



S&SR Environment and Spaces Group

Change in use of green and open space following COVID-19 lockdown
'stay at home' phase and initial easing of lockdown

October 2020

Authors: **Jonathan Olsen & Richard Mitchell** (on behalf of the S&SR Environment and Spaces Group), Places & Health Programme, MRC/CSO Social and Public Health Sciences Unit, University of Glasgow (Funding codes: MC_UU_12017/10; SPHSU10).

With thanks to NatureScot for access and permission to reproduce results from 'Enjoying the Outdoors: Monitoring the impact of Coronavirus and social distancing'.

Introduction

This report is for national and local government, NHS Boards, the third sector and other professionals involved in environment and planning policy development and implementation at a national and local level and service providers in both the public and private sector. It covers:

- How COVID-19 has influenced use of green and open space, including variation by age, sex, socio-economic status and ethnicity.
- The reported benefit of green and open space for mental and physical health during the COVID-19 lockdown.
- Recommendation for actions to support future decision making.

The report was prepared for the Social & System Recovery (SSR) - Environment and Spaces Group hosted by Public Health Scotland which includes partners from national and local government, NHS territorial boards, the third sector and academia. The group was established to: (a) bring together evidence on how our responses to the COVID-19 pandemic have affected our environment and spaces and how people interact within these, (b) articulate how this might impact on people's health and wellbeing and health inequalities, and (c) use this to inform national and local responses through policy and practice.

Where are the data from? These results are drawn from two surveys undertaken during lockdown, one by the University of Glasgow and one by NatureScot. The surveys had different samples and methods, with the University of Glasgow study focused on the UK as a whole and the NatureScot survey on Scotland only. The surveys showed agreement in their main findings, but differences in effect sizes.

Why look at green & open space and health? There is a wealth of research evidence demonstrating the positive impacts that natural environments can have on physical and mental health, including reduced stress and reduced cardiovascular morbidity. Governments recognised the value of access to urban greenspace and required councils to keep parks open for daily exercise during the Covid-19 lockdown.

Surveys

The YouGov / University of Glasgow "Outside Space and COVID-19 Survey" was during the 'stay at home' phase of the COVID-19 lockdown, where individuals were advised to only leave their homes once a day for exercise. 2,252 online questionnaires were completed between Thursday 30th April and Friday 1st May 2020, UK wide.

The "Enjoying the Outdoors: Monitoring the impact of Coronavirus and social distancing" survey, published by NatureScot, took place when COVID-19 restrictions on movement were eased to allow exercising outside more than once a day, within 5 miles of home whilst maintaining physical distancing. 1,008 online interviews were conducted between Friday 2th May and Friday 5th June 2020 in Scotland only.

Main findings

- Use of green and open space was polarised during lockdown. Some people did increase their frequency of use and time spent outside, but many made fewer or no visits.
- The most marked reduction in time spent in green and open spaces was amongst older people.
- Overwhelmingly, users reported that green and open space benefited their mental health during lockdown.
- Socio-economic inequalities in use of green and open spaces existed before lockdown. Lockdown did not reduce these and may have made them worse.

Other key findings

The main findings were broadly similar across survey respondents. However we noted the following differences between groups which may require further investigation in follow-up surveys and by local service providers:

Age:

- The greatest reported increases in use were by those aged 34 and under. This age group also plan to make more use of green and open space following lockdown.
- The greatest benefit to mental health was reported by the 25 to 44 years age group.

Socio-economic position:

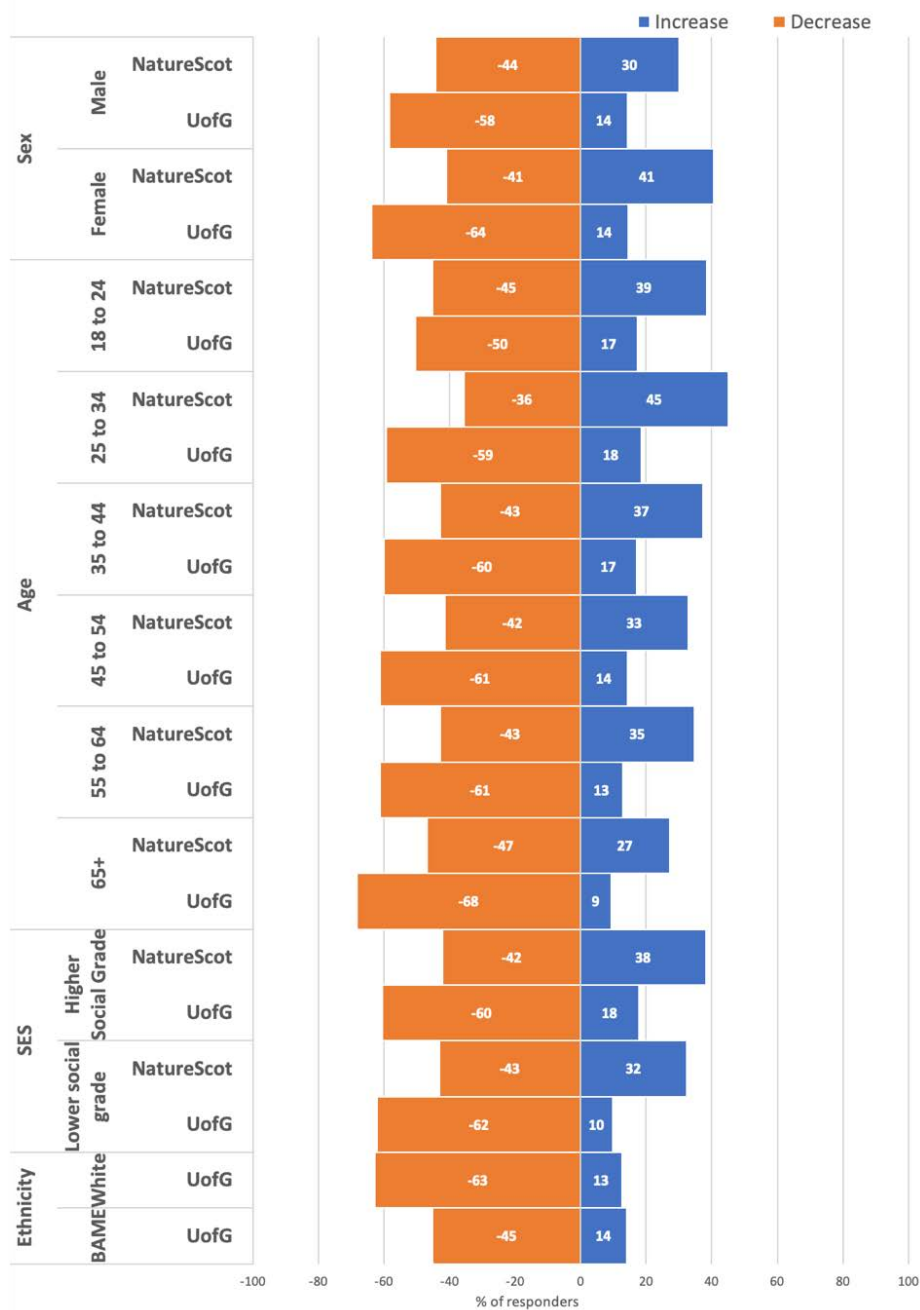
- Individuals of higher social grade were more likely to report increases in use, and also greater benefits to their mental health.

Ethnicity:

- The ethnicity data should be treated with caution due to low numbers within the BAME group. BAME individuals were more likely to report greater benefits to their mental health from green and open space during lockdown than white individuals. White individuals were more likely to report reductions in use of green and open spaces than BAME individuals.

Change in time spent in green and open space during lockdown

Both surveys found more people reporting reduced time spent outdoors than increased time. The NatureScot survey found 43% spent less time outdoors than usual and 35% spent more time. The YouGov survey, carried out during a stricter phase of lockdown, found 61% spent less time and 14% more time. The tendency to report decreased use got stronger with age and was more marked among the white population compared to the BAME population.



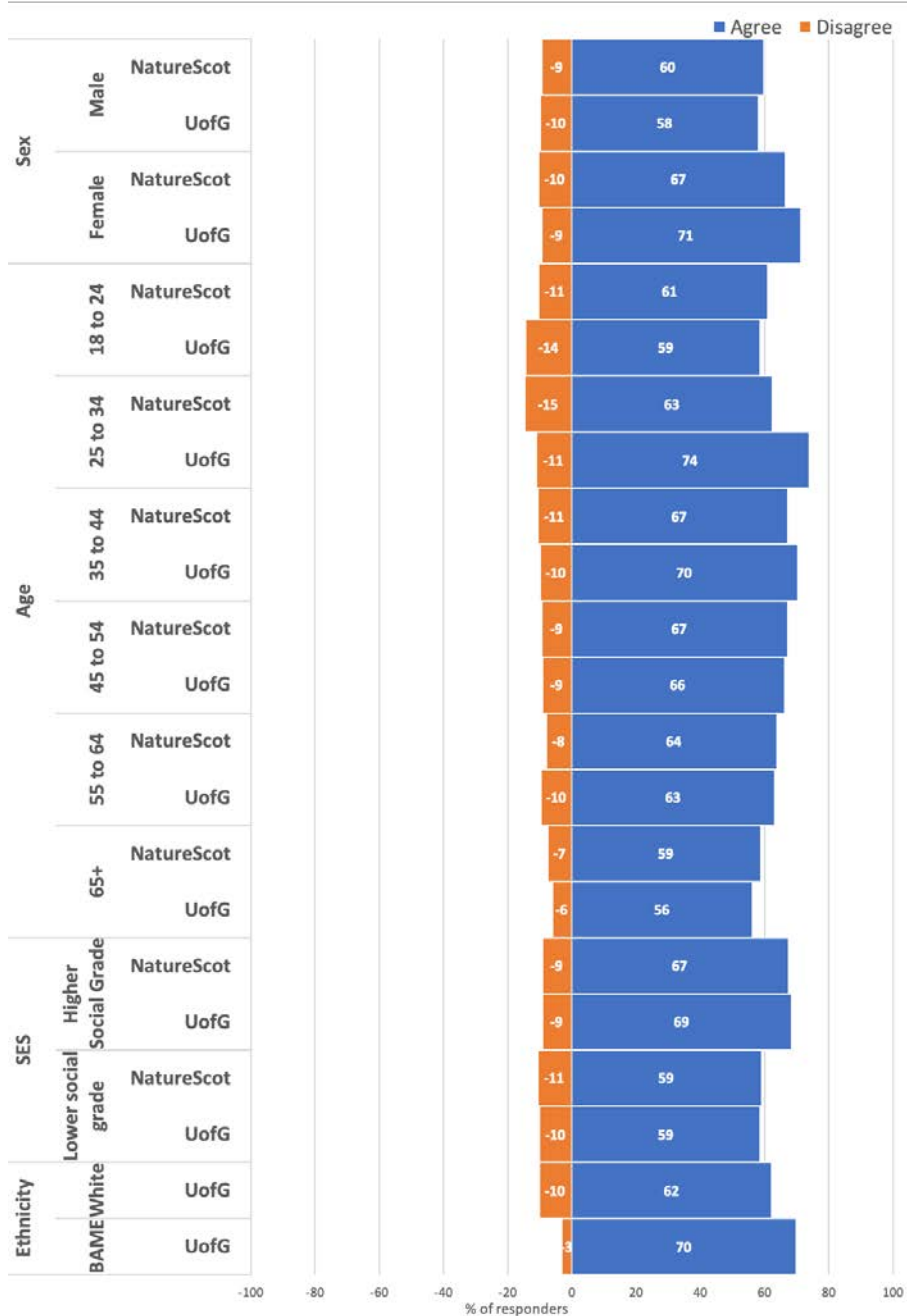
Survey Questions:

University of Glasgow (UofG) (Apr/May 20): "How much, if at all, has the amount of time that you have spent visiting green spaces changed since the 'lock down' movement restrictions began (i.e. since 23rd March 2020)?"

NatureScot (May/Jun 20): "Compared to the same period last year, how much did the amount of time you spend outdoors for leisure, recreation or exercise increase or decrease during the lockdown period?"

Green and open space has benefitted my Mental Health

About two thirds of individuals reported that green and open space benefitted their mental health during the COVID-1 lockdown period (NatureScot survey, 63%, University of Glasgow (UofG), 65%). Reporting mental health benefits was slightly more likely for females, young adults (25 to 44 years old), those of higher social grade and BAME individuals.



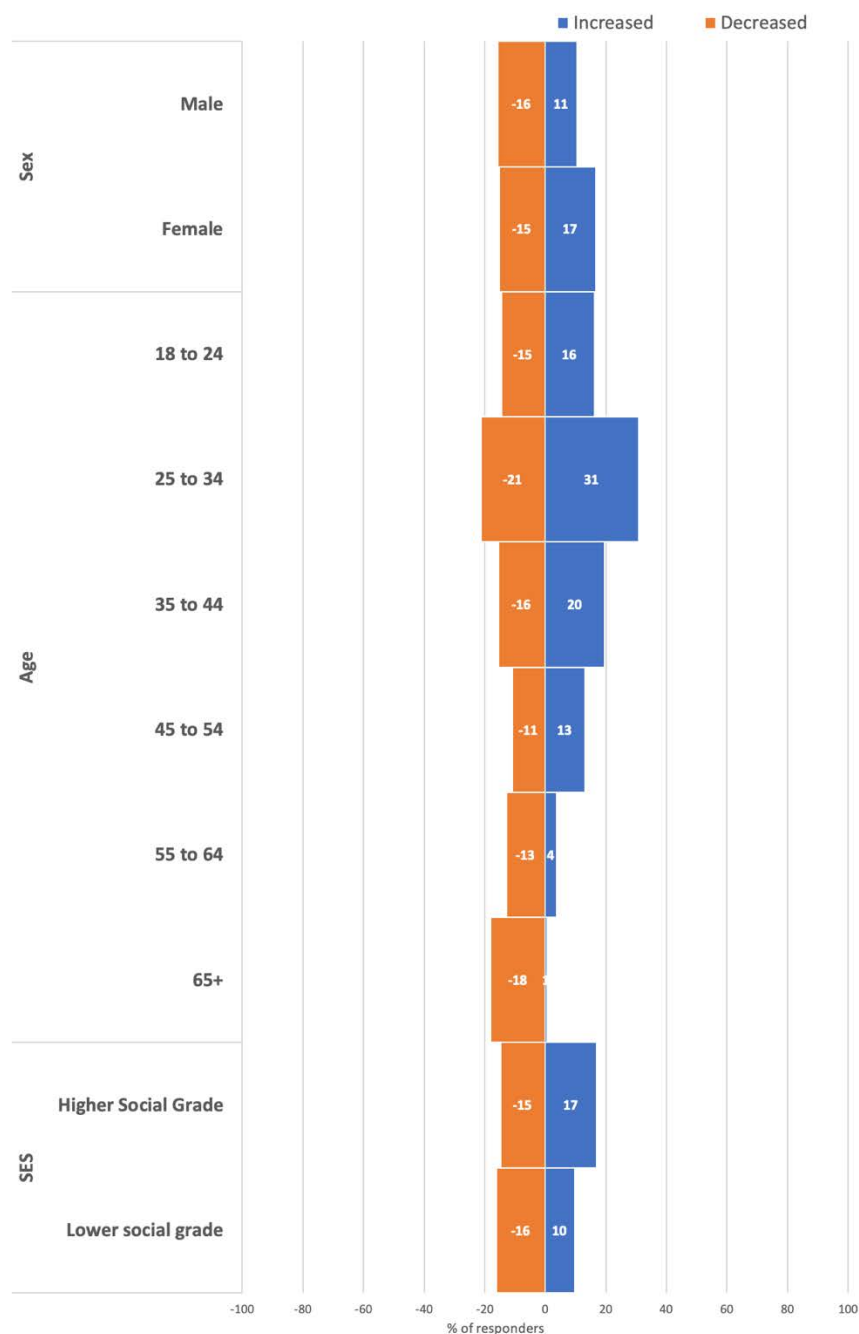
Survey Questions:

University of Glasgow (UofG) (Apr/May 20): "I feel that being in green spaces benefits my mental health more now, than before the movement restrictions were in place"

NatureScot (May/Jun 20): "Thinking about the time you have spent outdoors and any other ways you have enjoyed nature during lockdown, to what extent do you agree or disagree that it helped me to de-stress, relax and unwind"

Playing outside with children during lockdown

Females, younger adults (18 to 44 years old) and those of higher social grade were more likely to report an increase in the amount of time they spent playing outside with children during lockdown. Time spent playing outside with children decreased for older individuals (aged 55+). Additional data on the impact of COVID-19 on children's interaction with green and open space following COVID-19 can be found in [Report 2 of The Public Health Scotland COVID-19 Early years resilience and impact survey \(CEYRIS\)](#).

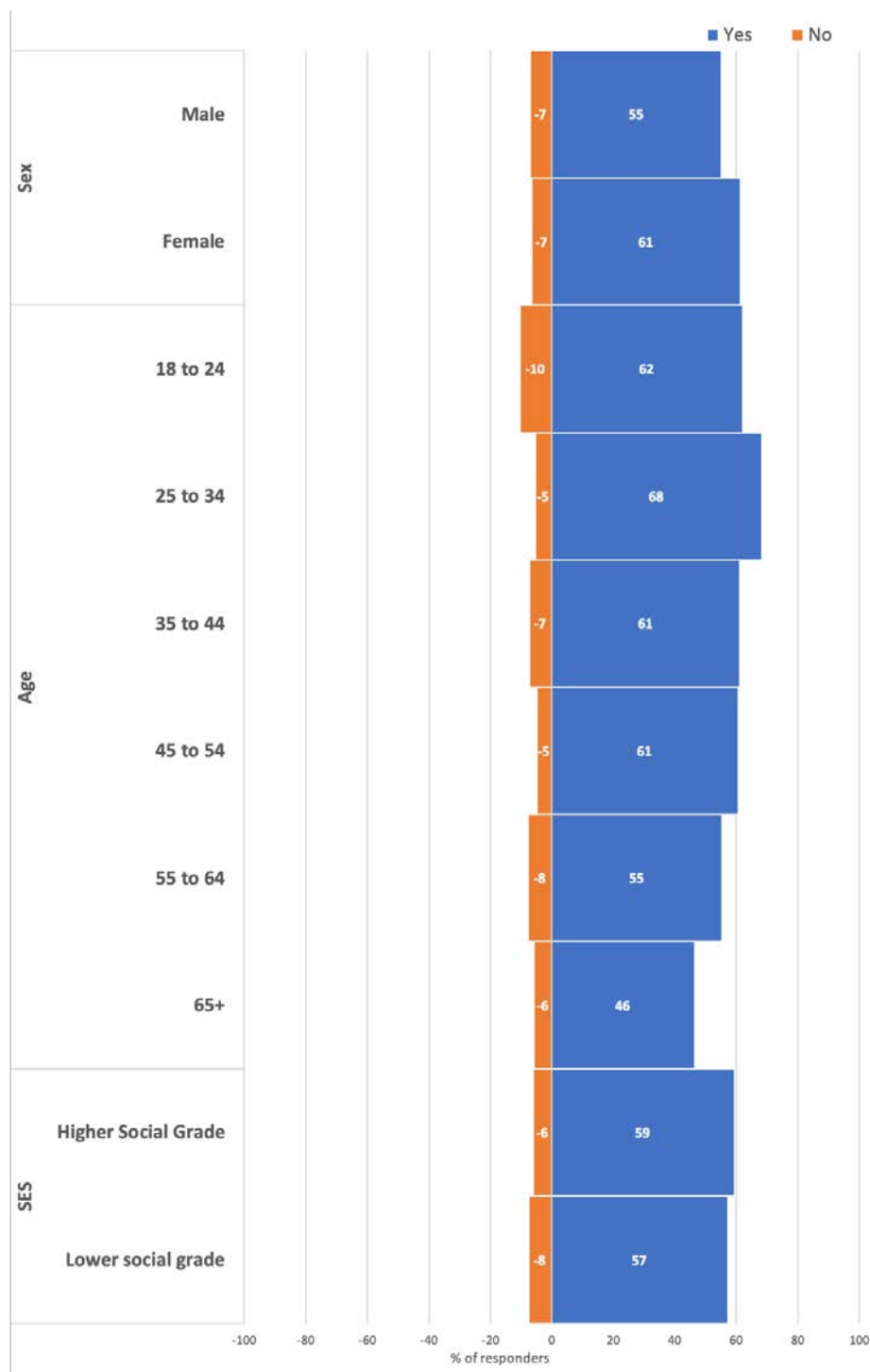


Survey Question:

NatureScot (May/June 20): "Compared to the same time last year, how much, if at all, has the amount that you do the following activities changed during lockdown? – Playing outside with Children"

I will make more use of green and open space in the future

A clear majority of individuals (58%) agreed that they intend use make more use of green and open space in the future. Females and younger individuals (18 to 34 years old) were slightly more likely to have this intention.



Survey Question:

NatureScot (May/Jun 20): "After lockdown, I will make more use of my local greenspace (e.g. parks, woods, paths and tracks)"

The Social and Systems Recovery - Environment and Spaces Group is hosted by Public Health Scotland (PHS). The group was established to bring together evidence on how our responses to the COVID-19 pandemic have affected our environment and spaces and how people interact within these, articulate how this might impact on people's health and wellbeing, and use this to inform national and local responses to policy and practice.

Members of the group include colleagues from:

CoSLA

Directors of Public Health

Greenspace Scotland

GCV Green Network

Glasgow Centre for Population Health

Glasgow City Council

Green Action Trust

Healthy Homes working group

Improvement Service

Inspiring Scotland

Living Streets

NatureScot

Play Scotland

Public Health Scotland

Scottish Health Promotion Managers

Scottish Government

Scottish Land Commission

SEPA

University of Glasgow

DOI: 10.36399/gla.pubs.223180

Published by the MRC/CSO Social and Public Health Sciences Unit

Berkeley Square

99 Berkeley Street

Glasgow

G3 7HR

Gla.ac.uk/sphsu

Twitter: [@theSPHSU](https://twitter.com/theSPHSU)