Survey Evidence on Attitudes, Plans and Expectations for Christmas 2020

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Introduction

Christmas 2020 presents a unique challenge in Ireland’s ongoing efforts to contain COVID-19 and the issue has provoked much public debate throughout November. This paper digests some survey evidence collected in the last two weeks that gives insight into where public opinion stands on some of the dilemmas involved. It also provides evidence on plans for Christmas that are already underway and quantifies some relevant expectations.

The survey results themselves attest to the significance of the issue, with more than a third (37%) of respondents saying that Christmas this year will be more important to them and their family than usual (versus 7% “less” and 50% “same”). Another sizeable minority (43%) expect disagreements within their family about how to handle COVID risks when making Christmas arrangements. As of November 16th, the majority (55%) of the population had not made concrete plans for Christmas.

The next section gives a brief description of the data source. For ease of reference the findings are then arranged by research question in numbered sections as shown below. (Note that the term “should” here refers to the public’s opinion).

1. Should we have Christmas as usual?
2. Will people relax their attitude to public health guidelines over the Christmas period?
3. Should special consideration to be given to Christmas?
4. Should pubs and restaurants be allowed to open for Christmas?
5. Should people be allowed to visit other households?
6. Should people be allowed to travel?
7. Should restrictions be lifted in early or mid-December?
8. Is public behaviour anticipating public health guidelines?

About the data

This paper describes data collected on November 9th and 16th via two modules (different questions each time) of the weekly Public Opinion Tracking Survey, conducted by Amárach Research on behalf of the Department of Health. The sample is approximately 1,600 each week. A quota-based system is used to match the socio-demographic characteristics of the sample to the national adult population based on Census figures. Data are then weighted to further improve the match. Responses are collected from Amárach’s SmartPoll panel, which is an online panel of 6,000 adults throughout Ireland, regularly refreshed through recruitment. Panellists receive text messages and email invitations to complete surveys via phone, tablet, laptop or desktop computer. Results are typically published within a day at https://www.gov.ie/en/collection/6b4401-view-the-amarach-public-opinion-survey/.

There are a few small points to bear in mind when interpreting the results. Firstly, in some cases the percentage figures reported below in answer to specific questions do not add up to 100% because a proportion of respondents have responded that they “don’t know” (or didn’t enter a response). In some instances the proportion of “don’t knows” is instructive and is highlighted. Secondly, the data
were gathered shortly after positive news in relation to possible vaccines and so it is possible that this influenced responses. No questions were asked about a vaccine specifically.

1. Should we have Christmas as usual?

One possibility is that a large proportion of the general public, wanting relief from the strictures of public health guidance, would like simply to have a normal Christmas, even at the cost of increased infections and tighter restrictions again in January. The data reject this view. Asked to agree or disagree with the statement “I am happy to have a quieter Christmas than usual this year”, 65% selected “agree” or “strongly agree”, compared to 16% who selected “disagree” or “strongly disagree”. When shown the statement “It would be better to let everyone enjoy Christmas and New Year’s Eve, even if we have to go back to Level 5 in January”, 56% disagreed and 28% agreed, with 37% disagreeing strongly versus just 10% agreeing strongly.

This desire to be cautious has already influenced both intentions and expectations. Asked whether they would “avoid some meetings with friends and family this year even if others go ahead and meet”, 72% agreed, including 63% of those aged under 35. One-in-four survey respondents expected to spend less money on Christmas this year and most expected to have fewer people for Christmas dinner than usual (46%, versus 44% “the same” and just 2% “more”).

It might be thought that this willingness to scale back Christmas activity would not extend to children’s activities. Again, the data do not support this. While 24% said they supported children having a normal Christmas, even if it meant more restrictions in January, 70% wanted continued restrictions on children’s activities. Almost half (48%) of parents with children under 10 had already talked to their children about Christmas being “different this year”.

2. Will people relax their attitude to public health guidelines over the Christmas period?

Another possibility is that people will be more likely to ignore guidance or violate restrictions over Christmas, making the measures less effective. The survey does indicate a more relaxed attitude to restrictions over Christmas, but the effect is relatively small. When asked whether they currently follow recommendations to prevent the spread of coronavirus, 56% of people report that they “very much” do so (a maximum 7 on the scale). This drops to 48% when asked how likely they will be to follow these recommendations over the Christmas period.

Figure 1 presents the full distributions of responses. It reveals a shift towards the middle of the scale, rather than a substantial number of people planning to disregard recommendations. The implication is that some people may be more inclined to push boundaries, but very few will plan to abandon guidance altogether. It is also possible that the responses reflect some ambiguity surrounding what the restrictions in place over Christmas are likely to be.

Expectations that others will follow recommendations over Christmas tend to be lower. Just 3% think other people are very likely (a ‘7’) to follow recommendations over Christmas and 44% gave a response below the mid-point of the scale. This compares to data collected by ESRI back in May, in which 5% responded with a ‘7’ to the same question (although not in relation to Christmas) and 39% gave a response below the mid-point of the scale. Hence, while people expect others’ attitudes to restrictions to relax over Christmas, the effect is quite small and largely consistent with previous findings.
Figure 1. Attitudes to following recommendations currently (solid green) and over Christmas (dashed red). The small shift in the distribution implies that some people plan to relax their attitudes. However, the overall effect is not large and very few plan to abandon guidance altogether. (Scales range from 1 ‘not at all following’ to 7 ‘very much following’ for current recommendations, and 1 ‘not at all likely to follow’ to 7 ‘very likely to follow’ over Christmas).

Source: Amárach Public Opinion Tracking Research 09/11 and Christmas Module

Overall, there is no indication in the data that people anticipate a dramatic drop in compliance with public health recommendations over Christmas, in themselves or others. Nevertheless, it is likely that some people will push the boundaries perhaps more than they have during the pandemic to date. What form this might take is not clear from the survey questions asked (although Section 5 below is perhaps indicative).

3. Should special consideration be given to Christmas?

When asked directly whether special consideration should be given to easing restrictions at Christmas, 46% agreed, compared to 27% who disagreed and 28% who were undecided. These proportions were broadly consistent across age groups and gender.

People were asked how they would like to spend the Christmas period and Christmas day, bearing in mind that easing restrictions at Christmas might mean tighter restrictions in early 2021. The vast majority, 85%, said they would prefer to spend quality time with close friends and family over the Christmas period, rather than seeing a lot of friends and family and risking 2021 restrictions. On Christmas day and on New Year’s Eve, 89% would rather have a quiet day with close family than a big day with extended family and friends. Differences across age-groups were modest, with 84% and
83% of under 35s preferring a quiet Christmas and New Year’s Eve respectively, compared to 90% and 91% of people aged 35 and over.

On Christmas activities outside the home, 33% said choirs should be allowed to sing at carol services and 19% said they would attend a choir service if they were allowed. When asked about Christmas services in local churches, 63% said they would prefer continuing restrictions on mass or religious services, while 32% said they would attend mass if their local church was open. The overwhelming majority, 92%, said they would prefer workplace parties do not go ahead in order to reduce the possibility of further restrictions in 2021.

4. Should pubs and restaurants be allowed to open for Christmas?

The public are cautious about re-opening pubs and restaurants. A large majority (83%) thought that, if pubs and restaurants re-open, restrictions (e.g. for social distancing) should be in place. Very few (just 6%) wanted these to be relaxed altogether for the Christmas period, knowing that restrictions might be required again afterwards. This majority was similar across socio-demographic subgroups, with little difference between those aged under 35 (80% prefer restrictions) and over 55 (84%), or between men (81%) and women (85%).

Nevertheless, again based on the trade-off question format, a majority (58%) wanted to see pubs and restaurants open (with restrictions) rather than remain closed completely over the Christmas period. Almost 1-in-3 (32%) preferred the latter option in order to reduce the possibility of tighter restrictions again in early 2021. Again, there was broad agreement across socio-demographic subgroups.

A majority (80%) said they would rather stay in with a few friends than have a night out over Christmas. Notably, this held true for younger people too, although the majority was smaller (71%). Thus, 7-in-10 young people preferred to socialise at home over the Christmas period, to reduce the possibility of tighter restrictions in early 2021.

5. Should people be allowed to visit other households?

When asked what they were worried about personally over Christmas, respondents were most likely to say “reduced social contact” (64%) and “the health of family and friends” (63%). “Prolonged restrictions” (45%) and “the economy” (32%) featured less prominently.

A large majority (76%) were of the view that guidance should remain in place over Christmas for older people to restrict their movements and to avoid visiting other households and receiving visitors. This majority was larger still among older adults (80% of over 55s versus 72% of under 35s). The figure climbed to 84% for maintaining guidance to “vulnerable people” (which was not defined in the question).

The survey did not test support for a specific rule or a limit on the number of household visits that might be recommended, but it did ask about plans already in place. Many people were already planning to limit visits. Figure 2 (left) shows that 40% of respondents were not planning to visit another household this Christmas. It is noteworthy that one third had yet to make up their minds. Many may therefore be waiting for official guidance. Of the 27% who were planning to visit other households, however, more than two-thirds thought they would visit at least two. The implication is
that, if these plans are carried out, a small minority of individuals could account for a substantial proportion of household visits. The survey did not ask about receiving visitors.

Figure 2. Plans for household visits (reported on November 16th). Many people do not plan to visit another household at all over Christmas, although one third have not yet decided (left). Of the 27% who do plan to visit other households, most think they will visit more than one (right).

Source: Amárach Public Opinion Tracking Research 16/11 and Christmas Module

6. Should people be allowed to travel?

Asked whether people should be allowed to visit relatives and friends anywhere in Ireland at Christmas, 49% supported and 34% opposed the idea. Answers differed by gender, with 45% of men and 53% of women in support. There were differences by age groups too, with 57% of people aged under 35 supporting visits anywhere in Ireland, compared to 47% of people aged 35 and over.

When asked to make the trade-off between friends and family coming home from abroad for Christmas and the possibility of tighter restrictions in 2021, 60% thought that family and friends should not come home. This reduced to 50% for those under 35. It is important to note that the question did not ask about allowing travel from abroad with adherence to quarantine and testing requirements.

7. Should restrictions be lifted in early or mid-December?

Asked directly when they think restrictions in general should be eased, 65% of people said they would prefer restrictions to be eased in mid-December rather than on 1st December. Even when asked about the current strictest Level 5 restrictions, 54% of people said they should be kept in place longer than the start of December if it would mean fewer restrictions for Christmas and New Year. A majority of 60% said they would prefer to see restrictions eased for one week of Christmas only rather than easing on 1st December, in order to avoid further restrictions in 2021. This was a consistent majority across age groups and gender.
Most people (52%) would prefer to have a shorter build up to Christmas this year compared to 26% who disagreed with this. As outlined above, most are in favour of restrictions on pubs and restaurants. Opinion is split on shopping, with 43% of people preferring shops to open in early December with normal hours versus 42% preferring them to open later in December with increased hours. However, asked when shops should open bearing in mind that earlier opening may increase the possibility of further restrictions in 2021, 51% said they would prefer shops to open only in mid-December.

In general, women were keener to see shops open sooner. This is notable, because the weekly survey results generally report that women support greater restrictions than men. Previous work on the division of household labour would be consistent with much of the organisational work being undertaken by women.

8. Is public behaviour anticipating public health guidelines?

One possibility is that members of the public have learned to make plans and behave in ways that anticipate forthcoming changes to public health guidance. Indications of reduced social contact immediately prior to the move to Level 5 have been attributed to anticipatory behaviour. In general, however, it is difficult to assert with confidence that a particular change in behaviour is undertaken in anticipation of specific changes to guidelines. This is because periods preceding such changes typically involve changes in other variables that may also be driving behaviour; it is not easy to tease time-varying factors apart. In particular, when case numbers (and other public announcements) indicate that the virus is spreading, behaviour is likely to become more cautious regardless of the public health guidelines.

Nevertheless, there is relevant data in both the Christmas surveys and the tracking survey more generally to suggest that the behaviour, expectations and plans of a substantial proportion of the public do reflect some anticipation of future outcomes and events in relation to the coronavirus.

Only a minority of respondents had a plan for Christmas by November 16th, despite 72% having discussed it with their family. Almost 1-in-6 say that they “won’t plan”. The general expectation is for fewer people at Christmas dinner and fewer social interactions generally. These figures are consistent with people waiting for announcements in relation to guidance and expecting restrictions on the extent of social activity.

In general, the tracking survey suggests that people’s behaviour throughout the pandemic has changed gradually in response to perceived risk as well as in response to announcements. Figure 3 (top left) charts the average response to a question, which has been collected every week since March, about how worried people are on a 1-to-10 scale. Alongside (top right), we plot the proportion of people saying that they are staying at home rather than going out. Finally, because people are often concerned that self-reported behaviour exaggerates compliance, we show (bottom) proportion of people who state that almost all or the majority of other people are following guidance (this was only collected after May).

In the top two panels, there is a clear step-change in behaviour associated with the original lockdown announced in March and a relatively sudden change in both series when this ended in May. Since then, changes in levels of worry and behaviour, while still substantial and significant, have become more gradual. It is also notable that the general pattern of these charts closely resembles charts showing the number of close contacts of positive cases over time. Together, these data series
are consistent with either anticipatory behaviour or, more simply, people adapting their behaviour in response to the same public data that constitutes the primary input to policy decisions (e.g. reports of daily case numbers, hospitalisations, etc.).

Figure 3: Measure of personal worry, a self-reported compliance behaviour (staying at home rather than going out) and perceptions of the compliance of others, over the course of the pandemic to-date. The pattern is consistent with behaviour responding in part to media reporting of the spread of the disease.

Source: Amárach Public Opinion Tracking Research

Conclusions

How cautious do the public want to be?

Given the above results, on average, the population would like a balance to be struck. The large majority of people think that Christmas should be quieter this year and many have partly planned for this already. Yet most people do want some relaxation of restrictions for Christmas. What do people think is a reasonable balance?
Across the two surveys multiple questions made the trade-off between easing restrictions for Christmas and the potential longer-term consequences explicit. Most of responses to these questions are referred to in specific contexts in earlier sections, but it is worth considering the sweep of responses across contexts.

When asked as a general question (i.e. not about specific activities like going to church, shopping, visiting, etc.), clear majorities supported keeping Level 5 restrictions in place into December if it means fewer restrictions for Christmas and New Year. They also supported a shorter build up to Christmas in terms of opening businesses, and waiting to lift restrictions until mid-December or for a short period around Christmas only.

The November 9th survey asked 13 questions that required people to trade off the benefits of relaxing a specific restriction for Christmas against the fact that this might lead to tighter restrictions again afterwards. These surrounded: seeing friends and family, socialising on Christmas Day itself, nights out, New Year’s Eve, pubs and restaurants, shops, household visits, travel, workplace parties, religious services, and children’s activities. In every case, the majority did not support easing the restriction at the expense of the longer-term, with a single exception: the majority would like to see pubs and restaurants open at Christmas with social distancing restrictions rather than remain closed. In only two cases did the minority wanting the restriction lifted exceed 30%: opening shops on December 1st and permitting religious services over Christmas.

Looking across the sweep of general and specific questions, therefore, a clear majority of the public want a cautious approach to predominate for most aspects of Christmas 2020. This level of caution expressed by the public arguably exceeds that typically expressed in current debate in the media, although clearly this is a subjective judgement.

Two key behavioural principles for managing Christmas

While a clear majority want a cautious approach, the data show that different people hold different views about the appropriate way to handle Christmas during the pandemic. This is challenging from a policy perspective, given the need for solidarity in coordinating our behaviour to combat the spread of COVID-19. In this context, two principles based on substantial bodies of behavioural evidence might be useful to reiterate.

First, the scientific evidence unambiguously shows that cooperation with collective action is made more likely by clear and repeated communication of why the behaviour requested clearly generates a desired collective outcome, i.e. one that is “best for all”. People need to understand the connection between the behaviour and the outcome and to believe that the large majority of others will also engage in the behaviour. This is why it is vital to talk about those who are complying with guidance as much, indeed preferably more than, those who are not. From this point of view, the fact that the surveys demonstrate that a high proportion of the population expect and have planned a quieter Christmas than usual is an advantage.

Second, behavioural evidence across multiple domains shows that simplicity matters. In the current context, simple rules (e.g. everyone should do X no more than twice) are easier to self-police and more likely to benefit from informal social disapproval that is known to deter those most inclined to transgress. Overall, then, simple rules of demonstrable benefit for a collective outcome are those most supported by behavioural science.