

“Covid Fatigue” of the urban poor in Ghana?

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POLICY BRIEF

“Covid Fatigue” of the urban poor in Ghana?

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Summary

Until the majority is vaccinated, the most effective measures to reduce the transmission of COVID-19 are to keep a safe distance from other people, wear a facemask and wash hands regularly. In order to do so, people must know the guidelines and have the means and will to follow them. In Accra, Ghana, a survey finds that six months into the pandemic, the urban poor are experiencing “Covid Fatigue”, reporting less knowledge about the virus and lower observance of social distancing measures. However, hygienic behavior has improved over time, in part because of government policies. Most respondents support government actions and emphasize the importance of government to enforce social distancing. It will be important for citizens in Ghana to overcome the “Covid Fatigue” and continue to follow effective protective measures in order to curb contagion in 2021.

COVID-19 in Ghana

COVID-19 has challenged many countries with well-financed health care systems, which has caused concerns about countries with fewer financial resources and public health infrastructure—including intensive care units and ventilators. Recognizing the limited capacity of medical services, Ghana imposed lockdown measures to enforce social distancing early in the pandemic.

On 30 March 2020, Ghana enforced a lockdown around the cities of Accra and Kumasi, leaving only essential services open. The lockdown had a significant impact, especially for people working in the informal economy, with little insurance and living from hand to mouth. Due to concerns about the worsening economic situation, the lockdown was lifted after three weeks. However, borders remained closed until September 2020, while schools

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were even closed through January 2021. Moreover, a mask mandate for public spaces was enacted right after the lockdown in April 2020. Despite these measures, Ghana registered 63,883 confirmed cases and 390 deaths as of 30 January 2021 (Johns Hopkins, 2021). These are among the highest national numbers in Africa, although still much lower than in Europe or the Americas.

To continue the measures needed to flatten a second COVID-19 wave—currently impacting many countries in the world, including Nigeria and South Africa—it is important to understand how much the population knows about and utilizes prevention measures, and how they view government efforts during the pandemic. Researchers from the University of Ghana Business School and the Development Economics Group at ETH Zürich conducted phone surveys of over 1,000 citizens in 18 low-income areas in Accra—first during the early April lockdown and again in August 2020—to find answers to these questions (Durizzo et al., 2020, 2021). The same citizens were surveyed in April and August.

Knowledge

To curb the spread of the pandemic, information about the virus as well as about preventive and therapeutic measures is essential. TV and radio are the main channels through which the urban poor of Accra inform themselves about the virus (over 70%). However, informed awareness seems to have declined over time: in August 2020, when COVID-19 cases were in fact increasing, more citizens reported not having informed themselves about the virus (11% relative to 1% in April). Fewer Ghanaians could mention the three official World Health Organization (WHO) core symptoms of fever, coughing, and tiredness, whereas more mentioned non-COVID specific symptoms such as sneezing. Fewer people were aware of how many were currently infected with the

virus (36% in April vs. 30% in August), and fewer remembered the recommendation to call 112 if feeling sick with COVID-19 symptoms (38% in April vs. 29% in August). Three times more urban poor mentioned in August that they would stay at home or self-medicate when feeling symptoms, which are not recommended measures by the Ghana Health Service.

WHO has warned about increasing coronavirus misinformation (WHO, 2021). The level of misinformation in Ghana seems to be lower than in other African countries (Durizzo et al., 2021). Nevertheless, 23% of poor people in Accra thought in August that taking herbal drugs effectively prevents the spread and infection of COVID-19, and 5% indicated dangerous behavior that could increase drug resistance (e.g., antibiotics, anti-malaria), weaken the immune system (e.g., drinking alcohol) or harm the body directly (e.g., drinking bleach).

Overall, the majority mentioned correct behavior to curb spreading, such as wash hands for at least 20 seconds (73%), cover the mouth when coughing (62%), and avoid touching the face (58%).

Behavior

Hygienic measures were reported at a similar level from the lockdown to August (see Figure 1). Around 90% always washed their hands with soap and 75% avoided shaking hands. One exception is wearing facemasks, which rose from 48% during the lockdown to 86% in August. A key reason for this was the introduction of mandatory mask-wearing in public shortly after the lockdown. When asked in August why respondents might not have worn a mask in the past week, the main reasons given were finding it uncomfortable (62%), and/or forgetting to wear it (41%). Essentially all (99.7%) reported owning a mask.

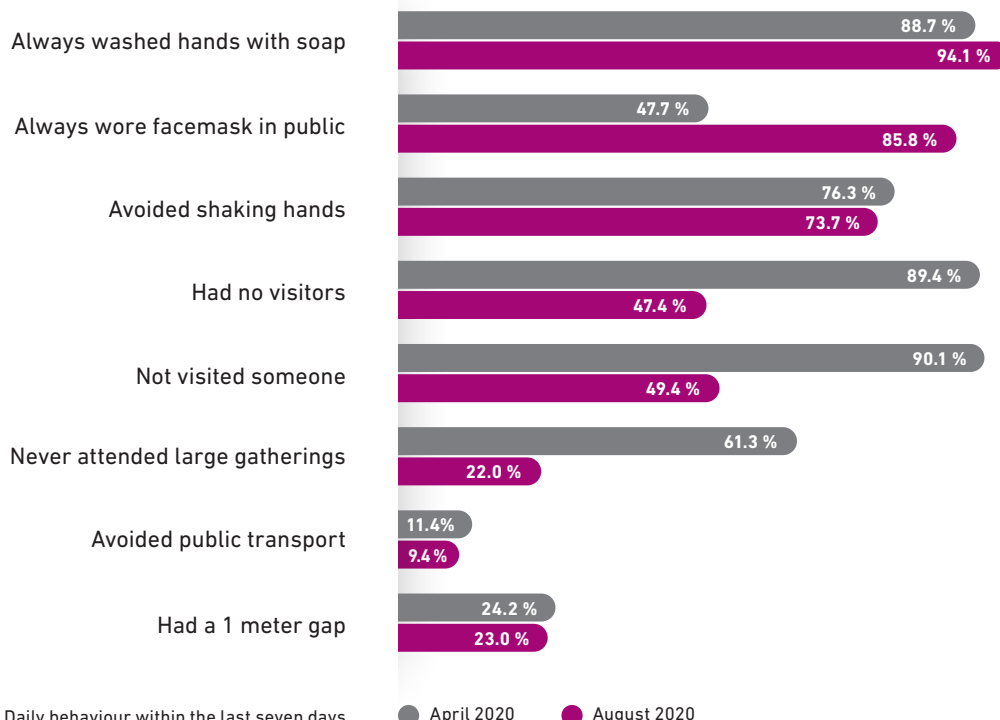


Figure 1: Daily behaviour within the last seven days

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In contrast, social distancing measures decreased over time. The share of people having visitors at home increased fivefold (from 10% to over 50%). The number of people attending large gatherings doubled from April (39%) to August (78%). The main gatherings people attended were church (23%) and markets (16%). Avoiding public transport and keeping a 1-meter distance from others has been a major challenge throughout the pandemic (see Figure 1).

These results suggest that increased awareness of the importance of social distancing as well as improved hygienic measures where social distancing is not possible, such as a church, markets, or public transport, are important to avoid a further increase in COVID-19 cases.

Government action and trust

Durizzo et al. (2020) show that better knowledge and trust in government is positively associated with people following governmental regulations. Trust in the Ghanaian government is generally high, but has slightly decreased from 82% in April to 72% in August. In addition, people’s view on government action to curb COVID-19 has changed slightly: while around 70% perceive the actions as appropriate, the share of people who felt that government measures are not sufficient has increased from 12% in April to 18% in August 2020.

Asked in August about the two most important measures the government should undertake to control the coronavirus, most mentioned enforcement of quarantine if people had contact with infected people (37%) or enforced social distancing (27%), as well as free government provision of protective equipment, such as facemasks (40%) or free hand sanitizer and soap (23%). In addition, people emphasized the importance of public knowledge on how to protect themselves (25%). School closures or travel bans were rarely mentioned (see Figure 2).

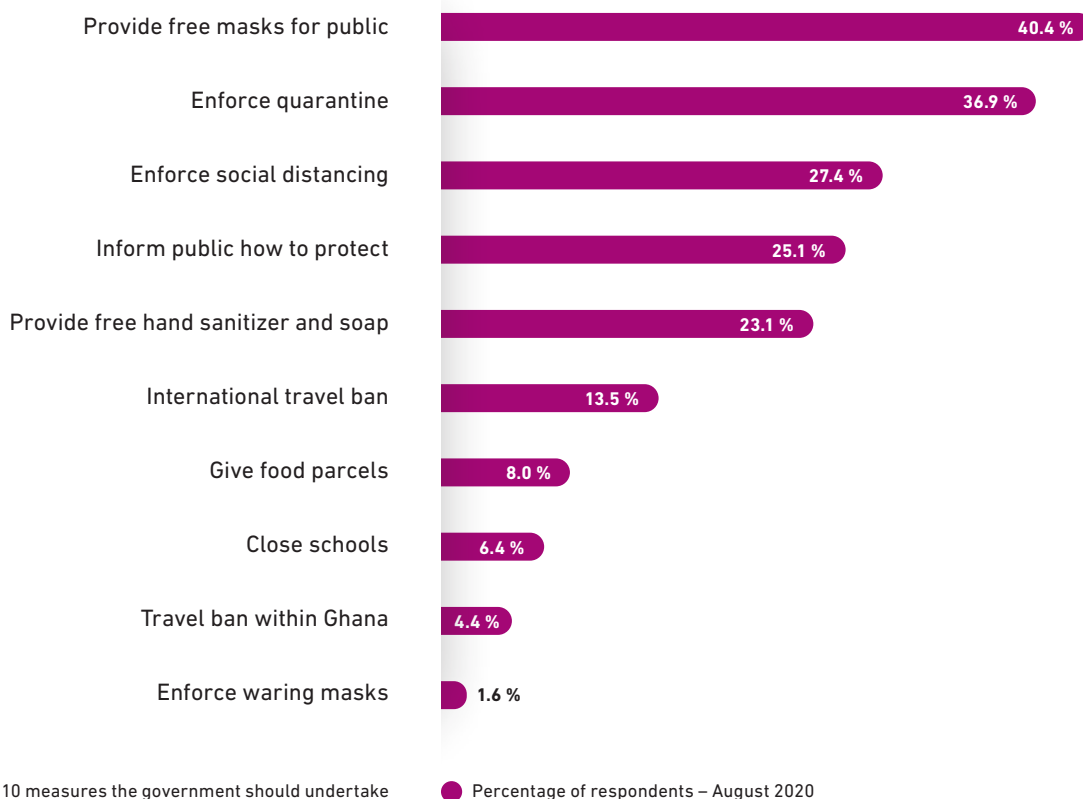


Figure 2: Top 10 measures the government should undertake
Note: Every respondent could mention two measures

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Photo

p.1.: A man sells facemasks in Accra after the partial lockdown in parts of Ghana. Photo: Nipah Dennis / AFP via Getty Images.



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