

Household composition, couples' relationship quality, and social support during lockdown

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

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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. Afshin Zilanawala was supported by the Economic and Social Research Council grant number ES/R003114/1.

We are very grateful to JD Carpentieri for his thoughtful selection of open text responses, which illustrate in study members' own words some of the quantitative findings presented in this briefing.

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

Zilanawala, A., Chanfreau, J., Sironi, M., and Palma, M. (2020) *Household composition, couples' relationship quality, and social support during lockdown - 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, November 2020

Contents

Executive summary	1
About the survey	2
Introduction	4
Changes to household composition	5
Changes in conflict.....	10
Couples' relationship satisfaction and conflict	12
Social and emotional support during lockdown	16
Conclusions.....	20

Executive summary

- While the majority of respondents reported that their household composition had remained stable, any reported change in living arrangements differed substantially across the cohorts. About two-fifths of 19-year-olds, who were living independently of their parents prior to the COVID-19 outbreak, moved in with their parents (or parents-in-law).
- Nearly one-fifth of the youngest generation reported more conflict with people around them since the outbreak whereas the vast majority (90% or more) of the older generations reported either no change or less conflict. A change in household composition appeared to be related to raised levels of conflict.
- The age 19 cohort was the least likely to be in a romantic relationship and if they were, they had the lowest relationship satisfaction.
- The youngest generations, those from the age 30 and age 19 cohorts, had the highest frequency of reporting more arguments with their partner since before the pandemic. Moreover, more women than men reported an increase in arguments since the start of the pandemic. For the age 62 cohort, in particular, more relationship conflict was reported if they also experienced changes in household composition, compared with cohort members who had stability in their household arrangements.
- Most respondents reported a great deal of perceived social support if they were sick or needed someone to talk to about their problems. Cohort members who were not in a relationship, and particularly among the age 62 cohort, had the least emotional support compared to their peers who were in relationships, irrespective of cohabitation status.

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 2000-2002, part of 'Generation Z'. They have been followed since birth and were age 19 at the time of this survey;
- [Next Steps](#), who were born in 1989-1990, 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.

As part of the survey, response weights were created, and all the results in this briefing have been weighted, so that the results are representative of the full cohort of that age (for further information on weights, see the [survey User Guide](#)).

A number of further research briefings, using the data from the first wave of the COVID-19 survey, can be found [on the CLS website](#).

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has altered almost every aspect of our daily lives. During the national lockdown, the UK Government took far-reaching measures to reduce the spread of the virus, including the closure of restaurants, schools, and non-essential businesses, as well as asking individuals to work at home and avoid meeting people from other households. These sudden changes have raised concerns about the potential strain on families and social relationships due to the limitations to meet and socialise with relatives, friends, and community members. Due to the stay-at-home orders, parents, children, and other family members spent substantially more time at home during the national lockdown than before. For some, the transition to lockdown meant at-home schooling, at-home working, or a combination of both, whereas for others, the pandemic has meant self-isolation. During the lockdown, some workers in the grocery, pharmacy, delivery, and other sectors were deemed 'essential' and, therefore, were on the front lines of the pandemic ensuring that people were able to access their basic needs. Depending on personal circumstances, some individuals have had to move in with older parents and family members, while others have had their adult children 'move back home'.

As a result of these dramatic changes, family members may be more directly exposed to relationship tension and conflict with each other. Couples may have had to unexpectedly alter their living arrangements which in turn may have impacted the quality of their romantic relationships. People living alone may have felt lonelier than ever with the restrictions. Equally, the measures adopted to contain the virus are likely to leave their mark on one's social connections and emotional support.

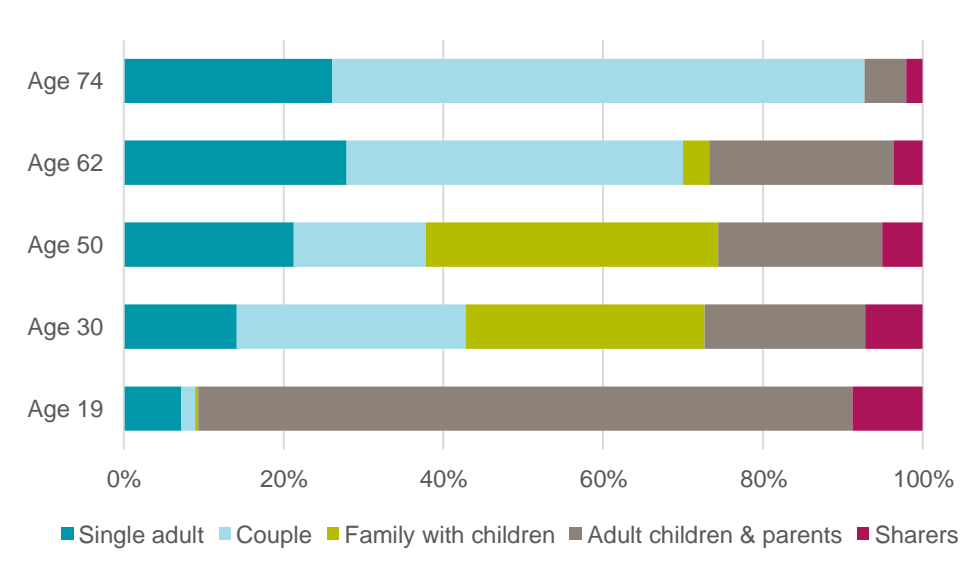
In this exploratory study, we provide descriptive evidence on household composition, couples' relationship quality, and social support during the May 2020 national lockdown in the UK. Specifically, we examined changes in living arrangements, conflicts with people, and relationship satisfaction and conflict among couples. We also considered changes in social connections, emotional support, and practical help among participants.

Changes to household composition

Participants were asked in May to report who they lived with and how this situation had changed since the coronavirus outbreak. Figure 1 summarises the household composition by cohort in our study and Figure 2 summarises the most commonly reported changes to household composition. Among the oldest two cohorts over a quarter of respondents (26% of those aged 74 and 28% of those aged 62) lived alone during the national lockdown. This proportion declined with each subsequent generation; 21% of those aged 50, 14% of those aged 30, and 7% of those aged 19 lived alone.

Living with own dependent children was most common among those aged 50 (37%) and those aged 30 (30%). The vast majority of respondents aged 19 lived with their parents at the time of the survey.

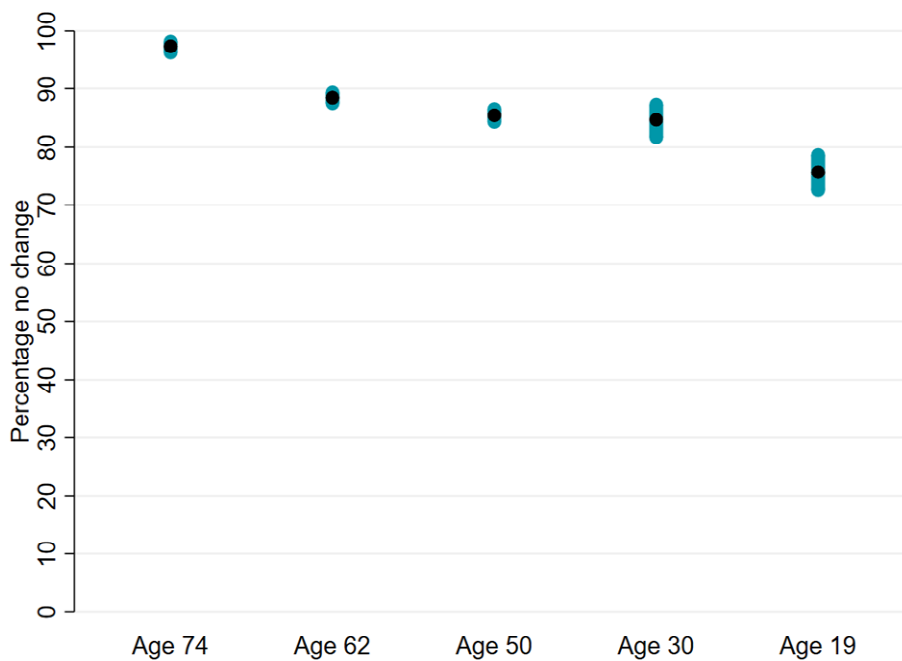
Figure 1: Household composition



Note: Percentages based on weighted survey responses

Respondents reported on the types of moves they or people they lived with had experienced since the coronavirus outbreak. While the majority in each cohort reported that their household composition had remained stable since before the outbreak, such stability differed by age, being most common among the oldest cohort (97%) and lowest among the youngest cohort (76%; Figure 2).

Figure 2: Stability in household composition



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

The most commonly reported change in household living arrangements differed substantially across the cohorts, reflecting the different life course stages of the respondents in these studies. Moving in with one’s parents (or parents-in-law) was unsurprisingly most common among the 19-year-olds, reported by 9% of the cohort overall (compared with about 2% of 30-year-olds and hardly anyone in the other cohorts) (Figure 3b). This represents about two fifths (42%) of 19-year-olds (and 3% of 30-year-olds) who were living independently of their parents prior to the COVID-19 outbreak before moving back home to live with their parent(s) (or moving in with a partner’s parents) (Authors’ calculations).

Additional analysis (not shown), indicated that among those aged 19, moving in with parents is strongly related to being a student. Thus, moving in with parents since the outbreak was reported by 15% of 19-year-olds who reported that their main activity prior to the outbreak was ‘in education at school, college or university’ (compared with 9% overall), and moving in with parents was as high as 60% among students in this age group who were living independently prior to the outbreak (compared with 42% of all living independently). By comparison, among 19-year-olds who reported employment as their main pre-COVID-19 activity, 4% overall and 24% among those

previously living independently reported having moved in with parents (or in-laws) since the outbreak. Relatedly, moving in with parents differed by social class, being more common among respondents whose parents were in non-manual occupations (12% compared with 3% among respondents whose parents were in manual occupations).

For some, moving back home involved a sense of sudden loss of independence and purpose which their studies had provided, and, alongside missing friends and romantic partners, brought with it tensions in the family home. This is summed up by one respondent:

“Before the outbreak I was studying a course I loved in [city], living in a really nice apartment in the same building as my friends and my boyfriend. Since the virus, I've had to move back home to live with my parents it feels like just as I had things together and was feeling really positive, it was taken away.

The main thing I'm struggling with is not seeing my friends and boyfriend especially. We were used to seeing each other every day and now due to being home from uni, live 2 hours apart and haven't seen each other for 2 months. We both miss each other a lot and are really struggling without each other.

I've also had some conflicts with family about the way I've been feeling which has [led] to me feeling alone a lot of the time.” (Female, age 19)

Another 19-year-old respondent remarked on moving back home enabling them to feel closer to family but the distance and lack of physical contact putting a strain on their romantic relationship.

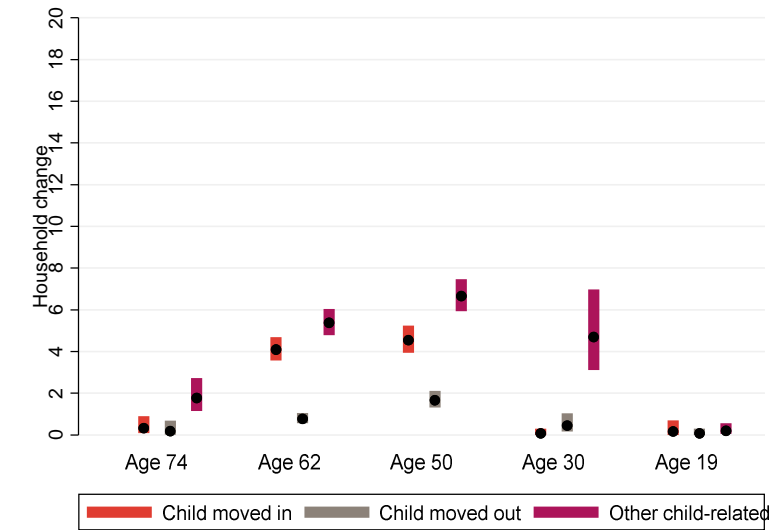
Other common household changes among the youngest two cohorts were moving in together with a partner, reported by 3% of those aged 30 and 2% of those aged 19, and 'other' household changes, reported by 6% and 15% of those aged 30 and 19 years old respectively. The survey did not ask further details of what these 'other' changes were, but they could include a sibling moving in or out of the family home or a housemate moving in or out of shared accommodation.

Changes to household composition related to the respondent's children were most commonly reported by those aged 62 and those aged 50 (Figure 3a). Although children moving out of the parental home since the coronavirus outbreak was a universally rare occurrence, 4% and 5% of respondents aged 62 and 50, respectively, reported that one or more of their children (any age) had moved in with them. Other household changes relating to their children were also reported by respondents aged 62 (5%), 50 (7%) and 30 (5%).

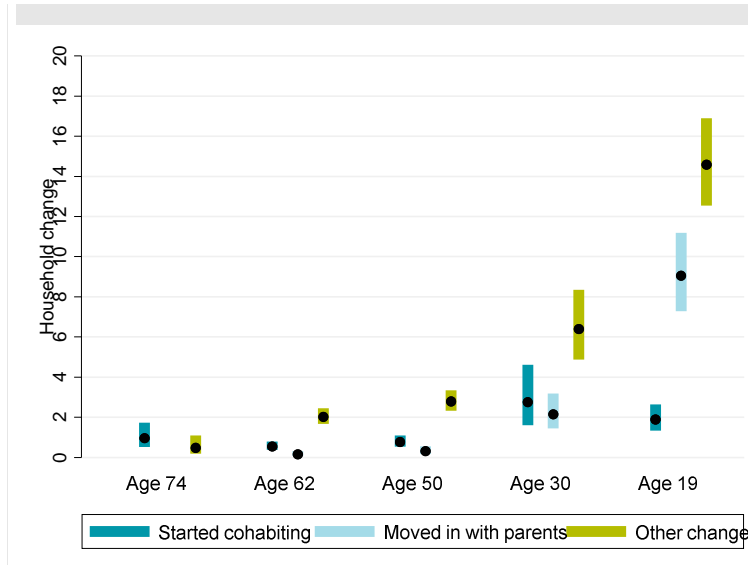
Again, the respondents' reflections in their own words revealed mixed experiences of adult children moving in with them. One 62-year old described having two of their grownup children move back home as "wonderful", with the children undertaking tasks such as doing the shopping to help minimise the parents' exposure to the virus, whereas a 74-year-old respondent described living with an adult child as the most difficult part of lockdown.

Figure 3: Changes to household composition

3a: Changes related to own children



3b: Changes related to other reasons



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

Changes in conflict

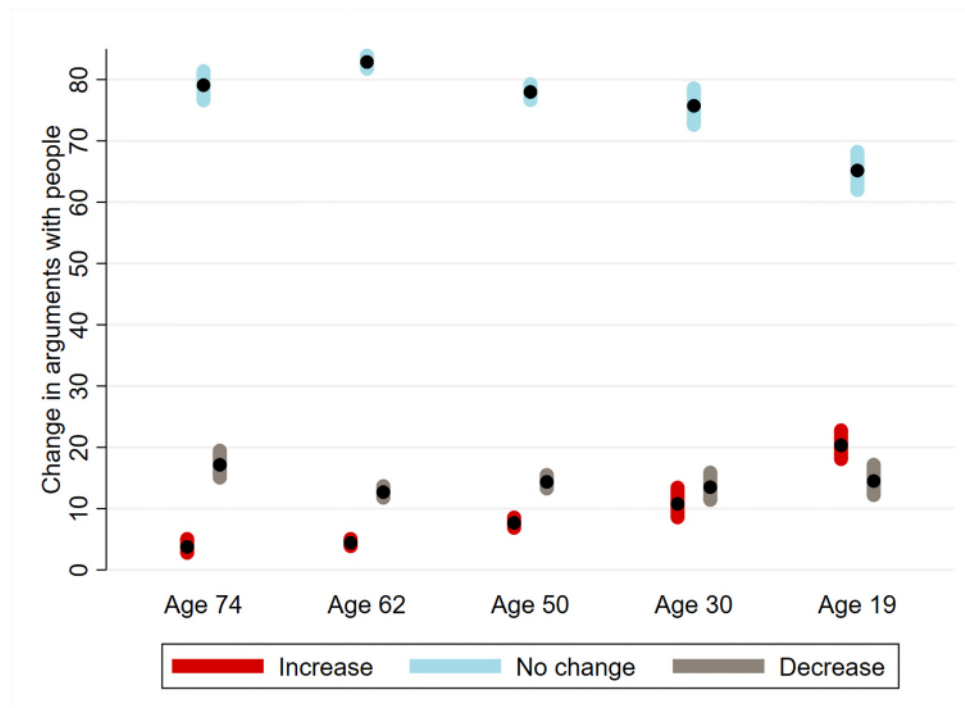
The lockdown conditions can put strains on inter-personal relationships whether or not there has been the upheaval of someone moving in or leaving the household, and all respondents were asked about changes in the amount of conflict with people around them since the outbreak. Specifically, cohort members reported whether they had experienced an increase in conflict, no change, or less conflict than before the outbreak. Figure 4a shows the percentage reporting changes in conflict across the cohort members. Around one-fifth (20.3%) of the youngest generation (age 19) reported more conflict whereas 4% to 11% of all other cohorts reported more conflict since the outbreak. The increase in conflict did not differ substantially by gender or social class (analyses not shown). A decrease in conflict with people around them was most commonly reported by the age 74 cohort (17.1%) compared with 12% to 14% of all other cohorts.

Note that this question is not specifically about change in conflict with family or household members. However, with the exception of those aged 50, the experience of a change in household composition since the outbreak appeared to be associated with raised levels of conflict as shown in Figure 4b. (Due to the small number of respondents aged 74 who experienced a change in household composition, results for this cohort are not shown.)¹

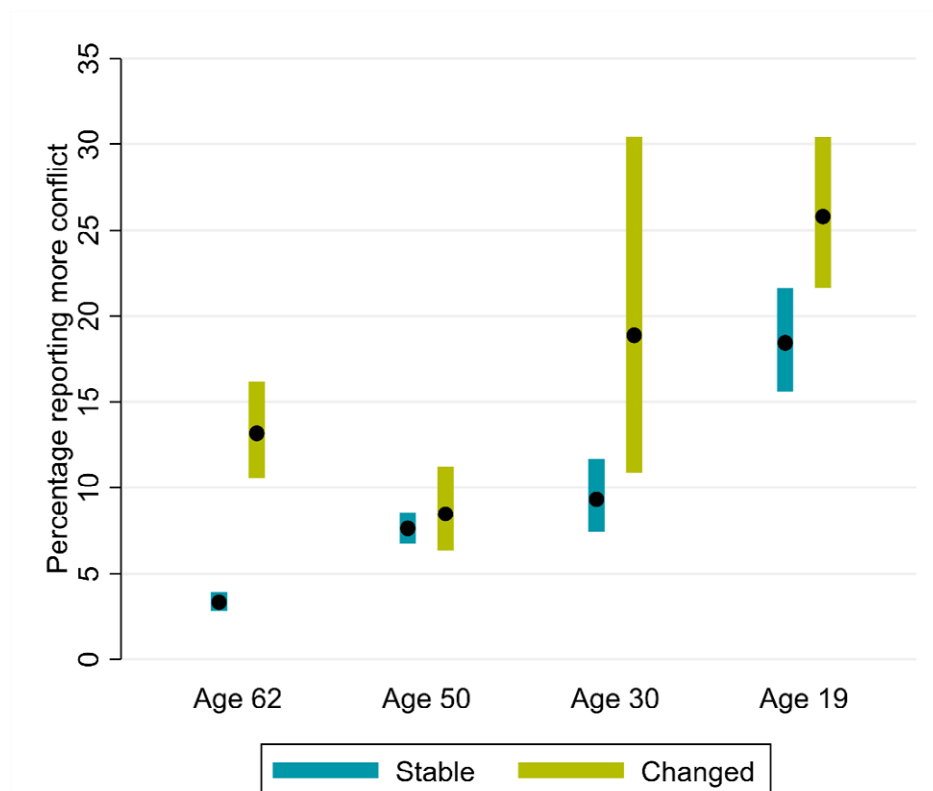
¹ Other research has explored family dynamics and stress following changes in living arrangements. <https://osf.io/preprints/socarxiv/kv8dg/>

Figure 4: Increase in amount of conflict with people since outbreak

4a: All respondents



4b: Increase in conflict by stability of household composition



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

Couples' relationship satisfaction and conflict

The conflicts, demands, and changes resulting from the COVID-19 lockdown may have placed strains on romantic partnerships. We explore the quality of couples' relationships from questions asking about their relationship satisfaction and level of conflict. With the exception of the youngest cohort, more than three quarters of the participants are in a (coresidential or not coresidential) relationship (analyses not shown). In contrast, among those who are 19-years-old, 41% of them are in a relationship.

Participants were asked how happy the relationship with their partner at the moment was, all things considered. The answer could range from 1 ('very unhappy') to 7 ('very happy'). Figure 5 reports the average relationship satisfaction across cohorts and by gender. Relationship satisfaction is highest among those who are aged 74 and slightly declines for younger ages. The lowest relationship satisfaction is reported by those who are 19 years old. Here, it must be borne in mind that the romantic relationships reported by the different age groups are qualitatively very different, as older respondents are much more likely to have been with their partner for years, or even decades. In addition, as discussed earlier, living with one's partner is clearly much more common among the older cohorts and rare among 19-year-olds. Nonetheless, it is worth noting that within each cohort, relationship satisfaction did not differ by whether or not the relationship was coresidential (analysis not shown).

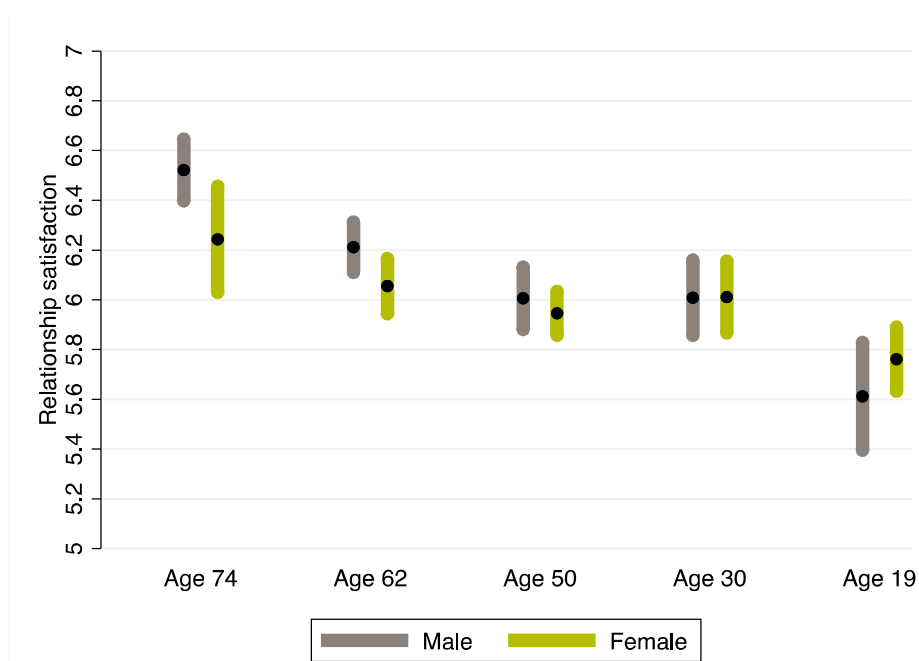
Even though differences are not statistically significant, women report lower relationship satisfaction in the cohorts aged 74, 62 and 50, and higher relationship satisfaction in the 19-year-old cohort. No differences in relationship satisfaction were detected by social class (manual vs. non manual, analyses not shown).

Two female respondents from the age 30 and age 62 cohorts, respectively, reflect on their challenging relationship circumstances:

“It has put immense strain on my home life as I recently split up with my partner and am still having to live with him.”

“It has also made me realise that I am very unhappy in my relationship, and when this is over I plan to go [my own] separate way.”

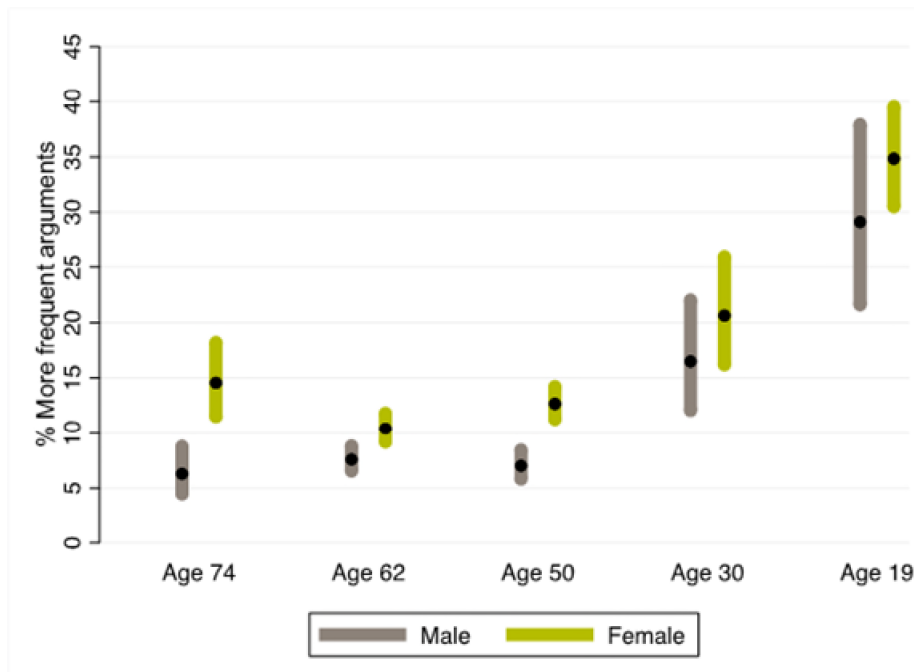
Figure 5: Relationship satisfaction, by gender



Note: Percentages based on weighted survey responses

Participants were asked whether, since the coronavirus outbreak, the amount they have argued with their partner changed. Potential responses included ‘My partner and I have argued more often’, ‘No change – same as before’, or ‘My partner and I have argued less often’. As shown in Figure 5, the proportion of those who reported more arguments with their partner is higher among the age 30 and age 19 cohort. Moreover, more women than men report an increase in arguments since the coronavirus pandemic began, and the gender difference is statistically significant among those aged 74 and 50. There are a number of reasons that might explain the gender differences, such as a difference in willingness to report on conflict, as well as difference in the perception of what constitutes an argument (or a combination of the two). There was little difference in the proportion reporting more frequent arguments with their partner by social class and by whether the respondent lives with children (analyses not shown).

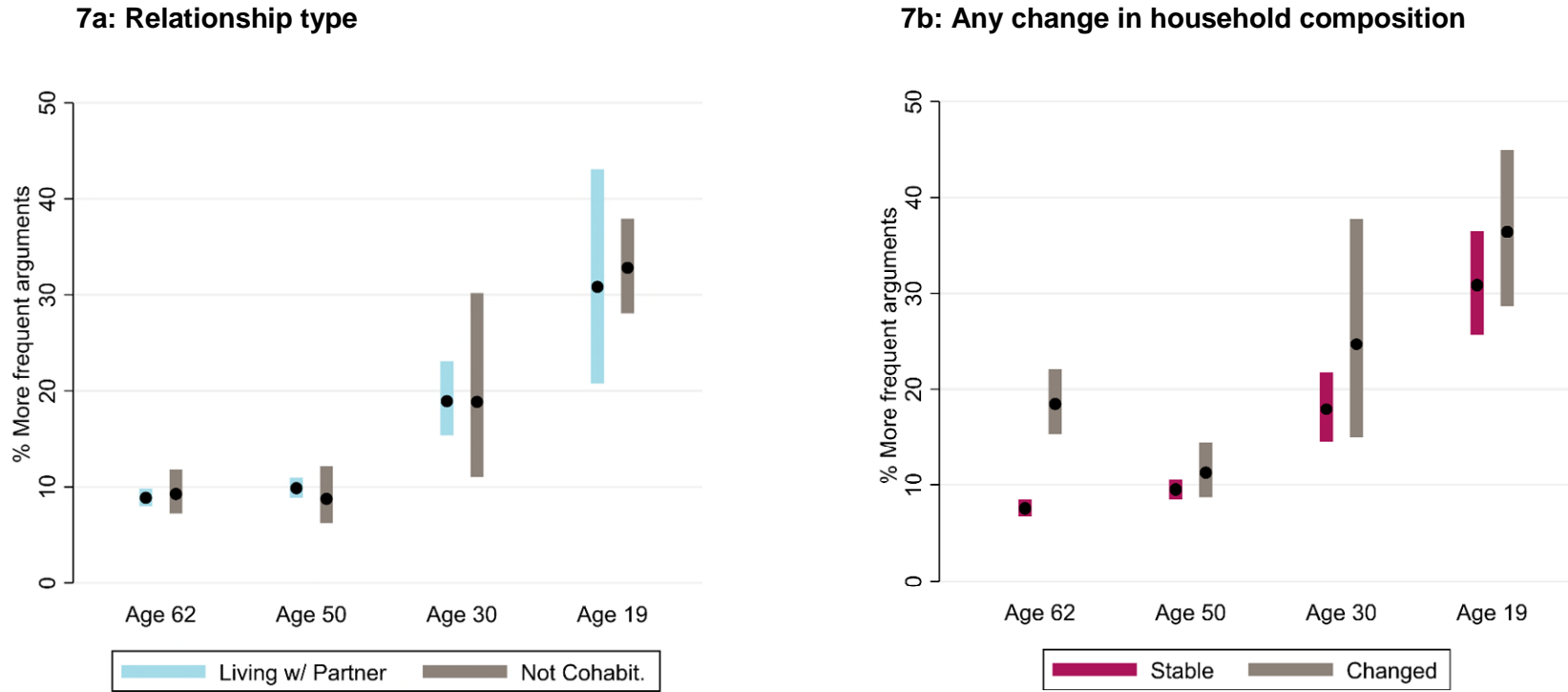
Figure 6: Relationship conflict, by gender



Note: Percentages based on weighted survey responses

Finally, Figure 7 reports the proportion of those who reported an increase in arguments with their partner, considering cohabitation status (Figure 7a) and changes in living arrangements since the coronavirus outbreak (Figure 7b). There were no statistically significant differences in the proportion who reported an increase in arguments, among respondents who live and do not live with their partners. The numbers of those who moved in with their partner since the outbreak are too small to analyse as a separate category. Similar to our earlier results on increase in general conflict (see Figure 4b), cohort members aged 62 experienced more relationship conflict with their partner if they reported changes in household arrangements relative to their peers who had stable household living arrangements.

Figure 7: Relationship conflict, by co-residence and change in household arrangements



Note: Percentages based on weighted survey responses. Due to the small number of cohort members aged 74 who were not cohabiting or who experienced a change in household composition, results are not shown.

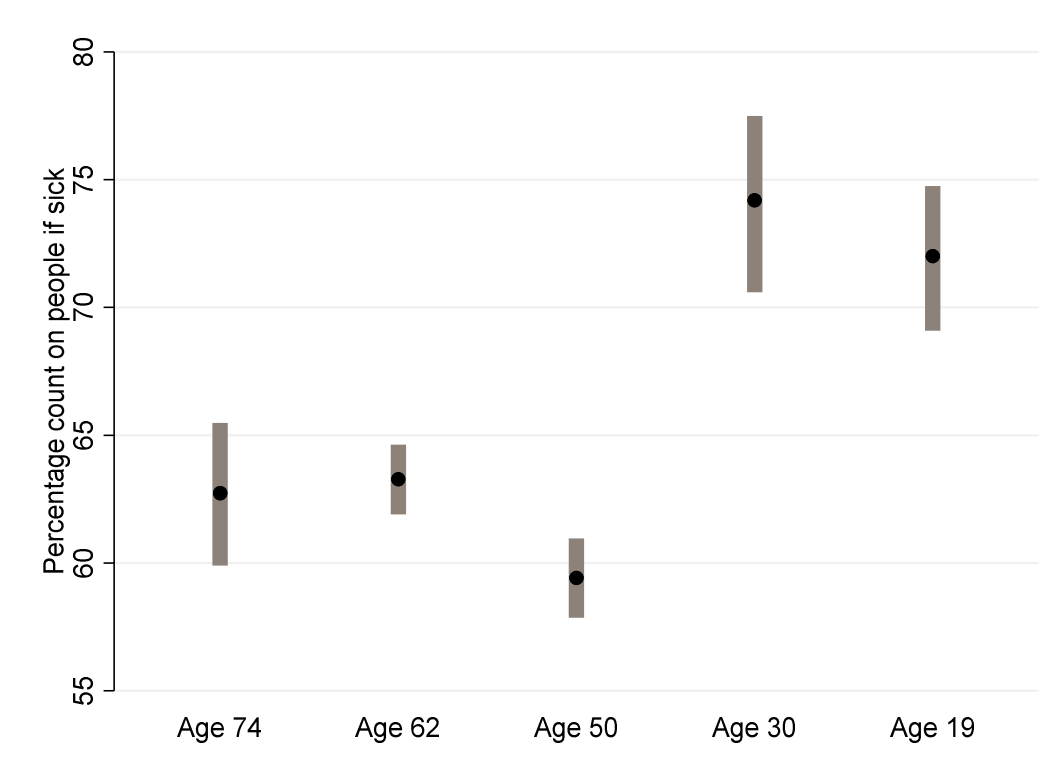
Social and emotional support during lockdown

“The outbreak has affected my life in an immeasurable way, but I am continuing to get through it with the support of my family, friends and flatmate. I am confident that I will remain stable enough until its end.”

The isolation, increased stress and/or conflict that many experienced during lockdown has emphasised the importance and value of having a social support network, as the comment above made by a 19-year-old respondent illustrates.

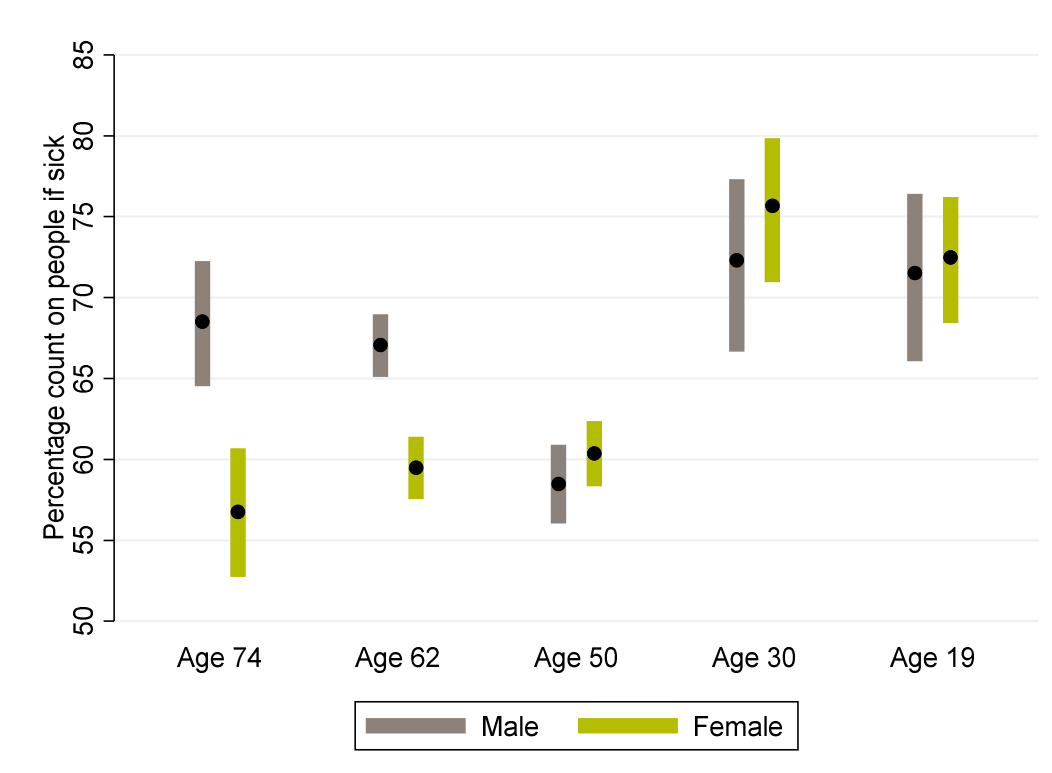
Cohort members were asked a range of questions to assess the extent of social provision from their friends, family members, and broader community. For example, respondents were asked the extent to which they could count on people around them for help if they were sick in bed. Therefore this question is tapping into perceived instrumental support, or the belief that support would be available if needed, rather than received support. Figure 8 displays the proportion of respondents who reported a great deal of perceived support if they were sick versus some, very little, or no support. Although more than half of each cohort reported a great deal of perceived support, the youngest generations (ages 30 and 19) had the most perceived social support (over 70%).

Figure 8: Help if sick



In the oldest cohorts (ages 74 and 62), men report more perceived support if they were sick in bed than women. However, these gender differences converge in the age 50 cohort and there were no statistically significant differences by gender for the younger generations (Figure 9). In analyses not shown, we did not find consistent results in social support by social class.

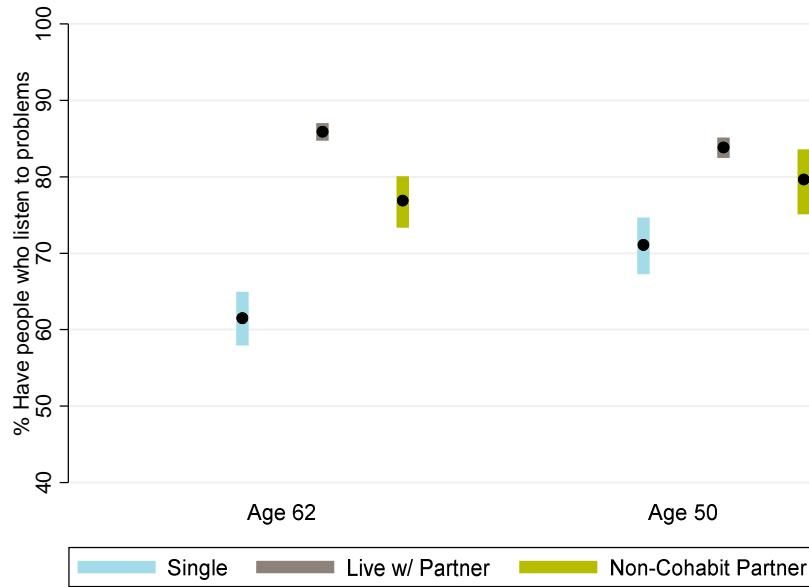
Figure 9. Help if sick, by gender



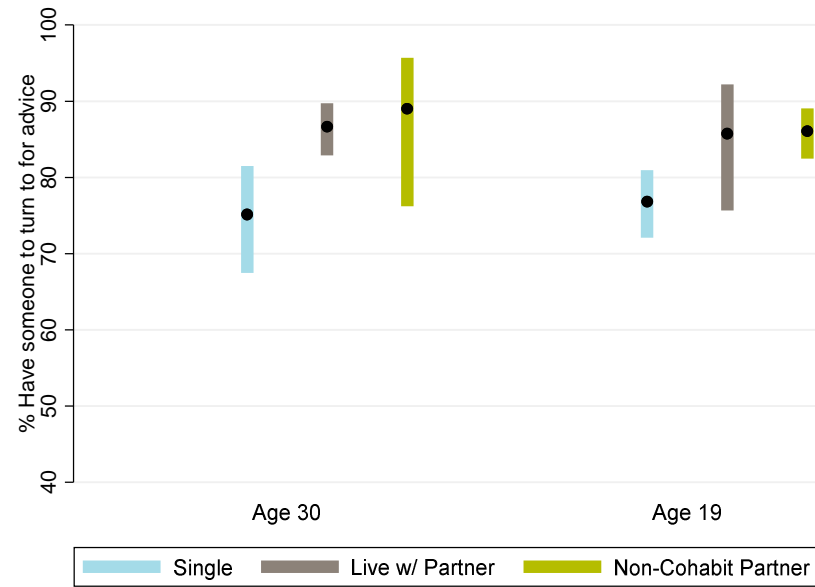
Participants from the youngest cohorts (ages 30 and 19) were asked whether they had people around that helped them feel safe, secure and happy, someone whom they trusted for advice, or someone to whom they felt close. Cohort members aged 62 and 50 were asked to what extent people around them would be willing to listen if they needed to talk about their problems and private feelings. Although we cannot present full cross-cohort comparisons for this series of questions, we did not find meaningful differences between cohorts who were asked the same questions. Nor did we find any systematic differences in gender and social class. However, interesting differences arose when analysing these questions separately by relationship status (Figure 10). In the age 62 cohort, those not in a romantic relationship had the lowest levels of perceived social support, those who are in non-cohabiting relationships had more social support, and respondents in cohabiting relationships had the highest levels. These differences were more stark in the age 62 cohort compared to the age 50 cohort. Moving across the generations, those who were not in a relationship continued to have lower social provision but the differences were not statistically significant. Additionally, the mean differences among those in a relationship, regardless of cohabitation status, converged.

Figure 10: Social support, by cohort

10a: People who listen



10b: Someone to turn to for advice



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

Conclusions

This briefing has described changes in household living arrangements, the changes in the quality of romantic relationships, relationships with family and friends, as well as the extent of social support among four generations during the national lockdown, in May 2020.

Unsurprisingly we found respondents' household compositions across generations were in line with expectations. The oldest cohorts were most likely to live alone or with their partner whereas over 80% of the youngest cohort (age 19) report living with their parents at the time of the survey. Although the majority of each cohort reported no change in their household composition, the most common change, if any reported, among the youngest generation was moving in with one's parents, and among the older generations was related to own children (e.g. children moving in or out). In the age 19 cohort, moving in with parents was most common among students.

The youngest generations, and particularly the age 19 cohort, reported more disharmony in their lives in a number of ways. Nearly one-fifth experienced an increase in the amount of conflict with people around them since the outbreak. This cohort was also the least satisfied with their relationship with their partner and reported more arguments with their partner. However, living with one's partner is clearly much more common among the older cohorts and relatively rare among 19-year-olds. Further analysis needs to account for this differential context of romantic relationships across generations. Further research is also needed to investigate household dynamics as we found changes in household composition to be related to more conflict with people across all cohorts and, among the age 62 cohort, more relationship conflict.

Broadly speaking, our findings suggest cohort members had a great deal of perceived social support. There was little systematic difference by gender and social class within cohort. Emotional support was less commonly reported among cohort members who were not in a relationship, and particularly so for the age 62 cohort, raising concerns about loneliness which should be explored further in future research.