

Changing living arrangements and family conflict in lockdown

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POLICY BRIEFING

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On 23 March 2020, the UK went into lockdown to attempt to limit the spread of coronavirus. School and university closures, the move to remote working, furlough or the loss of employment have all meant that many adult children who had previously left the parental home have returned. Other individuals have moved to provide care and support for a family member or friend who has been 'shielding'. Conversely, some vulnerable and/or older people have moved in with a younger relative or friend. For many families this has been an unexpected change; placing pressure on them to move into close quarters, spending more time together than ever before while adjusting to a change in circumstances and financial resources.

The study uses recently available data from five large scale nationally representative surveys to explore the impact of recent changes in living arrangements due to the coronavirus pandemic. The findings provide strong evidence that people whose living arrangements have changed because of the Covid-19 pandemic are more likely to report increased stress and family conflict than those whose living arrangements have not changed. This has important implications for public health and wider policy as prolonged periods of stress can lead to serious health problems. This policy briefing provides an overview of the key findings of a SocArXiv article available at <https://doi.org/10.31235/osf.io/kv8dg>

Key Points:

- *95.5% of respondents to the Understanding Society COVID-19 Survey had not changed their living arrangements during the three months since 1 March 2020.*
- *However, there were big differences by age, with 15% of those aged 16-19 reporting a change in living arrangements compared to just 2% of those aged 75 and over.*
- *Young people aged 16-29 accounted for over half (57%) of all respondents reporting that they had changed address since the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic.*
- *Respondents in mid-life (45-59) and early later life (60-74) were most likely to report other people had moved in or out.*
- *Nearly a quarter (24%) of the Millennium cohort, currently aged 19, reported a change in the people they were living with, compared to under one in ten of the 1958 cohort, now aged 62.*
- *Respondents whose household composition had changed were also significantly more likely to report increased stress levels versus those whose living arrangements hadn't changed (47.3% vs 36.9%).*

Introduction

Many adult children who had previously left home returned to live with their parents during the pandemic lockdown. For other adults across all age groups, their living arrangements changed because of having to shield, work remotely, being furloughed or facing loss of employment.

At first sight, the changes in living arrangements caused by the Covid-19 pandemic could be seen as positive, as returning young adults benefit from the resources of the parental home, and older parents receive support from younger household members.

An unexpected move, however, can also cause stress. For example, young people could feel they have lost their independence, while older members of the household could struggle with having their grown-up children and even grandchildren living at home again. Within a household, members provide and receive emotional, instrumental and financial support.

Stress and conflict, however, can flare up when people believe that resources and demands for support are not equal. Stress may be associated with both psychological and physiological reactions, and long-term exposure to stress can lead to serious health problems.

The study

This study addresses a number of research questions:

- What has been the scale of changes in living arrangements in the period from when the lockdown was announced in March 2020, through to its easing in May 2020?
- What have been the main drivers of these changes?
- How have these drivers varied across different stages of the life course?
- Have these changes in living arrangements influenced stress and interpersonal conflict? And has this varied for the different cohorts?

This study uses two distinct but complementary sources of data: i) the second wave of the Understanding Society COVID-19 Study, conducted in May 2020, providing a nationally representative sample of the population aged 16 and over and ii) the special Covid-19 surveys conducted with the participants of four nationally representative cohort studies which have been collecting data since childhood, including the Millennium Cohort Study (MCS), born in 2000-2002 and now aged 19 years; Next Steps, born in 1989-1990, now aged 30 years; 1970 British Cohort Study (BCS70) born in 1970, now aged 50 years; and the National Child Development Study (NCDS) born in 1958 and now aged 62 years.

Main findings

Data from the Understanding Society May COVID-19 Survey shows that for most of the respondents (95.5%), their living arrangements had not changed (Table 1). Just over 2% had changed their address and a further 1.5% reported other people had moved in, whilst under 1% reported people moving out.

Since 1 March 2020...	N	%
I moved to my current address	259	2.2
Other people have moved into my address	298	1.5
Other people I lived with have moved out	121	0.8
My living arrangement has not changed	14123	95.6

Source: Authors' analysis, Understanding Society COVID-19 Survey, May 2020

Table 1. Percentage reporting a change in living arrangements in 3 months March to May 2020

However, the likelihood of having changed living arrangements during the three months since 1 March 2020 varied significantly by age (Figure 1), with 15% of those aged 16-19 reporting a change in who they lived with, compared to just 2% of those aged 75 and over.

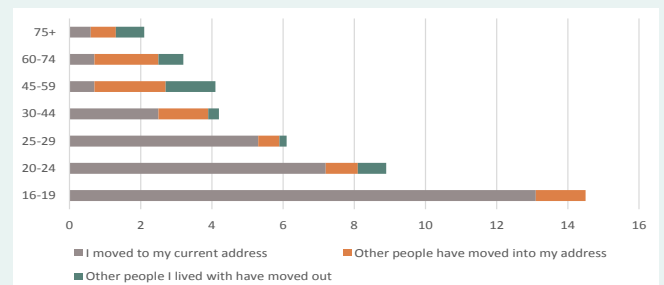


Figure 1: Percentage of age group changing living arrangements since the coronavirus outbreak

Young people also represented the majority of people doing the moving.

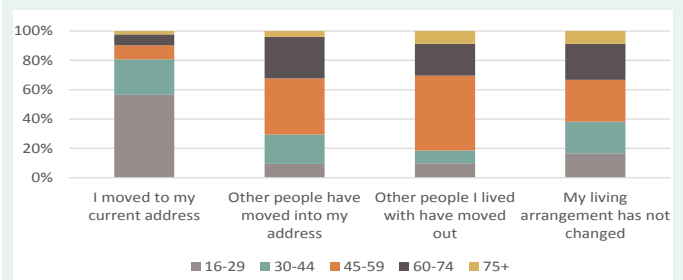


Figure 2: Age composition of changes in living arrangements

The reasons given for the changes in living arrangements highlight the diversity of motivations for changing address during the pandemic. Of the 259 sample members who moved to a new address:

- 17 moved to live with a partner.
- 15 separated from a partner.
- 4 moved because of problems with the people they were living with.
- 19 moved in to provide support/care for family member/friend resident at new address.
- 7 moved as they needed support or care from a family member/ friend resident at new address.
- 4 were key workers and wanted to protect family.
- 3 were key workers and wanted to be closer to their workplace.
- 6 moved to share bills.
- 11 moved as they did not want to live on their own.
- 38 moved from university/college accommodation.
- 107 cited other reasons, including 32 to buy and 17 evicted.

Of the 298 sample members who reported other people had moved into the sample members’ household:

- 47 reported that their partner moved in.
- 8 people moved into a household because they had separated from their partner.
- 15 moved because of problems with the people they were living with.
- 24 moved in to provide support/care for family member/friend in the household.
- 44 moved as they needed support or care from family member/ friend resident in the household.
- 7 moved in because the person they usually lived with is a key worker.

- 10 moved to share bills.
- 44 moved as they did not want to live on their own.
- 59 moved from university/college accommodation.
- 78 cited other reasons including 26 ‘chose to isolate here’, 10 unable to travel home, 12 new baby, 3 for childcare, 12 lost accommodation or job and moved back.

We used multivariate analysis to examine whether changes in living arrangements due to Covid-19 were associated with changes in the levels of stress and conflict with people around them, and how this varied across cohorts.

The findings are stark; among movers we found higher odds of reporting increased levels of stress and conflict amongst both the parental generation (proxied by the BCS70 and NCDS) and the returning young adults (proxied by the MCS).

Policy implications

The study findings have important implications for public health and wider policy. Prolonged periods of stress can lead to serious health problems.

Policy makers need to be mindful that services may need to flex to take these new, albeit for many temporary, forms of living into account. For example, Universal Credit has been a lifeline for many families during the pandemic, but claims may be delayed for those whose changes in circumstances are complicated by temporary moves, with extended waiting times adding to stress.

Other services such as GP practices may also need to ‘flex’, recognising that one in ten younger people have changed address during the pandemic – and may move again over the coming months as circumstances change.

	Living arrangement change because of Covid-19	NCDS (age 62)	BCS70 (age 50)	Next Steps (age 30)	MCS (age 19)
Increased stress	No (ref)				
	Yes	1.47*** (1.21 to 1.78)	1.31** (1.08 to 1.60)	1.06 (0.79 to 1.42)	1.24* (1.01 to 1.51)
Increased conflict with people around them	No (ref)				
	Yes	2.40*** (1.68 to 3.42)	1.03 (0.73 to 1.47)	1.48 (0.97 to 2.26)	1.57*** (1.25 to 1.98)

Source: Authors’ analysis, Covid-19 survey in five National Longitudinal Cohort Studies (2020). ***p<0.001, **p<0.01, *p<0.05

Table 2: Adjusted odds ratios and 95% confidence interval of increased stress as well as conflict among each cohort

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