

## Behavioural Science and Covid: Resources for Policy Researchers

### Liam Delaney and Emma Watson

The emergence of the covid pandemic in Ireland in late February led to an unprecedented need to change human behaviour across the whole population in a very short period of time. Recommendations from the ECDC and WHO stress the need for physical distancing, hand hygiene, cough and sneeze etiquette, and a range of other measures intended to slow down the spread of the virus and give time for the acute care system and other capacities to develop. In such a context, understanding human behaviour is vital.

A number of disciplines are relevant for studying how people respond to such policies. There are clearly economic issues in how different groups will respond to the incentives involved - the role of the government in replacing income to those being asked to stay away from their workplace is clearly of relevance. The discipline of behavioural economics has stressed that people may also be heavily impacted by how these incentives are communicated and designed in terms of complexity, something that has been particularly relevant. As well as incentives, people's understanding of the restrictions and their reaction to communication is also clearly important. Disciplines such as health psychology and behavioural medicine examine in detail how people behave with regard to their health. Such disciplines are highly relevant for how to design health communications and understand the wider determinants of health behaviours. Social psychology has been particularly useful in understanding collective action and how people's behaviour is shaped by their expectations of others and by norms more generally. The phrase "behavioural science" can sometimes be confusing but it provides a useful way of summarising the fact that many disciplines relevant to human behaviour work on these questions in overlapping but often subtly different ways.

The Irish public health emergency team NPHE has drawn from the behavioural sciences in a number of ways. In particular, the behavioural change subgroup draws from expertise from the ESRI Behavioural Research Unit, the UCD Geary Institute, UL Department of Psychology, NUIG Health Behaviour Change group, as well as experts in behavioural change from across the Irish government. Such input has included providing recommendations on health communications, alterations to physical choice architecture, and understanding of public behaviours.

As part of the Geary Institute contribution, we have been compiling resources from the behavioural sciences relevant to covid. We have gathered these into two open google documents: [Useful Resources on COVID and Behavioural Science](#) and [Behavioural Science and Covid Resources: Part 2](#).

The [first document](#) provides a wide range of general resources on behavioural science and covid, including some of the key behavioural models, and the first early review papers. It provides links to some of the core frameworks in behavioural science applications, such as the Behavioural Change Wheel. The review by Lunn et al (2020) in the Journal of Behavioural Policy Administration provides a particularly useful resource summarising the key themes in the application of behavioural science to covid response. We also provide links to ongoing survey research programmes in this area.

The [second document](#) provides key literature across some of the key questions that will be addressed on infection control policies from a behavioural perspective. We include resources across a range of topics relevant to ongoing policies in these areas, including mental health effects, covid health literacy, physical distancing supports, public attitudes, stigma, ancillary behaviours, healthcare utilisation, and other topics. It is clear that the evolving situation creates a huge demand for evidence across a range of emerging issues. We will use this document to keep track of useful papers emerging but each of these areas will require very detailed consideration well beyond what can be summarised in such a list.

These documents are intended to act as a useful source of information for our policy research community. They are not intended to act as recommendations or be prescriptive. We welcome suggestions and we will be updating the second document continuously throughout the next few months to point to useful research being conducted in Ireland and throughout the world.

## References

Department of Health (2020). *National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHET) COVID-19 Subgroup - Behavioural Change*. Retrieved from <https://www.gov.ie/en/collection/3008f6-the-national-public-health-emergency-team-nphet-covid-19-subgroup-be/>

Lunn, P. D., Belton, C. A., Lavin, C., McGowan, F. P., Timmons, S., & Robertson, D. A. (2020). Using Behavioral Science to help fight the Coronavirus. *Journal of Behavioral Public Administration*, 3(1).