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Law and Compliance during COVID-19: Interim Report 3

Public Attitudes on Compliance with COVID-19 Restrictions (Face Coverings)

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Context:

In March 2020, the government introduced a set of restrictions to ‘lockdown’ the UK in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the central purpose of which was to protect public health by both containing the rate of infection and protecting the NHS’ capacity to treat a potential influx of COVID-19 patients. At that point, face coverings were not required. However, the policy position changed and, by July 2020, regulations mandating the use of face coverings in certain public spaces were brought into force across the UK. What resulted was an active public debate about both the rules on face coverings and compliance with them.

As part of our ongoing research on *Law and Compliance during COVID-19*,⁶ we undertook two public opinion surveys, to better understand public attitudes to the key public health restrictions, during the first wave of the virus in the UK. We are now using this data—combined with interview and focus group data—to understand more about how people understand the rules, if they see themselves as compliant, what drives compliance, and how the rules relate to ordinary perceptions of rights. Given the change in position regarding face coverings, we put a further survey into the field in October 2020 related to the rules on face coverings.

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⁶ More details are available on the project’s website: www.lawandcompliance.uk.

Fieldwork on this survey was undertaken between 9th and 22nd October 2020. The sample size was 1,192 respondents. The figures have been weighted and are representative of all GB adults (aged 18+).

Purpose of this third interim report:

In this paper, we report some key preliminary findings regarding perceptions of the rules regarding face coverings from our third survey. In the longer term, we will conduct a more detailed statistical analysis that seeks to understand compliance behaviour. We publish these preliminary findings now, however, as we see them as valuable to current debates. Our survey data will be supplemented by ongoing qualitative work (interviews and focus groups), and an analysis of the government’s interventions more generally. We will report more fully on these in due course.

Initial key findings:

Confidence in knowledge of the face covering rules

Most people (97%) stated they either fully or mostly understand the rules. However, there was more disagreement about specific requirements and whether the rules are law or guidance. This reflects the same general pattern seen in relation to general lockdown rules in our previous surveys.

To what extent do you think you currently understand, if at all, what the rules require of you regarding wearing a face covering?	
I fully understand what the rules about wearing a face covering require of me	67%
I mostly understand what the rules about wearing a face covering require of me	30%
I am quite unclear about what the rules about wearing a face covering require of me	3%
I am completely unclear about what the rules about wearing a face covering require of me	1%

As far as you know, in your part of the UK, in which of the following situations are you legally required to wear a face covering, or are not legally required to but advised to by government, or are neither legally required nor advised to by government?	
Inside shops	
Wearing a face covering is legally required	86%
Wearing a face covering is not legally required, but is advised by government	13%
Wearing a face covering is neither legally required nor advised by government	0%
I am unclear on this	1%
Inside cafés / restaurants / pubs	
Wearing a face covering is legally required	59%
Wearing a face covering is not legally required, but is advised by government	28%
Wearing a face covering is neither legally required nor advised by government	6%

I am unclear on this	7%
Inside cinemas / theatres	
Wearing a face covering is legally required	72%
Wearing a face covering is not legally required, but is advised by government	16%
Wearing a face covering is neither legally required nor advised by government	1%
I am unclear on this	10%
While using public transport	
Wearing a face covering is legally required	91%
Wearing a face covering is not legally required, but is advised by government	8%
Wearing a face covering is neither legally required nor advised by government	0%
I am unclear on this	1%

Understanding of exemptions

Recently, there has been concern about whether public understanding of the exemptions to the general rules is low and, in some instances, leading to people being unfairly confronted for not wearing a mask. We asked questions about knowledge of the exemptions. The responses, such as those set out below, suggest there is a lack of clarity in relation to the exemptions amongst a significant minority. At the same time, 30% of people thought it was likely or very likely they would be challenged by another shopper if they did not wear a mask.

As far as you know, in your part of the UK, which of the following groups of people are exempt from the requirements to wear face coverings?	
People who cannot wear a face covering because of a physical or mental illness, impairment or disability	
Are exempt from the rules about wearing face coverings	87%
Are NOT exempt from the rules about wearing face coverings	3%
I am unclear on this	10%
People who would experience severe distress if they wore a face covering	
Are exempt from the rules about wearing face coverings	72%
Are NOT exempt from the rules about wearing face coverings	8%
I am unclear on this	20%
People accompanying others who rely on lip reading	
Are exempt from the rules about wearing face coverings	49%
Are NOT exempt from the rules about wearing face coverings	13%
I am unclear on this	38%

If you were to break the rule about wearing a face covering while shopping, how likely or unlikely do you think it is that you would be challenged by another shopper?	
Very likely	4%
Somewhat likely	26%
Neither likely nor unlikely	31%
Somewhat unlikely	29%
Very unlikely	10%

General compliance with the face covering rules

There were generally high levels of reported compliance with the face coverings rules. For instance, 96% of people reported always wearing a face covering while shopping. However, 6% of that group admitted to “bending” the rule.

Presuming that you have remembered the requirement to wear a face covering and have one to hand, which of the following statement best describes your attitude to actually wearing a face covering while shopping?	
I would always now wear a face covering while shopping	92%
I would usually now wear a face covering while shopping	6%
I would sometimes now wear a face covering while shopping	1%
I would never wear a face covering while shopping	0%

In your answer to the last question you said that you would always wear a face covering while shopping if you have one with you and remember that you should be wearing it. Sometimes people bend the rules to some extent. Please indicate whether, since it was introduced, you have ever bent the rule about wearing a face covering while shopping.	
I have bent this rule	6%
I have not bent this rule	94%

Access to face coverings

There has been some discussion that access to face coverings itself may be a compliance issue for some. In our survey, 98% of people reported having access to a face covering. 35% of respondents were of the view that the government should provide free face coverings, but 52% thought this should not happen.

Do you have a face covering that you can use, should you require it?	
Yes	98%
No	2%

Do you think the Government should or should not provide free face coverings for everyone?	
Should	35%
Should not	52%
Don't know	14%