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COronavirus Vulnerabilities and INFOrmation dynamics Research and Modelling

FACTSHEET: Emerging vulnerabilities during the COVID-19 pandemic: Findings from the COVINFORM project

The findings presented in this fact sheet have been taken from the Coronavirus Vulnerabilities and INFOrmation dynamics Research and Modelling (COVINFORM) project's deliverable D4.7 Analysis: Government Responses to COVID-19 and Impact Assessment – update M32. The deliverable focused on describing and assessing government response to the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly the identification and management of emerging vulnerabilities[1].

Declining mental health

According to an Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and European Commission (EC) paper titled 'Health at a Glance: Europe 2020,' the COVID-19 pandemic saw an increase in the rates of stress, anxiety, and depression[2]. The toll that the pandemic has had on the global population's mental health has been associated with what some observers call a 'second' or 'silent' pandemic (ibid). The COVID-19 pandemic contributed towards declining mental health as reported by research in numerous COVINFORM target countries. In Austria, for example, it was reported that government health policies, such as lockdowns and social distancing contributed towards loneliness[3]. Similarly, in Belgium, the emotional impact of lockdowns heightened feelings of loneliness. In Greece, the daily influx of COVID-19 information, in combination with measures such as social isolation and prolonged lockdowns, was identified as having a role in declining psychological wellbeing[4].

Increased domestic violence

A May 2020 WHO study reported that the EU states reported a 60% rise in emergency calls about domestic violence during the COVID-19 pandemic. Increases in domestic violence occurrences were also noted in the COVINFORM project[5]. In Germany, the BMG Evaluation of the Legal Foundation and Measures of Pandemic Policies revealed that certain measures may have aggravated gendered vulnerability, confirming the importance of protecting women against violence. The evaluation also noted that in some cases, the pandemic appeared to have led to the "re-traditionalization" of gender roles and retrenchment of gendered economic inequality. In Portugal, civil society organisations launched campaigns to raise awareness and provide support for victims.

[1] Note that the two deliverables investigated the following target COVINFORM countries: Austria, Belgium, Germany, Greece, Italy, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, and the United Kingdom. Data for the United Kingdom concerns England and Wales only.

[2] Scholz, N. (2021). (issue brief). Mental health and the pandemic. European Parliamentary Research Service.

[3] Stolz, E., Mayerl, H., & Freidl, W. (2020). The impact of covid-19 restriction measures on loneliness among older adults in Austria. The Impact of COVID-19 Restriction Measures on Loneliness among Older Adults in Austria. doi:10.1101/2020.09.08.20190397

[4] Stylianou, T., & Ntelas, K. (2023). Impact of covid-19 pandemic on mental health and socioeconomic aspects in Greece. International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health, 20(3), 1843. doi:10.3390/ijerph20031843

[5] Mahase, E. (2020). Covid-19: EU States Report 60% rise in emergency calls about domestic violence. BMJ, m1872. doi:10.1136/bmj.m1872
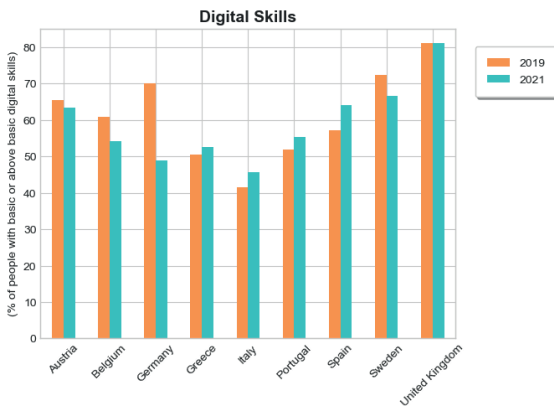
Economic difficulties

During the pandemic, the EC acknowledged that the pandemic shocked European and global economies. That said, the pandemic posed a threat to the European economy and the livelihoods of EU citizens in particular[6]. In Spain, one of COVINFORM's target countries, the lockdowns resulted in many individuals with limited or no work, in particular those employed in the service sector. Initiatives to help those affected by economic vulnerabilities included the ERTE programme (a type of job retention scheme) which implied a wage replacement for those employees who could not work.

Access to education

A March 2023 report from the European Expert Network on Economics of Education provided a thorough overview on how COVID-19 affected the learning outcomes of pupils. The report indicated that the pandemic triggered the largest disruption to education systems in several decades[7]. In England, concerns were raised among the youth about the possible impact of coronavirus mitigation measures, such as school closures and social contact rules, on young people's lives. In Portugal, the pandemic had an educational impact, particularly for children from low-income families and those with special needs. School closures and online learning created new challenges for these groups, leading to a widening of educational inequalities.

The figures below highlight trends in national data pertaining to the vulnerabilities identified in D4.7. The data is presented for the COVINFORM target countries.[8]
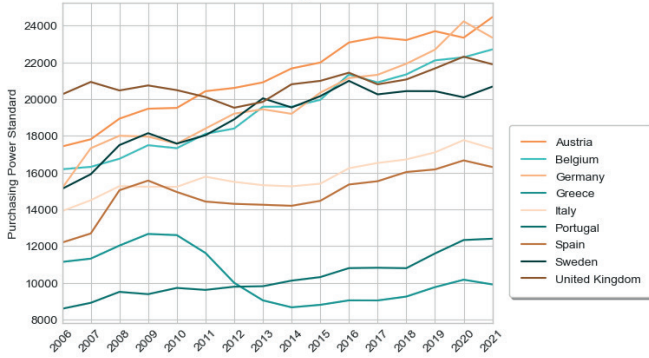

Figure 1 Percent of respondents with basic or above basic digital skills across the COVINFORM countries in 2019 and 2021. This dataset measures the % of people with basic or above basic digital skills according to the Digital Competence Framework used in the ESS (ICT survey) in European countries and foundational skills according to the Lloyd's Bank Essential Digital Skills Survey in the UK.

EU Member States Data Source: Eurostat (Dataset Code: isoc_sk_dskl_i & isoc_sk_dskl_i21)
UK Data Source: Lloyds Bank Essential Digital Skills Survey

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[6] (N.d.). Retrieved from https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/coronavirus-response/supporting-jobs-and-economy-during-coronavirus-pandemic_en

[7] (N.d.). Retrieved from https://education.ec.europa.eu/ga/news/report-covid-impact-learning-outcomes

[8] The COVINFORM target countries under study are Austria, Belgium, Germany, Greece, Italy, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, and the United Kingdom. Note that the data for the UK concerns both England and Wales. Note that the data collected from the COVINFORM Risk assessment model was not disaggregated for domestic violence (I.e., national crime rates) and included national statistics (e.g., diagnosis for psychiatric disorders as opposed to general mental health and wellbeing).
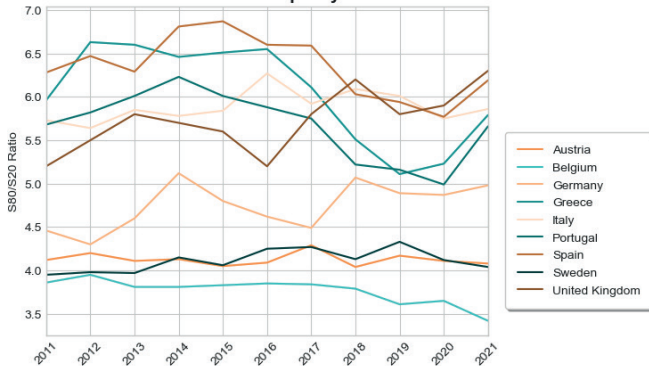
Median Household Disposable Income

Figure 2 Median Household Disposable Income across the COVINFORM target countries. The indicator measures median equivalised net income in a household. The units are in Purchasing Power Standard which is an artificial common reference currency unit used in the European Union which eliminates the differences of price levels between countries.

EU Member States Data Source: Eurostat (Dataset Code: ILCDI04)
UK Data Source: Office of National Statistics (ONS)

Income Inequality

Figure 3 Income Inequality across the COVINFORM target countries. This indicator is measured as the S80/S20 ratio which is the ratio of total income received by the 20% of the population with the highest income (top quintile) to that received by the 20% of the population with the lowest income (lowest quintile). Income must be understood as equivalised disposable income.

EU Member States Data Source: Eurostat (Dataset Code: tespm151)
UK Data Source: Office of National Statistics (ONS)
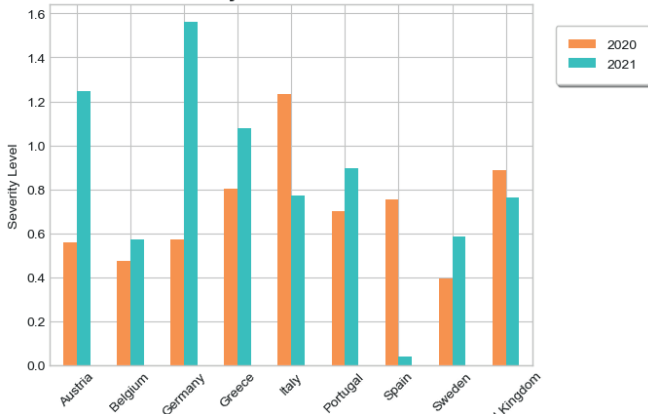
Severity of School Closures

Figure 4 Severity of School Closures in the COVINFORM target countries in 2020 and 2021. This data is an average of daily data over a year which looks at the daily levels of school closures implemented in a country with the levels being: 0: 'No school closures', 1= 'Localised school closures 'and 2= 'Nationalised school closures'.

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PROJECT **FACTS**

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Programme
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Research & Innovation Action

GRANT No.
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Coordinator
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