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What People Said about Life under Lockdown

Abstract

The article discusses results from the IGPS/Roy McKenzie Centre Covid-19 lockdown survey, focusing on what people reported about their experiences of the level 4 lockdown, both positive and negative, in an open-field response. New Zealanders' responses allow identification of some common themes. Some of these themes, perhaps, come as a surprise: generally, a plurality of people were positive about the lockdown, particularly in terms of the benefits of time with their family, with a majority having either positive or mixed/neutral feelings. Less surprisingly, work was also on a lot of people's minds. The results also illustrate a wide diversity of human experiences during the lockdown.

Keywords time, family, work, level 4 lockdown, zombies

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The Institute for Governance and Policy Studies and the Roy McKenzie Centre for the Study of Families and Children, in conjunction with Colmar Brunton, collected a 'Life under lockdown' survey looking at well-being, family life and work during the third week of alert level 4 lockdown. The survey finished with an optional open field question, limited to 280 characters (i.e., a Twitter-length response): Is there anything else you would like to tell us about your experiences of lockdown, positive or negative? Of the 2,000 respondents, 894, or 44.7%, gave a usable response, an unanticipated positive result.¹ We have a rich historical record of the thoughts of many ordinary New Zealanders during the pandemic lockdown.²

This article considers people's responses, looking at themes derived from a simple reading, as well as from coding responses and from considering word counts. Themes identified are illustrated by quoted responses. No socio-demographic information is provided for quotes, for two reasons. First, it helps protect confidentiality.

Table 1: Who's more likely to make a useable response? Useable responses by socio-demographics

	% useable responses from group
Overall	44.7
Gender	
Female	47.2
Male	42.9
Age	
Under 30	29.2
30 to 49	41.9
50 to 64	52.4
65 and over	61.5
Ethnicity	
NZ European	45.1
Māori	48.0
Pacific	42.9
Indian	34.9
Asian	46.2
Household income	
< \$20,000	42.8
\$20,001-\$30,000	46.8
\$30,001-\$50,000	50.4
\$50,001-\$70,000	42.1
\$70,001-\$100,000	42.6
\$100,001-\$150,000	42.6
\$150,001>	46.1
Highest education	
Primary or secondary school	44.4
Diploma	48.9
Undergraduate degree	42.1
Postgraduate degree	43.1

Second, it avoids reducing individuals' voices into prior-driven socio-demographic boxes. Where a response was sufficiently detailed that a respondent might still be identifiable, detail was removed. For reasons of delivering immediacy of voice, quotations from responses are rendered in their original spelling and grammar.

Respondents and their basic socio-demographics

In aggregate, do those who responded to the open field question differ greatly from the broader sample in terms of socio-demographics? That question is explored in Table 1. Variations in responses according to people's gender, ethnicity, household income and education are not especially important. However, there was a much stronger tendency for older people to respond.

Positive, mixed and negative responses

The responses were coded into three broad categories: 'Generally positive', 'Mixed positive and negative and neutral', and 'Generally negative'. Coding was based on feelings expressed in the response, not whether the person apparently supported or didn't support the lockdown. The plurality of responses (43%) were positive, positive plus neutral or mixed were about two thirds (43% positive plus 23% mixed), and just over one third of responses (35%) were negative about their experiences during lockdown. Several interesting socio-demographic patterns emerged. First, there were few gender differences. Younger people tended to offer more positive comments and older people more negative comments, but differences were not great, so the greater likelihood of older people responding (Table 1) is unlikely to have greatly biased the responses towards the negative. Second, New Zealand Europeans were less likely to offer positive responses than non-Māori minority ethnic groups. Māori fell in-between the majority and the other minorities. Third, in terms of socio-economic status, those in the bottom two income bands were noticeably more likely to offer a negative comment, as were people with non-tertiary education.

Word counts and what matters³

A total of 18,011 words were provided, averaging 20 per respondent. On average, people used 108 out of their 280-character quota. For the analysis presented in Figure 1, word count rankings excluded function words, pronouns, and definite and indefinite articles and the word lockdown. The raw frequency of use of the remaining 20 most common words is shown in Figure 1.

Time and family

'Time' was the most-used word, at 193 times. It was used with multiple meanings. Time was used positively in the sense of time spent with family, partner or children in 92 responses. In terms of four-word combinations, 'time with my family' (7 mentions), 'quality time with family' (5), 'more time with family' (4), 'time with each other' (3) and 'time with the family' (3) were all found. Three shorter complete examples of this quite pronounced trend include 'Great family bonding time', 'Lockdown has been good for our family – quality time', and 'More quality time spent as a whānau. Routines were still maintained. They miss their peers but appear generally happy.' For another, it was appreciation of new temporal opportunities: 'loely to spend more time at home and with my grilfreind'. For yet another, it represented a first-time opportunity: an example of longer feedback on the positives of the use of 'time' was:

It's been a good way to focus on what's important in my life. Personally for me it's been a good time for me to connect with my 2 year old and enjoy having time with my Husband and Parents. On the flip side it's highlighted what I've missed due to working.

For some, time was used positively in a personal sense. Lockdown could be a chance for personal growth: 'have enjoyed the time off to renew myself'. For another, it was a first-time opportunity: 'I've enjoyed a holiday from work as I have never had longer than a week off. Could never afford it.'

Some – 22 responses in total – used 'time' negatively, usually succinctly. Examples include 'Lots of productive time wasted', 'very board a lot of the time', and 'it sux big time'. The balance of uses of time were mostly not relevant, 'time being', 'critical times' or 'part time' being examples.

The single most common focus of the nouns which people used was related to family in various forms. 'Family' was used 147 times in responses ('whānau' was used once). Other words related to family which were popular were linked to children – 'children' itself (36), 'child' (10) and 'kids' (34). These counts underestimated the

degree of focus on children, since there were seven mentions by respondents of their child as, for example, a '4-year old'. People also mentioned 'partner' (27), 'husband(s)' (26) and 'wife' or 'wives' (17). 'Mums' were mentioned eight times, while 'dad(s)' were not mentioned. 'Daughter(s)' received 14 mentions, while 'son(s)' had five. There was one mention of a 'grandson' and three of 'granddaughters'. The large majority of these family references were positive. Fewer than a dozen family references were negative.

Place: home, work, shops and school

Place, and activity linked with that place, was an important dimension of people's responses, with 'home' (126) and 'house' (31), unsurprisingly, figuring strongly.

Various dimensions of work also showed up prominently (of course, work can function as both a noun and a verb). 'Work' was mentioned often – 116 times – while 'working' (48), 'job(s)' (47) and 'worker(s)' (17) were also important. The pay dimension of work was mentioned somewhat less, but it still figured in people's accounts. 'Money' figured 22 times, but 'pay' (17), 'income' (16), 'wages' (7) and 'salary' (2) were also on the horizon.

People also reported on losing jobs: 'I lost my job because of Covid19 and still can't find another job which is pretty sad', or simply 'Lost job'. Others worried about job loss for others: 'Some of my friends lost jobs and losing jobs even if they have families. Also my company did some redundant' and 'those with jobs and full pay are the lucky ones. Some of my friends and workmates have lost theirs'. For another, job loss was complex: 'Lost job but quickly found another after 2 weeks. Partner upset as I got night shift.'

Others were simply worried: 'Very worried about loosing my job. And finding a another job during this time will probably be very difficult and stressful'; 'I'm just worried/depressed that I won't have a job and be able to help out my family with finances, that's what's making me feel worthless because I got laid off, it's not fair that I'm the youngest and I can't help out'; 'Just uncertain for my partner to get a job very testing times' or 'continuos worry about job security'.

Table 2: Positive, Mixed or neutral and Negative expressions by socio-demographic characteristics

	Generally positive %	Mixed and Neutral %	Generally negative %
Overall	43.0	22.6	34.5
Gender			
Female	42.7	23.7	33.6
Male	43.3	21.6	35.1
Age			
Under 30	46.2	24.6	29.2
30 to 49	44.3	21.2	34.5
50 to 64	41.8	22.9	35.3
65 and over	40.2	22.9	36.9
Ethnicity			
NZ European	38.8	24.4	36.6
Māori	45.0	20.6	34.4
Pacific	53.7	19.4	26.6
Indian	53.8	17.3	28.8
Other Asian	53.5	19.8	26.7
Household income			
< \$20,000	43.1	12.3	44.6
\$20,001-\$30,000	27.5	30.0	42.5
\$30,001-\$50,000	41.8	24.9	33.3
\$50,001-\$70,000	47.3	22.9	29.8
\$70,001-\$100,000	48.9	19.3	31.8
\$100,001-\$150,000	40.6	25.6	33.8
\$150,001 >	44.8	20.0	35.2
Highest education			
Primary or secondary school	38.8	22.0	39.2
Diploma	42.0	25.9	32.1
Undergraduate degree	48.9	21.3	29.8
Postgraduate degree	44.9	19.2	35.9

Figure 1: 20 most commonly used words

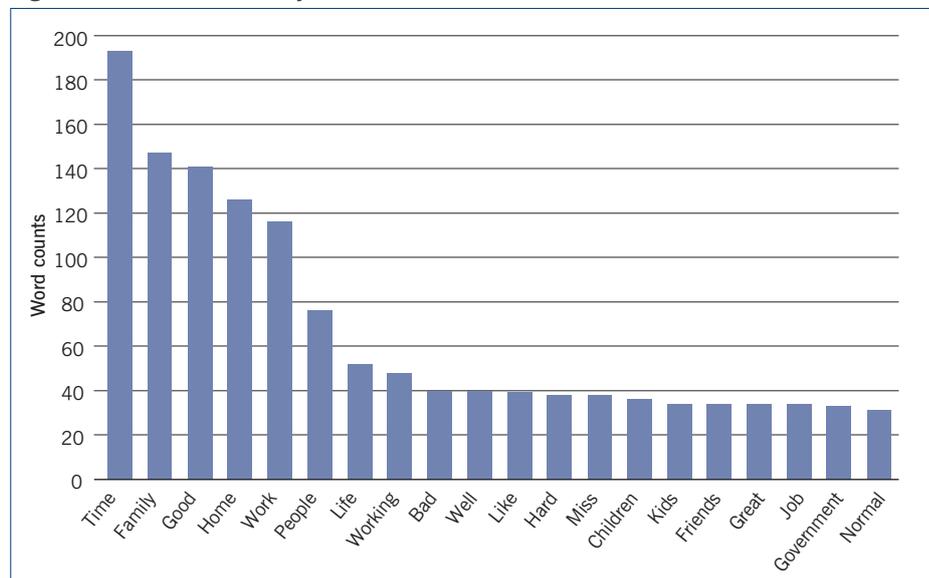


Table 3: Top 20 feelings or emotions mentioned

Feeling or emotion	Word count
Good	141
Enjoy/enjoying/enjoyed	63
Stressful/stresses/stressed/stress	45
Bad	40
Hard	38
Miss	38
Great	34
Difficult	25
Happy	21
Nice	16
Ok/okay	15
Boring	14
Worry	13
Better	13
Fine	12
Missing	11
Tough	11
Coping	11
Positive	10
Worried	10

Pay cuts or disputes were mentioned by several people: ‘Bit worried about reduced pay hard to pay bills loans n stuff’; ‘happy to be in work even if i took a pay cut and hours reduced , has been tough on partner with son home for so long’; ‘the most distressing and stressful thing has been dealing with my job and disputes re hours and pay – it has basically been the whole cause of my angst during lockdown’; and

It is bad because even though my employer gets 13 million in wage subsidy, my pay has been reduced to only 80%. I am just slightly above minimum wage and my wage subsidy is used to top-up those highly paid managers who can afford a wage cut or reduction.

Others, however, reported positive effects of luck in this context. For example:

We sold our 2nd house just before lockdown, things would be alot different for us if this sale did not go through. With my husband no longer employed and my pay being reduced we would not be able to meet our financial obligations had we not sold the house the week of lockdown.

Not surprisingly, school was a focus for people. ‘Schooling/learning’, ‘schools’, ‘school’, ‘schooling’, ‘homeschool’ and ‘homeschooled’ came up 30 times in total. Many reported struggles. For some, the challenge was managing children of different ages: ‘Definitely finding it hard to help 3 kids all at different levels complete their school work, especially with a toddler running around.’ For others, it was balancing home schooling with working from home: ‘It’s so difficult trying to manage schooling/learning for the kids while also making time to work from home. Very stressful.’

The last place-based focus related to shops and shopping. ‘Shopping’ was most mentioned at 27 times, followed by ‘supermarket(s)’ with 23, while ‘shop(s)’ (15) and butcher(s) (6) both also drew some attention. Surprisingly, ‘café’ and ‘mall’ only figured once each.

Expressions of feeling and emotion

Expressions of emotions and feelings were common. Table 3 shows the most common words used that related to feeling or emotion. The table supports the coded predominance of positive or mixed responses to lockdown over negative responses. Table 3 shows that positive emotions seem generally stronger, with the top two feelings and emotions being positives, although, on balance, approximately half of emotive words identified were positive and half were negative.

‘Good’, with 141 mentions, was nearly as popular a word as ‘family’. Good was used positively in the large majority of 124 responses and negatively in 10 responses – for example, ‘Not good for the general economy’ (the balance is either double use in a response, or non-relevant use, e.g. ‘good morning’). The phrase ‘been good’ was used 16 times and ‘all good’ was used 11 times, while ‘not good’ was used six times, illustrating a positive dominance.

The next most popular word after ‘good’ was some dimension of ‘enjoy’. The combination of ‘not enjoy’ was not used. The first potentially negative word was some variant of ‘stress’, with 40 responses here. Thirty respondents used this variant in a negative manner, while the balance are positive or neutral.

Interestingly, positive emotions were often coupled with feelings about time. For example, this was a typical positive response in tone and content incorporating both ‘time’ and ‘enjoy’ and noting a lack of ‘stress’: ‘Homelife has not posed any stress in our bubble durring lockdown, we have found many things to keep busy and are enjoying our time together’. Sometimes ‘enjoy’ was in the context of mixed emotions: ‘I quite enjoy working from home (warm, comfortable, quiet) but I am lucky that I can work from home. It does get lonely though but I manage it.’

There was also a non-trivial amount of negative emotion registered. For example, ‘not being able to’ (17) was the top four-word phrase used, illustrating constraints on activities, and used more than twice as often as ‘time with my family’ (7). Someone wrote, using the term twice:

The worst thing has been not being able to attend Church, especially over the Easter Season!! Not being able to see family and friends is also difficult, I feel very concerned as to the effect this will have on the economy of our country and all the younger generations to come!!

A few people expressed mental health concerns: ‘Really not good for mental health being confined, especially with having history of mental health issues’ and ‘It feels oppressive and is a struggle mentally’ are two examples.

Additional feelings of gender stress in relation to alcohol were recorded:

Men that are home on full pay while wife works thinking yeah it holiday time sleep when they want do bugger all round home to catch up drink when should be doing chores that needed doing not considering often oh i should cook give partner that working a break plain annoying.

But for others lockdown has offered partial and possibly temporary solutions:

I can say that my husband has to come straight home and not make pit stops to his best friends house on Friday after work to have drinks. Samoan churches been so demanding about how \$100 fortnightly is compulsory for donations to the priest. Being grateful beyond measure.

For another, lockdown was the last straw:

After lockdown my partner and I will separate!!! Being in lockdown emphasised the difficulties with our relationship. Nonetheless I think that the lockdown was important and necessary and that it saved many NZ lives.

Other dimensions

Some people mentioned undertaking exercise or leisure activities. Eleven people mentioned 'run(s)' or 'running', 12 people 'walks' or 'walking' and 18 people mentioned 'garden(ing)'. There were nine mentions of 'dog', including 'after lockdown i have found i spent more time with my beloved dog, which is one of my best friend n family' and 'PUBLIC PARKS HAVE BECOME DOG POOP AND CRAZY BIKERS'. 'Fish(ing)' got two mentions and 'surf' only one. 'Hunt(ing)' and 'tramp(ing)' were not mentioned. All of these leisure activities had some prominence in the media as activities people wanted to do but were prevented from doing under lockdown. They did not grip the imaginations of the respondents.

'Government(s)' was mentioned 36 times, mostly positively, sometimes neutrally and sometimes negatively. Politics, however, was not overly prominent in responses. 'Labour' was used two times and 'National' once. 'Jacinda' (never 'Ardern' alone) was mentioned ten times, with comments like 'Jacinda is doing a great job. Just can't wait till this is over' (coded a

'Mixed' response), 'I think Jacinda Adern & Ashley Bloomfield are my latest heroes!' and 'Lockdown has been fine. I think it is the best thing we could have done in the circumstances and makes me proud to be a New Zealander and a supporter of the Labour government and Jacinda.' There were fewer negative political views expressed. An example is: 'the only anger I feel is for the extreme over reaction by Government and the sheep like obedience of the populace'.

There were situations where the respondent was playing with a very difficult hand. Here are six examples:

Person 1: I cry lol the time I'm worried about money and the long term affects of this situation on our household and our finances, I am hanging on by a thread.

Person 2: My husband past away on ... [xxxx]. I need my kids and family here, but they live out of town,..... it's going to be awhile and that's so sad

Person 3: full time from home, homeschool...children...)teaching things you learnt from ... years ago would normally be challenging enough, with the added stress of being ... pregnant with a high risk pregnancy (I have previously lost ...[x] babies) no fun

Person 4: I felt really bad not being able to take flowers to the cemetery on the first anniversary of my husband's death.

Person 5: I have got really bad hives and dental pain during the lockdown. I supposed to have a replaced filling only but now I need to do a root canal. My hives are still not under the control but I am running out of medications. No doctor & specialists are available for further diagnose.

Person 6: Zero income in house. Frustration applying for support on internet. We give up. Wins suck. Really suck. It feels like their working life based on trying to find a reason to decline supporting people has left them

as the worst place for the public to need to go to for support.

Finally, there were humorous or striking responses, intended or otherwise. One person's response was: 'If you really wanted me to answer this you wouldn't have limited the maximum text input, so no.' Another remarked: 'Stop using that bloody word "bubble" God I hate that word to describe home. Hang whoever decided to use it.' Another used a striking metaphor to describe their children's pleasure:

My children are enjoying having me home, they have been like Pauas stuck to me the whole time, so I have been dropping hints and letting them know that I may be going back to work soon, my big girl thinks driving a log truck is stupid and I should work at her school, hmmm

Zombies were on another's mind: 'This is the closest I'm ever going to get to a zombie apocalypse, and it's all just so boring. This is not at all what I was expecting.' And one was simply amused by our questions: 'I enjoyed reading the questions regarding my wife. It gave us a laugh.'

Conclusion

Overall, many more people were positive about the experience of lockdown than anticipated. Responses indicate the strong and positive importance for people of family and time spent with family during lockdown. They also indicate the importance of work to people. The responses also tell us about human resilience and the diversity of individuals' experiences, of humour, hardships and tragedies.

- 1 Respondents who gave a 'No', 'Nope' or some other variant response were excluded as unusable.
- 2 We thank all who did our survey. We are extra grateful to all who responded to our additional open field question.
- 3 Word counts were analysed using <https://www.online-utility.org/text/analyzer.jsp>.