

SPI-M-O Consensus Statement on public gatherings, 11/03/2020

Signed off by SPI-M-O chairs on behalf of members.

The direct impact of stopping large public gatherings on the population-level spread of the epidemic is low, because they make up only a small proportion of an attendee's contacts with other people. However, stopping them would have effects on their other behaviours, which could have a larger impact on the epidemic spread. On one hand, stopping some public gatherings could mean people replace this with other activities (i.e. playing football behind closed doors could mean fans watch the match in the pub), potentially slightly accelerating epidemic spread. On the other hand, the message sent by stopping them would be expected to change people's behaviour in other ways, potentially slowing epidemic spread. It is not possible to quantify either of these effects.

The impact of stopping all leisure activities, including public gatherings such as at bars and restaurant, would be expected to have a much larger effect on the population-level spread of the epidemic. Smaller gatherings happen more frequently than larger ones so the cumulative effect is larger.

The risk of infection to an individual from attending public gatherings depends on the length of time they spend in close proximity to other people. The key factor isn't the size of the event, but the number of people to whom you come into close contact; duration of those contacts; and how close these contacts are. In general, contacts tend to be less intimate and shorter at public gatherings than in other settings such as contacts with family members and coworkers.

The risk to an individual from attending large events is generally no higher than in smaller events. In most larger events, such as sports matches, attendees will come into close contact with at most a handful of people, so the risk to attendees is low.

Smaller gatherings such as bars and nightclubs are higher risk as you can be in closer contact with others. Family gatherings are particularly high risk as they bring people into closer contact. Similarly, religious services with a high level of physical contact would be higher risk. Some activities are higher risk because they are disproportionately depended by older groups. At gatherings such as cinemas, you come into contact with few people so the risk is lower, although indoor gatherings are, in general, higher risk than outdoor ones. Risks from leisure activities could be also be lowered by reducing contacts within those settings.