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Population & Societies

Neighbourliness during lockdown in France

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Did the COVID-19 lockdown affect relations between neighbours and increase feelings of isolation in France? Drawing on data from the Coconel survey, Anne Lambert and colleagues describe the services given and received before and during lockdown, and the variations across ages and social categories.

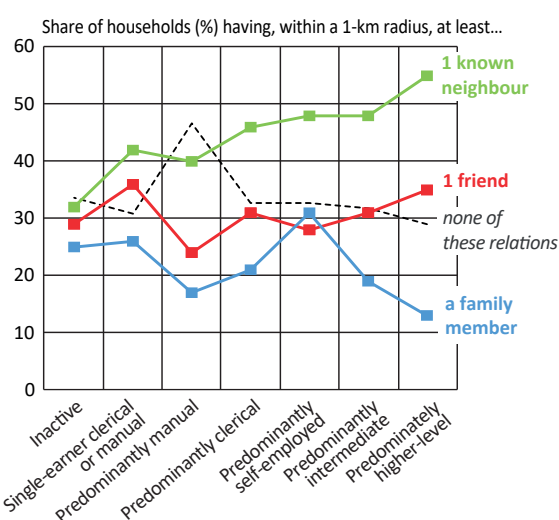
The exchange of services is an integral part of neighbourly sociability in France. Giving and receiving are asymmetrical, however, and unequally distributed across the population, as was shown by the first major survey on relations between neighbours in France (Contacts survey, INED-INSEE, 1983). Social practices of this kind were not greatly affected by the lockdown, except for the provision of help to older adults and the decrease of help to families, as the Coconel survey reveals (see Box). The French are active in the exchange of services, but by no means equal.

Who lives close by?

In France, what kind of contact circles do people have within a kilometre of their home?⁽¹⁾ Around 21% report having a family member within this radius, 31% a friend, and 45% a neighbour they know personally. In all, 66% of people in France report knowing at least one person in their immediate neighbourhood. But this breakdown varies by social status. Only 13% of 'predominantly higher-level occupations'⁽²⁾ households reported having a relative within this radius, but they make up for this absence through other

types of relations (Figure 1). Their sociability, involving a larger and more diverse range of contacts than the other social categories [1], more often extends across the whole of France, as previous research has shown. For this group, the 'dispersed extended family' [2] counts more than the 'local family circle' [3]. Conversely, low-income⁽³⁾ and working-class households most often live close to their family, which plays a key protective role in contexts of economic

Figure 1. Contact-circle composition by household social status



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Coverage: Metropolitan France.
Source: Coconel survey.

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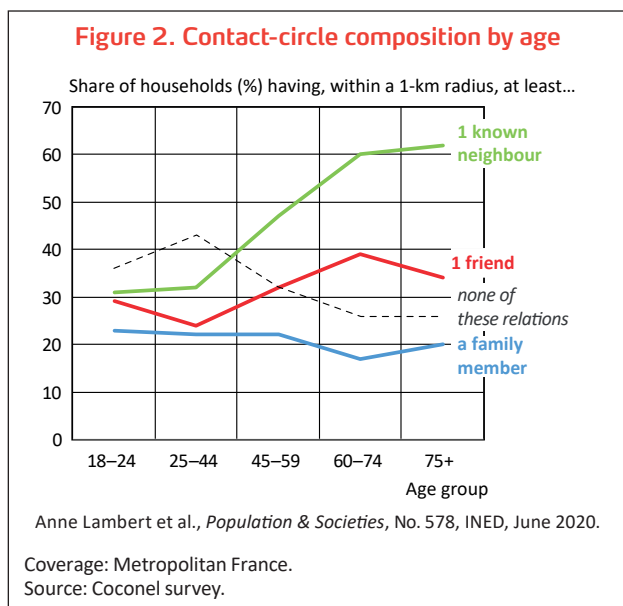
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(1) Between 17 March and 10 May 2020, the French authorities restricted people's outdoor 'physical activity' to a daily maximum of 1 hour within 1 km of their home. This same radius was used in the Coconel survey to measure the composition of respondents' contact circles.

(2) See: <https://www.cnis.fr/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/R%C3%A9novation-de-la-PCS-2018-2019-rapport-valid%C3%A9-par-le-Bureau-25-oct-2019.pdf>

(3) With monthly disposable income of less than €900 per consumption unit.



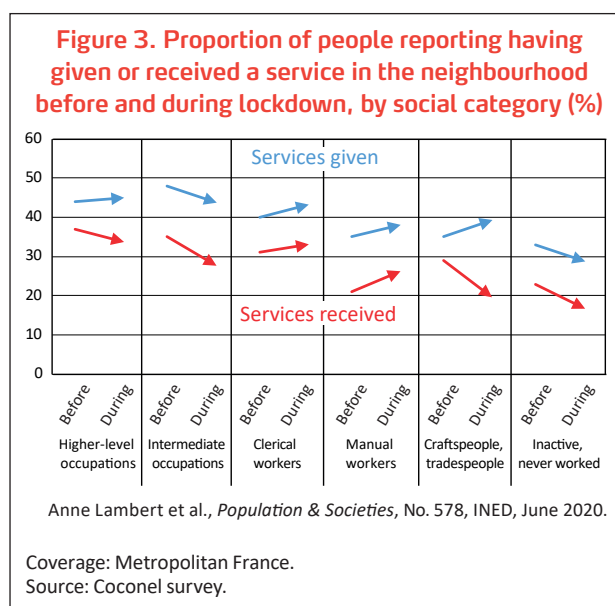
insecurity (informal mutual support, childcare, etc.) [4]. In addition, predominantly self-employed households and those with a single earner in a manual or clerical occupation more often have relatives living nearby. With age and length of residence, the share of family members within a 1-km radius decreases, while that of friends and, above all, personally known neighbours, increases (Figure 2).

Mutual support is linked to contact-circle composition: 45% of French residents, on average, exchange services (received or given) in their neighbourhood. The proportion rises to 56% among those who have family, friends, or known neighbours living nearby versus 25% among those who do not. The lockdown had no impact in this respect. That said, the Coconel survey is limited to relations within the neighbourhood; individuals may have exchanged services outside the neighbourhood or with more distant relations, such as work colleagues.

Effects of lockdown on mutual support in the neighbourhood: giving, receiving, reciprocating

Despite a common belief that the 2020 health crisis produced an exceptional wave of solidarity, the intensity of exchanges of services remained stable during the lockdown. As in the previous month, 4 in 10 French people reported providing a service in their neighbourhood, and 29% reported receiving one. People generally think that they offer more services than they receive; in fact, whatever one’s age or social status [5], reciprocity is the rule: 83% of the men and women who reported receiving a service also offered one.

The health crisis led to a disorganization of economic activity and reduced the income of certain households. It was among the higher-level occupations that the highest proportion of people continued working



during lockdown (85%), with just 1 in 3 working outside their home, followed by people in intermediate occupations (80%), among whom half worked outside home. All ages combined, household income fell for 55% of craftspeople and tradespeople, 40% of manual workers, 31% of clerical and sales workers, 23% of intermediate occupations, and 20% of higher-level occupations. Neighbourliness during the crisis was diversely affected as a consequence (Figure 3).

During lockdown, the differences between social groups narrowed slightly, but the social disparities are similar to those observed in the Contacts survey (INSEE–INED, 1983) and in the more recent ‘My neighbourhood, my neighbours’ survey (Mon quartier, mes voisins; INED–CMW, 2018) [7], the exchange of services being more frequent among people in higher-level and intermediate occupations (Table 1). The former were the most neighbourly in lockdown, while the latter, habitually the most active in neighbourhood life and reciprocity [6], became less so over the period. In the other social categories (clerical/sales workers, manual workers, craftspeople and tradespeople), exchanges of services increased during lockdown, but the social hierarchy remained unchanged, with craftspeople and tradespeople, manual workers, and inactive people remaining distinctly less active in this respect. It is among this heterogeneous latter group, comprising students and vulnerable parts of the working-class population, that neighbourliness decreased the most.

Clerical and manual workers, notably those aged 60–74, were able to use their free time to interact with their neighbours, while those in intermediate occupations often continued to commute to work under difficult circumstances. Among clerical and manual workers, sociability may also have been stimulated by the need to limit the effects of income

Table 1. Share of individuals offering or receiving services in the neighbourhood (%)

	Before lockdown*	During lockdown	Change
Gender			
Women	44	45	+1
Men	47	50	+3
Age group			
18–24	42	39	–3
25–44	44	40	–4
45–59	43	43	0
60–74	54	60	+6
75+	45	62	+17
Occupational category			
Craftspeople, tradespeople	39	43	+4
Higher-level occs.	50	52	+2
Intermediate occs.	53	49	–4
Clerical/sales worker	45	50	+5
Manual worker	39	45	+6
Inactive	37	31	–6
Partnership situation			
Not in a union	41	47	+6
In a union	48	48	0
Family situation			
Childless	43	49	+6
With child(ren)	50	45	–5
Total	46	47	+1

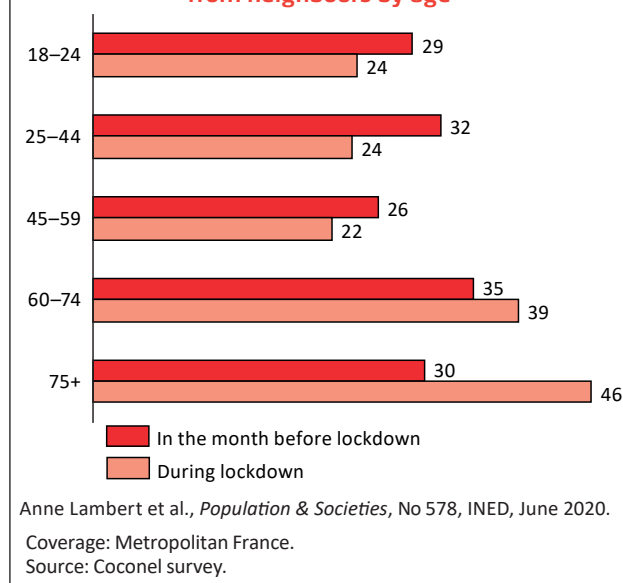
* People who left their habitual place of residence during the lockdown (6% of the French population) were excluded.
 Coverage: Metropolitan France.
 Source: Coconel survey.

loss. Among the most disadvantaged, however, the crisis further limited their interactions with neighbours and heightened their isolation.

While 63% of the people who received a service during lockdown had already received one the previous month, the profile of recipients was modified by the pandemic, with some people becoming recipients as a result of the lockdown. Thus, services provided by neighbours to the elderly, above all those with no friends or family living nearby (Figure 4), increased sharply. But it was difficult for them to reciprocate. Among the people aged 75 or older who received a service from a neighbour during lockdown, only 60% offered a service, compared with 85% in normal times. Clearly, this asymmetry reflects their vulnerability and their dependence on outside help for shopping and other things, but also the impact of the health guidelines they were required to follow during the pandemic.

The 60–74 age group played a key role as service providers during the health crisis. Their exchanges with neighbours increased during lockdown, but unlike their elders, they offered more services than they received. Families,⁽⁴⁾ on the other hand, who are more neighbourly under normal circumstances, less often received support

Figure 4. Percentage of people receiving help from neighbours by age



from neighbours. Only 25% received a service during the crisis versus 34% previously. With the closure of all schools, families were confronted by an increased workload of domestic and home-schooling tasks while being cut off from their support network of family and friends. At the same time, confinement in the home reduced their childcare needs.

Integrated but isolated: the ‘lockdown effect’

Not surprisingly, the lockdown measures decided in March 2020 brought a sharp increase—from 16% to 38%—in feelings of isolation among the population. The share of people feeling ‘very isolated’ rose from 4% to 9%. Such feelings were most prominent among women and young people; living with a partner had a protective effect.

In normal times, neighbourhood sociability, measured by contacts with a local relative, friend, or neighbour, reduces the feeling of isolation (Table 2), but these relations were disrupted by the lockdown. Feelings of isolation during the crisis were most common among people who had offered or received services in the neighbourhood. It rose sharply among the 60–74 age group, which offered the most services, and among the over-75s, even though they have been the most frequent recipients of services from the start of the pandemic. The ban on family visits and contacts with grandchildren seems to have weighed heavily on old people’s sense of isolation; neighbourhood support—despite its greater frequency—appears to have been an inadequate substitute. All in all, the lockdown disturbed people with the strongest involvement in close-by relations, who were suddenly forced to reduce their neighbourly activity.

(4) All people living with children, either alone or with a partner.

Table 2. Share of individuals feeling isolated in their home or neighbourhood (%)

	Before lockdown*	During lockdown	Change
Gender			
Women	18	41	+23
Men	14	35	+21
Age group			
18–24	26	46	+20
25–44	21	42	+21
45–59	13	33	+20
60–74	11	37	+26
75+	11	36	+25
Partnership situation			
Not in a union	20	43	+23
In a union	13	35	+22
Family situation			
Childless	16	37	+21
With child(ren)	17	40	+23
Contacts within 1 km*			
At least 1 relative	14	40	+26
At least 1 friend	11	40	+29
At least 1 known neighbour	13	37	+24
None	21	35	+15
Services exchanged			
Service(s) offered or received in the month before lockdown	16	43	+28
No service offered or received in the month before lockdown	16	34	+17
Service(s) offered or received during lockdown	16	42	+27
No service offered or received during lockdown	16	34	+18
Total	16	38	+22
* People who left their habitual place of residence during the lockdown (6% of the French population) were excluded. Coverage: Metropolitan France.			

Sociability is governed by social norms that shape the meaning and rules of exchange. In French society, services given and received are more frequent, numerous, and diverse at the top of the social hierarchy, despite the geographical separation of family members. Conversely, the working classes more often live near family members but exchange fewer services with their neighbours. While the lockdown disrupted lives and greatly increased the sense of isolation, it had little impact on the unequal laws of sociability.

Box: The Coconel survey (Logement et Conditions de vie)

This survey on housing and living conditions was conducted by INED in partnership with the Coconel consortium (VITROME IHU Méditerranée Infection, CIC Cochin-Pasteur, EHESP, ORS Paca), ANR, IRD, and IFOP. A sample of 2,003 people representative of adults living in metropolitan France was created using the quota sampling method (age, gender, education, occupation, and category of municipality). The online survey was conducted between 30 April and 4 May 2020. The questions concerned the situation before and during lockdown and covered a range of topics: housing and living conditions, employment and working conditions children and home schooling, neighbourliness, and feelings of isolation.

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Abstract

Be it in normal times or in a crisis, exchanges of services between neighbours are subject to the same laws of sociability. People in higher-level occupations make up for the geographical dispersion of their family through more frequent relations with neighbours and feel less isolated than other social categories. During the lockdown to control the spread of COVID-19, the proportion of individuals exchanging services with neighbours remained stable, but attention focused on the over-75s at the expense of families. People aged 60–74, habitually the most neighbourly age group, exchanged even more services during the crisis. In one respect, however, the lockdown produced a radical change: the exchange of services did nothing to prevent a sharp increase in the sense of isolation.

Keywords

neighbourhood, sociability, lockdown, isolation, COVID-19 pandemic, France