



# Behavioural Insights research for the control of COVID-19 in the EU

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## Background



- Behavioural Insights (BI) research can help us to understand **behavioural choices, barriers and drivers** within a population
- Highly relevant for addressing **pandemic fatigue** and for **promoting vaccination**
- Knowledge, attitudes and behaviours can be both **dynamic over time and geographically specific**:
  - Authorities need to have behavioural insights, on an ongoing basis, to make decisions that are consistent with population needs and expectations



- BI research has played a major role in:
  - HIV/AIDS pandemic
  - SARS, 2002–03
  - Ebola, 2014–16
  - Zika, 2016–17
- But it is still not fully integrated into the preparedness and response systems in many countries
- *What, therefore, is the status of BI in the EU/EEA during the COVID-19 pandemic?*

## Methods



- 10 (of 31) EU/EEA countries responded to our call for interviews with national level experts
  - Cyprus, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Norway, Slovenia, Spain and Sweden
- Interviews took place between 16 October 2020 and 13 January 2021 (i.e. pre-vaccine rollout)
- Open-ended, qualitative questions on **integration of BI findings into risk communication** and **decision making processes**

## Results



- Most BI research has been **quantitative**: nationally representative samples of the general population
- Four countries had used WHO-EURO's **COSMO tool** (standardised survey instrument, covers 21 broad topics)
- Most countries have conducted **serial cross-sectional surveys**, allowing for comparisons over time
- Most commonly studied area: assessments of **population acceptance of/compliance with NPIs**
- **Qualitative BI research** not as widely used: limited capacities, time, resources and staff

## Structural and governance challenges



- A **spectrum** in the ease with which BI findings contribute to the decision-making process
- **BI not extensively integrated** into national COVID-19 management teams in many countries
- General under-representation of social and behavioural sciences (as compared to biomedical expertise)



- Strong links between key institutions doing BI may exist (MoH, NIPH, President's/PM's Office), but **coordination** is not always adequate
- Several national funding agencies supporting COVID BI research in universities, but **findings not always well linked to decision-making processes**
- **NB** – many of these issues have been at least partially addressed during the pandemic: things are, in general, improving! 😊



## Impact of BI on Risk Communication



- Helping to frame the ways in which recommended behaviours have been presented to the public (change from instructive to more emotionally engaging)
- Enhancing the uptake of COVID-19 testing through use of insights gained via theories of behavioural change
- Providing direction in the messaging around COVID-19 vaccines (e.g. identifying issues around vaccine hesitancy) and pandemic fatigue (e.g. where and how to strengthen messages)



## Linking BI to decision making



- BI rarely leads to development of a specific policy or strategy decision. But:
  - BI can **provide a nuanced understanding** of a given situation and thereby inform the development of implementation plans
  - BI has acted as an **evaluation tool for policies** (rather than as formative research intended to shape the response)
- This work could lay the foundation for further enhancing of national capacities for BI research, and for integrating them more fully into wider preparedness and response structures

## Geographical disparities?



- Responses from different regions of the EU/EEA not evenly spread
- Future work should focus on the countries not responding to the survey:
  - *How can we ensure that the needs of these Member States are properly met?*

## Meanwhile:



- Immediate steps can be taken to:
  - 1. Facilitate networking opportunities** of BI experts in Member States via webinars/face-to-face meetings
  - 2. Map the BI research** being conducted in universities and in other social science research institutions across the EU
  - 3. Synthesise published data** on aspects of behaviour that may have direct policy and programmatic value

## Thank you for listening!



- Behavioural Insights research to support the response to COVID-19: a survey of implementation in the EU/EEA  
<https://www.ecdc.europa.eu/en/publications-data/behavioural-insights-research-support-response-covid-19>
- WHO tool for behavioural insights on COVID-19  
<https://www.euro.who.int/en/health-topics/health-emergencies/coronavirus-covid-19/publications-and-technical-guidance/risk-communication-and-community-engagement/who-tool-for-behavioural-insights-on-covid-19>