

Health Survey Northern Ireland 2020/21

Things users need to know

NISRA suspended all face-to-face household interviews in the middle of March 2020 due to the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. In the reporting period June 2020 – March 2021 all interviews carried out on the Health Survey Northern Ireland were conducted by telephone.

There are a number of factors which users should take into consideration when interpreting the 2020-21 results and care should be taken when comparing these to previously published findings from the survey.

1. While survey methodology changed, the impact of the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic and the resultant introduction of new public health regulations, guidance and advice may have also fundamentally changed peoples' behaviour and attitudes. It is difficult to separate out change caused by the methodological adjustments and actual behavioural change at this point in time.
2. The change in data collection mode from face-to-face to telephone may have altered how people responded to the survey;
3. The change in data collection mode also necessitated some streamlining of the questionnaire and changes to how some questions were asked or presented as well as the response categories associated with them. This may also have implications for how people responded to the survey;
4. The achieved response rate on the survey in telephone mode was 18% and this is a lower response compared to the normal achieved response rate of 55% in face-to-face mode. This has reduced the number of cases at the household and individual levels. The precision of the survey estimates in the 2020-21 year is also reduced compared to previous findings;
5. The demographic profile of the achieved sample has changed in comparison with previous years. Some of the changes include:
 - There is more of an under-representation of people aged 16-44 compared to previous years.
 - There are also fewer households from the most deprived areas and more households from the least deprived areas.

NISRA has provided weighting variables to apply to the data. Whilst these weighting variables should reduce bias in the results they cannot eliminate all forms of bias which may be present in the data.

Any changes within the 2020-21 data compared to previous years have to be considered in the context of all of the above.

Care should be taken in reaching any conclusions based on 2020-21 data and comparisons to previous years. It would be advisable to look at changes in behaviour or attitudes contained in the 2020-21 results over the next couple of years, particularly when data collection on the survey returns to face-to-face mode and society returns to normal, to see if they are part of a permanent changing trend.