

Detailed findings from YouGov National Poll on Addiction Behaviours in UK's lockdown's – Oct 2022

Population Estimates:

1. All UK adults who were not in recovery themselves or did not know someone in recovery prior the COVID-19 pandemic: 42,431,012
2. All UK adults who were not in recovery themselves or did not know someone in recovery prior the increase in cost of living: 42,954,851
3. All UK Adults who either had an addiction themselves but were in recovery prior to the COVID-19 pandemic (March 2020), or have someone they know personally in this scenario: 5,238,397
4. All UK Adults who either had an addiction themselves but were in recovery prior to the increase in the cost of living (February 2022), or have someone they know personally in this scenario: 4,714,557
5. All UK Adults who had experienced problems as a result of an increase in drinking during the COVID-19 pandemic: 1,960,313
6. All UK Adults who were not in recovery and had experienced an increase in gambling during the COVID-19 pandemic: 2,121,550
7. All UK Adults who had experienced an increase in drinking since increase in cost of living (Feb 2022): 2,147,743

Impact of pandemic on recovery

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47% of UK adults surveyed online who identified as being in recovery from an addiction, or, knowing someone in recovery from addiction prior to the COVID-19 pandemic have experienced a relapse or a re-occurrence of their addictive behaviour during the pandemic. On a national scale, replicated across the population this would be equivalent to more than 2.4 million people in recovery from an addiction having experienced some form of relapse during the pandemic (i.e. March 2020 to February 2022).

Polling in 2021 indicated that between the first lockdown and May 2021, 37% of UK adults who identified as being in recovery from an addiction had experienced a relapse themselves, and had a relative who had experienced this.¹

This indicates a growing trend of addiction relapse or self-identified relapse during the UK lockdowns and the height of the covid 19 pandemic.

People reporting relapse also report a high level of anxiety, stress or trauma related to the pandemic and other changing external factors. 48% of those reporting a relapse (either themselves or someone they know) during the pandemic reported that they/ the person experiencing relapse experienced anxiety, stress or trauma related to fears about the future,

¹ September 2022 Base: All UK adults who either had an addiction themselves but were in recovery prior to the COVID-19 pandemic (March 2020), or have someone they know personally in this scenario and had a relapse.
May 2021 Base: All UK adults who either had an addiction themselves but were in recovery prior to lockdown, or have a friend or relative in this scenario

41% experienced this related to economic uncertainty and 34% experienced this related to the pandemic.

First indication yet that anxiety, stress and trauma related to future concerns coincided with addiction relapse. Indicating the wider impact of the pandemic and changing economic outlook is having on people's recovery.

Impact of pandemic on addiction behaviour in UK adults not in recovery

22% of adults not in recovery or who did not know someone in recovery from an addiction prior to the COVID-19 pandemic say they have increased the amount of alcohol they are drinking during the pandemic since before the pandemic. In the 2021 survey, 19% of those not in recovery increased the amount of alcohol they were drinking since the lockdown started (i.e. since March 2020).²

For the UK as a whole that could mean over 9 million people increasing their intake of alcohol during the pandemic. In 2020 and 2021, 3% of all UK Adults not in recovery prior to lockdown reported drinking *a lot* more alcohol since the first UK lockdown started. Worryingly, in the 2022 study, 6% of all UK adults who were not in recovery themselves or did not know someone in recovery prior to the COVID-19 indicated they had increased their drinking *a lot* during the pandemic.

21% of adults not in recovery who increased the amount of alcohol they were drinking during the pandemic experienced related problems (such as relationship difficulties, managing work, sleeping problems, physical symptoms of withdrawal, debt etc.). In 2021, 17% of all UK adults who have increased their alcohol use during lockdown experienced these problems. Replicated across the country this would mean that a little over 1.9 million people are experiencing problems associated with increased alcohol consumption during the pandemic. This indicates a rising impact from people drinking more and experiencing addiction symptoms associated with it.

Of people who said they were experiencing problems due to their increased alcohol consumption, 25% of this group said they found it difficult to resolve these problems associated with their increased drinking. Replicated across the UK population this would mean over 490,000 people, who have not previously been in recovery from an addiction, finding it difficult to resolve problems associated with their increased alcohol intake.

5% of all UK adults who were not in recovery themselves or did not know someone in recovery prior the COVID-19 pandemic surveyed say they have increased the amount of online gambling they are doing. Replicated across the UK population this would mean roughly 2.1 million people have increased their online gambling during the pandemic. 5% of respondents not in recovery also increased their online gambling during lockdown in the 2021 results.

Of those who had increased the amount of online gambling they are doing during the pandemic, 26% say they have experienced problems associated with their increased online gambling during the pandemic. In 2021, 15% experienced problems during lockdown. This could suggest over 550,000 people experiencing problems associated with increase in gambling and is consistent with the results from May 2020 when the UK at the start of the pandemic.

² September 2022 Base: *All UK adults who were not in recovery themselves or did not know someone in recovery prior the COVID-19 pandemic*

May 2021 Base: *All UK adults not in recovery prior to lockdown*

3% of people surveyed not in recovery say they have increased the amount of illicit drugs they were taking during the pandemic. If replicated across the population this would mean over 1.2 million people increasing the amount of illicit drugs they were taking.

Addictive behaviour cost of living crisis (from Feb 22 to Oct 22)

Of all UK adults surveyed 83% said they were worried about the increasing cost of living –

Cost of living crisis and recovery

Of all adults surveyed who were in recovery, or knew someone in recovery prior to February 22 (the start of the cost of living crisis) 32% reported they (or someone close to them) had experienced a relapse – just 8 months into the crisis.

Of this group 61% reported experiencing anxiety, stress or trauma related to cost of living and 56% reported anxiety, stress or trauma related to economic uncertainty and rising inflation. Just 22% were reported experiencing these symptoms in relation to the pandemic. Whilst concern about the pandemic was falling – people are now experiencing anxiety, stress or trauma related to cost of living crisis. Moving from one crisis to another with continued pressure on mental health and addiction.

Cost of living crisis and addictive behaviours

5% of adults who were not in any form of recovery from an addiction or who didn't know anyone in recovery prior to the cost of living crisis say they have increased the amount of alcohol they are drinking since the increase in the cost of living started. This is lower than the increase in drinking reported in the 2 year period of the pandemic. Replicated nationally this would mean over 2.1 million people increasing the amount they are drinking since the cost of living crisis.

However, given the increase in drinking reported during the pandemic, only 21% reported a decrease in their drinking.

In the 8 months of the cost of living crisis months 25% of people who have increased the amount of alcohol they are drinking experienced related problems (such as relationship difficulties, managing work, sleeping problems, physical symptoms of withdrawal, debt etc.). If this was replicated nationally this would mean just over 530,000 experiencing symptoms associated with addiction from increased drinking since the start of the cost of living crisis.

Addictive behaviour and mental health

Overall 20% of adults who reported experiencing consequences from increased drinking, gambling or use of illicit drugs since the cost of living crisis said they would definitely or probably need or needed help or treatment for this.

For all those reporting an increase in consumption of alcohol, illicit drugs or gambling since February 2022, 40% said that increased consumption could be attributed to anxiety about the current rise in cost of living with 30% saying it could be attributed to fears about the future.

How common is addiction in UK communities?

44% of UK adults reported that potentially addictive behaviours (such as illicit drug taking, excessive drinking or gambling) are becoming more common in public spaces – e.g. parks, high streets, town and/ or city centres.

29% reported addictive behaviours are becoming more commonplace at educational settings, such as schools, colleges or universities.

23% reported addictive behaviours are becoming more commonplace at sporting venues and 33% reported addictive behaviours are becoming more commonplace in pubs, clubs and/ or restaurants.

Editor notes:

Oct 2022;

Main dataset:

All figures, unless otherwise stated, are from YouGov Plc. Total sample size was 2067 adults. Fieldwork was undertaken between 11th - 12th October 2022. The survey was carried out online. The figures have been weighted and are representative of all UK adults (aged 18+).

Worries about cost of living dataset:

All figures, unless otherwise stated, are from YouGov Plc. Total sample size was 2051 adults. Fieldwork was undertaken between 14th - 16th October 2022. The survey was carried out online. The figures have been weighted and are representative of all UK adults (aged 18+).

May 2021 and 2020:

All figures, unless otherwise stated, are from YouGov Plc. Total sample size was 2088 adults. Fieldwork was undertaken between 6-7th May 2021 and 15th - 17th May 2020. The survey was carried out online. The figures have been weighted and are representative of all UK adults (aged 18+).

Analysis:

Population estimates are calculated by Action on Addiction, using the UK population and statistics within the data. The following population estimates are used for calculations in these findings:

1. All UK adults who were not in recovery themselves or did not know someone in recovery prior the COVID-19 pandemic: 42,431,012
2. All UK adults who were not in recovery themselves or did not know someone in recovery prior the increase in cost of living: 42,954,851
3. All UK Adults who either had an addiction themselves but were in recovery prior to the COVID-19 pandemic (March 2020), or have someone they know personally in this scenario: 5,238,397
4. All UK Adults who either had an addiction themselves but were in recovery prior to the increase in the cost of living (February 2022), or have someone they know personally in this scenario: 4,714,557
All UK Adults who were not in recovery and had experienced an increase in drinking during the COVID-19 pandemic: 9,334,823
5. All UK Adults who had experienced problems as a result of an increase in drinking during the COVID-19 pandemic: 1,960,313
6. All UK Adults who were not in recovery and had experienced an increase in gambling during the COVID-19 pandemic: 2,121,550
7. All UK Adults who had experienced an increase in drinking since increase in cost of living (Feb 2022): 2,147,743