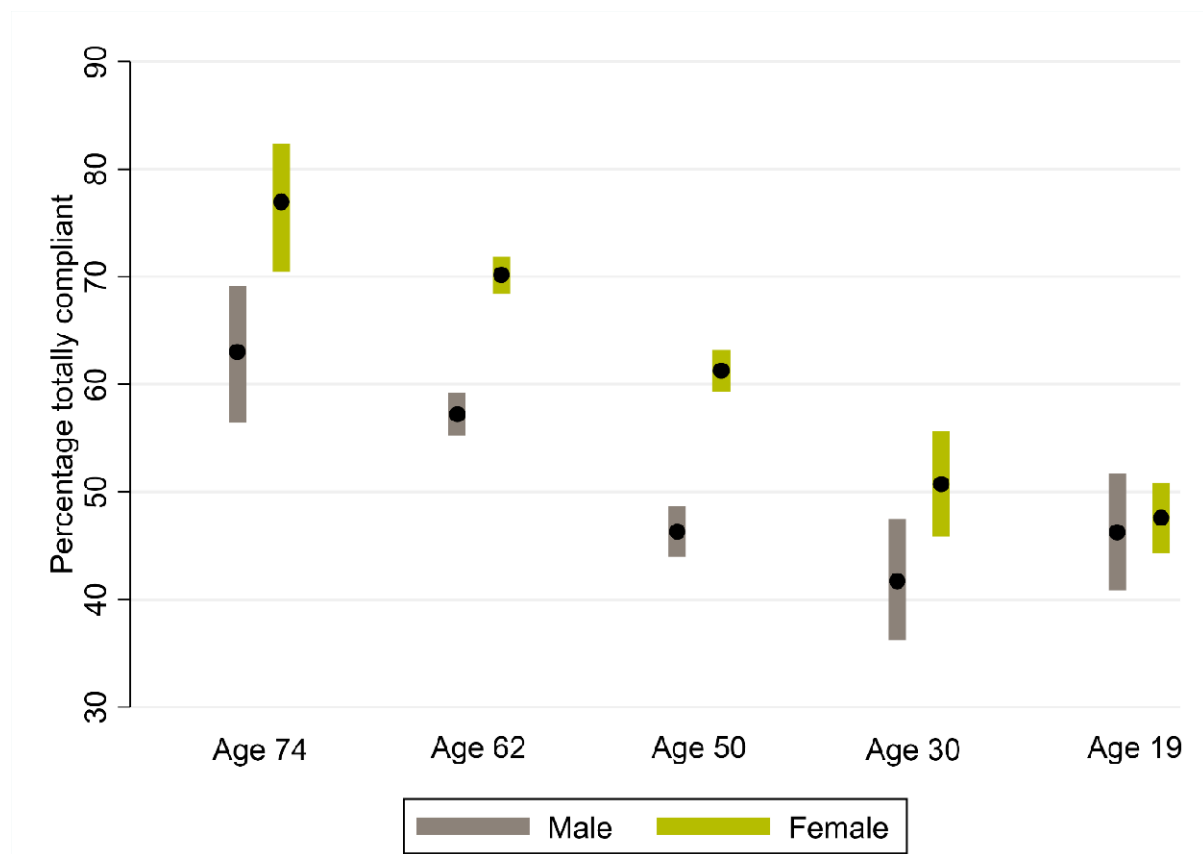
People in all generations were remarkably compliant with social distancing guidelines during the time period covered by our survey (2-31 May 2020). Across all studies, more than half of all respondents reported they were completely compliant,

scoring themselves 10 on a scale from 0-10. Average scores were above 9 among the older cohorts and only drop slightly below 9 points for those aged 30 and 19. Women had higher compliance scores than men in all studies, significantly so among those aged 62, 50 and 30. Average scores by class and ethnicity did not differ much at all. However, patterns in the data suggested that the more educated respondents were, on average, more compliant with social distancing guidelines than those with fewer qualifications. This was most marked among those aged 74.

Complete compliance

Around two-thirds of 62- and 74-year olds reported they were completely compliant, compared with around one half of the members of the three younger cohorts. This overall pattern was replicated across class and education levels in all cohorts. Older women (ages 62 and 74) were the most likely to report they were completely compliant – over 70% compared to between 57% and 60% of men in these age groups. This gender gap was also evident among those aged 50 and 30 but was hardly evident among the youngest respondents (age 19). The differences in complete compliance by ethnicity were almost negligible for 30-year-olds (45% BAME to 47% White) but were slightly more pronounced among 19-year-olds (54% to 46%).

Figure 6: Percentage completely compliant by cohort

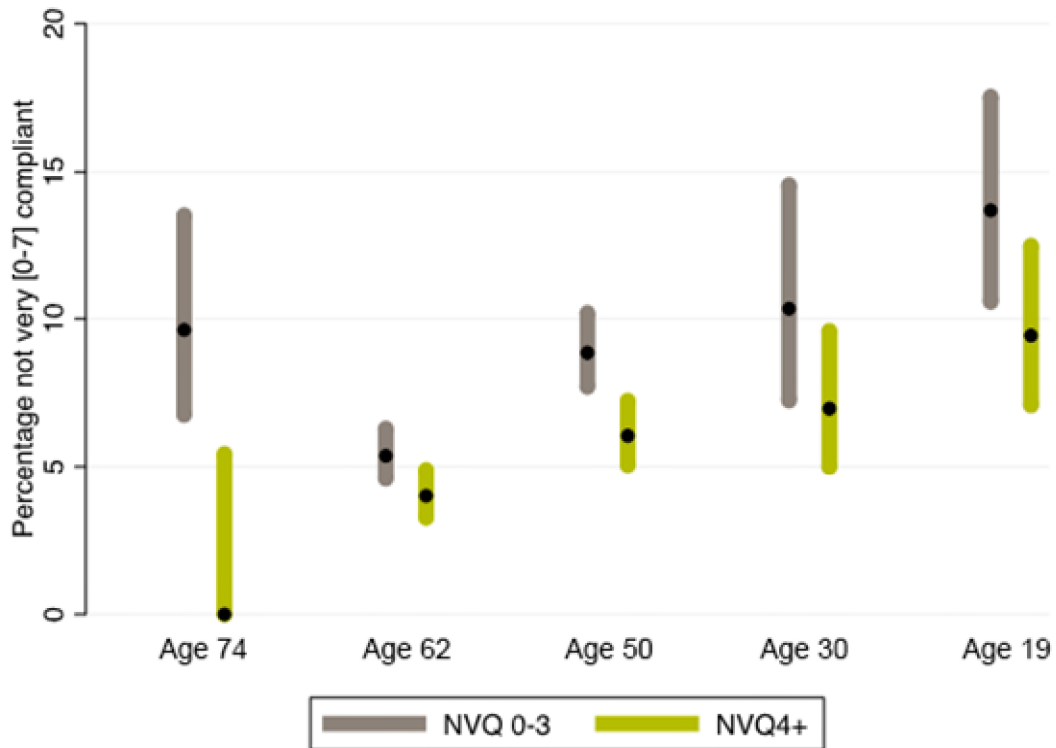


Note: Percentage based on weighted survey responses; the bars (whiskers) reflect 95% confidence intervals using the Agresti-Coull method

Low compliance

Given the very high levels of complete compliance with the social distancing guidelines shown in all studies, we calculated low compliance as being those scoring 7 or less. This ranged between 1 in 20 (62-year-olds) and 1 in 8 (19-year-olds). Men were more likely than women to have low compliance scores (this was significantly so across all cohorts apart from the youngest). Those who had low compliance tended to be those with fewer qualifications and those from a manual background. Indeed, no 74-year-olds with higher qualifications reported low compliance. BAME cohort members tended to report higher levels of low compliance (12-16%) compared to their White counterparts (9-11%).

Figure 7: Percentage not very compliant by highest qualification level



Note: Percentage based on weighted survey responses; the bars (whiskers) reflect 95% confidence intervals using the Agresti-Coull method

Conclusion

The population's expression of trust is not a given. Trust has to be earned. In times of a public health emergency, an individual's evaluation of trust will be influenced by their faith in the evidence as presented and managed by government as well as their trust in one another to adhere to the rules governing their behaviour¹¹. All five cohorts (ages 19, 30, 50, 62 and 74 during the COVID-19 pandemic in May) report higher levels of trust in others than in the government, and a significant minority of respondents in all generations had changed their evaluation of trust in both government and others around them. For these respondents the direction of change moved in opposite directions. People of all ages were more likely to trust people in their area and less likely to trust the Government, compared to before the pandemic. Older respondents across the five cohorts were more likely to be trusting of government and others to begin with, and a bigger percentage reported an increase in trust in those around them since the lockdown than reported an increase in trust in government. This is quite possibly as friends and neighbours act positively to support one another over time whereas the actions of government in managing the crisis received a mixed evaluation.

The older generation are more likely to divide in their evaluations according to traditional lines of gender and education where women and the less educated are likely to be more trusting both of government and others. Where differences emerge, it is among the younger cohorts, who are typically less committed to trusting government and notably so among BAME groups. Despite this, people were remarkably compliant to social distancing measures in May. However, only time will tell how strongly people will adhere to policy responses in the future.

Our story will continue with the release of a second round of this web survey in late 2020 and a third in early 2021. We may well find that the pleasing overall compliance to social distancing among members of the five studies begins to falter as people

¹¹ Patel, R. (2020). [Removing the pump handle- stewarding data at times of public health emergency](#). Rethinking Data Programme. Nuffield Foundation.

doubt the competence of government to handle the pandemic as more recent evidence suggests^{12 13 14}.

¹² Duffy, B. (2020). [Coronavirus fallout: blame, trust and the future of the UK](#). The Policy Institute, King's College London and Ipsos MORI. Report published 28 July 2020.

¹³ Fancourt, D., Steptoe, A. & Wright, L. (2020). [The Cummings effect: politics, trust, and behaviours during the COVID-19 pandemic](#). *The Lancet, Correspondence*. Published online August 6, 2020

¹⁴ The Times (2020). ['Another Fine Mess: the government may have had little choice but to conduct a U-turn over exam results, but this fiasco has raised doubts over its competence'](#). Leading Article published 18 August 2020.