

1. Research notes



Rural mobility during the lockdown

Research notes
Begin: June 2020
End: June 2020

The lockdown and its strict restrictions on people's movements led many French people to live and organize themselves differently, especially in rural areas where mobility is a crucial resource. This study, which is part of a larger project, aimed to understand the impact of this unprecedented situation. How did people in rural areas experience this restriction of their movements? Did the lockdown foster the emergence of new aspirations in terms of rhythms of life and mobility, as it did for people living in cities?

Research participants

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This document provides a brief summary of the first results of an online survey conducted from April 14 to May 11, 2020. This survey entitled "Evolution of Rural Mobilities During the Lockdown" is the result of a research project carried out by ENTPE (LAET) and the Grenoble Alpes University (PACTE) called "Re-actors", funded by Ademe, and which focuses on two rural areas in the regions of Drôme and Ardèche. The whole project is part of a broader study of changes in rural mobility practices.

The lockdown and its strict restrictions on people's movements led many French people to live and organize themselves differently. In this sense, the period that ended on May 11, 2020 was special and allowed people to really assess the consequences of having their mobility restricted.

Many questions quickly emerged:

- how was this forced reduction of movement experienced?
- how did people in rural areas adapt to this situation?
- what new forms of organization emerged?
- what might be the long-lasting effects of such a situation?

1. Methodology

How the survey was implemented

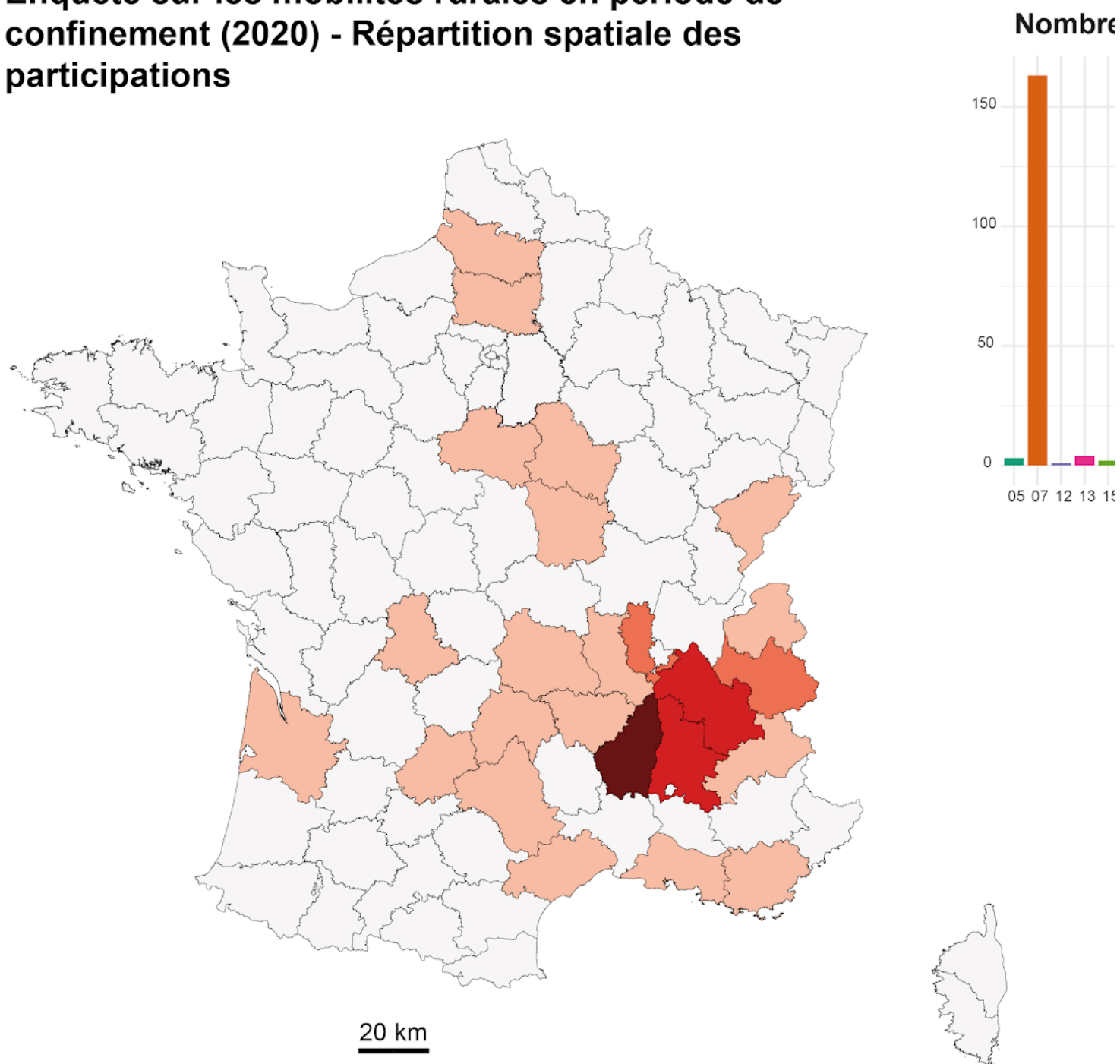
The survey was conducted on the survey management platform Sphinx Online. It was communicated to participants via email, social networks and local media in the regions of Drôme and Ardèche. The primary goal was to collectively reflect, within the Re-actors project, on how the lockdown situation was interpreted and the ways in which it could be used to imagine the "world of tomorrow." We therefore chose to distribute the survey locally, despite the risk of getting fewer respondents. For example, some biases, whether specific to online surveys or to the relatively small number of respondents, prevented us from obtaining a representative sample of the population. The purpose of this exploratory survey is above all to provide food for thought.

Profile of respondents

396 people living year-round in rural areas were selected for the survey. Urban dwellers who relocated to the countryside for the lockdown weren't included, as the survey's goal was to question changes in mobility and their long-term expression in rural areas.

Given the origin of the research project, which involves local authorities as well as associations located in Drôme and Ardèche, the survey took place first and foremost in the departments in question. However, we didn't restrict our field to these research areas alone, and received responses from other departments, some neighboring and others further away.

Enquête sur les mobilités rurales en période de confinement (2020) - Répartition spatiale des participations



Respondents were in lockdown in towns with an average population of 2,946. However, there were large variations: 37% of respondents were confined to very small towns with less than a thousand inhabitants (17% of which were in towns with less than 500 inhabitants).

In the vast majority of cases, the respondents didn't relocate for the lockdown: only 24 individuals (i.e. 6% of the sample) did so, and of these, only 8 went to a different town, in each case a smaller one. These include 6 people who went to spend the lockdown with their parents and 2 in their second home. In terms of household composition, the proportion of single people in the sample is about the same as it is nationally, at just over 15% ¹. However, the percentage of households with children is much higher (almost half of the sample, compared to 35% nationally). The majority of respondents are women (66%), a common bias in other studies conducted during the lockdown ². The most represented group is 36-to-55-year-olds (53%), which corresponds to working ages.

Logically, there is a strong over-representation of working adults (74%, compared to 63% at the national level). The lack of students (3% vs. 10% nationally) is a reflection of the geographical areas where the survey was conducted, further compounded by the fact that urban students who went to their parents' rural home for the lockdown were intentionally excluded. There is also an over-representation of retirees (14% vs. 7% nationally) which doesn't appear in other lockdown surveys. This is due to the fact they are usually heavily present in rural areas and also more willing to respond to surveys. Finally, the unemployed and other inactive individuals are under-represented (6%, compared to 19% nationally).

The analysis of socio-professional categories shows that higher-ranking intellectual and artistic professions are over-represented, which is a classic bias of online surveys. Employees are also over-represented, while farmers, craftsmen, traders, entrepreneurs, intermediate occupations and factory workers are under-represented. This distribution partly reflects the heterogeneity of lockdown situations according to socio-professional categories, and the unequal availability of time during this particular situation. As a result, the social categories that were the most able to respond to the survey were those that engaged the most in telework.

Key results

This synthesis of the results is based on three entries: the expected elements, the main surprises and the open questions.

The main elements confirmed

As in many other online studies, the share of socio-professional categories who enjoy Internet access is over-represented. And while the lockdown caused an increase in the use of digital tools, the fact that many essential workers continued working outside of the home limited the dissemination of the survey in some areas. The serious inequalities revealed by the lockdown tended therefore to be tempered here, as in many other surveys. The results must be interpreted with this in mind: the full diversity of opinions and experiences of the lockdown isn't accounted for.

At the same time, the very definition of the respondent's geographical affiliation is subject to interpretation. This old debate on the boundary between the urban and rural is pervasive in the answers and will merit further study. Nevertheless, the vast majority clearly identifies the countryside as a favorable environment to be in during lockdown. Having easy access to nature, space, and a garden is overwhelmingly viewed as an advantage, but despite what people might think, not all respondents could benefit from it. Indeed, for some, the restriction on accessing open nature was particularly tough.

Although not representative, our survey confirms inequalities that were uncovered in how people experienced the lockdown. People's situation with respect to employment during the lockdown was strongly linked to their socio-professional category: while 80% of the management-level civil servants and intellectual and artistic professions that were interrogated were teleworking, factory workers and employees were much more exposed to partial unemployment (45% and 48% respectively), while private practice professionals and business leaders mainly suffered from reduced activity.

Overall, people felt that they handled the lockdown pretty well (the proposed scale ranged from 1 - very negative experience, to 10 - very positive experience). Indeed, the most selected modalities were 7/8/9, for almost 60% of respondents. Less than 20% chose one of the modalities ranging from 1 (very negative) to 5. However, there are significant differences according to employment situation, which in turn impacts how people perceive the future and influences how they experience the lockdown. Among those who are employed, a third reported not fearing the future, while another third feared for their job. The analysis of the socio-professional categories reveals that those who are the most worried are craftspeople, traders and related workers, followed by factory workers and employees, and private practice professionals. In contrast, civil servants are the least worried, while managers and intermediate occupations have mixed feelings. The analysis found a very significant and positive correlation between people who are worried about the future and those who are in a situation of partial unemployment or reduced/lost activity; the same correlation is observed between people who are confident about the future and those who are teleworking or whose job situation hasn't changed. This perception of the future is then strongly correlated to how positively/negatively one experiences the lockdown.

Similarly, people aged 55-65 had a better experience of the lockdown than those aged 18-25, and those who spent the lockdown with family likewise had a better experience than single people.

The lockdown caused a massive reduction of mobility. As a result, the average weekly mileage was reduced more than six fold. Trips became both rarer and shorter. This situation didn't result in a massive modal shift, but it's worth noting that many respondents walked a lot more, which is something people more usually do for short distance trips in urban areas. The use of cars, on the other hand, sharply decreased: while before, 50% of respondents used their car every day, only 4.5% did so during lockdown. Conversely, while only 7% used it less than once a week before the lockdown, this share rose to 29%. The proportion of people who report never using it also increased threefold (from 4 to 12%). However, it should be noted that, contrary to what occurred in cities, while people used their cars less, they didn't use their bicycles more. Indeed, overall the use of bikes also decreased: while 26% of respondents used it one or more times a week before the lockdown, this proportion decreased by ten points, while those who "never" use a bike rose from 50% to 71%. Three reasons can explain this decline in cycling: first, teleworking eliminated many trips for certain categories of the population that would otherwise likely be using their bicycle on a daily basis ³. Secondly, in the countryside, bicycles are mainly used for leisure activities ⁴, which were not one of the authorized reasons for going outside, while cars are perceived as the ultimate mode of transportation ⁵. Finally, the government's inconsistencies and uncertainties ⁶ regarding cycling discouraged any widespread modal shift.

For respondents, the main challenge they reported was maintaining a normal social life. In rural areas in particular, sociability requires various mobilities that couldn't be compensated for through the massive development of digital tools. It should also be noted that few respondents expressed a desire to maintain such high levels of digital use. Indeed, while 38% of respondents reported being part of an online conversation group, only 13% wanted it to continue after the lockdown. Conversely, 48% of respondents claimed that neighborhood solidarity initiatives were positive innovations that emerged during the lockdown and that should remain for the long term. Because of the particular situation caused by travel restrictions and more broadly the questioning of the economic system and its resilience, there has also been a strong demand for greater consumption of local products: just over half (56%) of the respondents said they bought more local products, citing mainly solidarity initiatives with producers (59% of respondents). This shift occurred in a context of greater solidarity and with the emergence of new forms of local relations, and the vast majority of people want these changes to endure. It's worth noting also that delivery services weren't very popular: 65% reported never using them. Similarly, drive-throughs were cited by 39% of respondents, but only 23% want them to continue. This clearly reveals a desire for spatial proximity but also for a physical proximity that has been severely lacking and that virtual proximity or impersonal devices such as delivery services or drive-throughs haven't replaced.

But still, a few surprises

While the lack of sociability, especially family contact, was negatively experienced, few respondents reported feeling frustrated at not being able to access shops, city centers and workplaces. The new relationship to time that emerged with this slowdown of daily rhythms increased the value people placed on time spent focused on themselves and their activities. People invested highly in their domestic space, by starting renovation works, home projects and often a vegetable garden. The lockdown is widely recognized as having updated

some traditional ways of life in the countryside. The routine of “car, work, sleep” has been replaced, for those who teleworked, by “video, self, home.”

Finally, when respondents list the practices worth maintaining, they mostly mention consuming less, enjoying taking time for oneself, mastering one’s daily pace of life, and wanting to continue teleworking. This translates into a clear desire to reduce work-related travel. However, this reduction is rarely desired for trips performed to meet up with people or for leisure.

While our research project revolves around rural mobilities and their evolutions (a decrease and a shift to greener modes of travel), the lockdown leads us to update how we think of rural living itself. For while it is, generally speaking, certain life projects that initiate a change in mobility practices, the period that just ended had the opposite effect: the restriction of people’s movement generated new desires for lifestyle changes, or accelerated preexisting trends, with which rural life is paradoxically already in tune. The avenues for research and creation are important: how to invent a rurality that has strong sociability but few mobilities?

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Notes

- 1 Insee, 2012.
- 2 Bourdeau-Lepage Lise, Le confinement et ses effets sur le quotidien, 2020 ; Bès et al., Enquête Vie en Confinement, 2020.
- 3 <https://theconversation.com/le-velo-peut-il-se-developper-hors-des-grandes-villes-131982>
- 4 <https://www.banquedesterritoires.fr/le-velo-est-lactivite-physique-preferee-des-francais>
- 5 Hubert Jean-Paul, Pistre Pierre, Madre Jean-Loup, « L’utilisation de l’automobile par les ménages dans les territoires peu denses : analyse croisée par les enquêtes sur la mobilité et le Recensement de la population », Economie et Statistiques, 2016, p.179-203. <https://hal.archives-ouvertes.fr/hal-01313813>
- 6 https://www.bfmtv.com/auto/peut-on-faire-du-velo-pendant-le-confinement_AN-202004180034.html

Mobility

For the Mobile Lives Forum, mobility is understood as the process of how individuals travel across distances in order to deploy through time and space the activities that make up their lifestyles. These travel practices are embedded in socio-technical systems, produced by transport and communication industries and techniques, and by normative discourses on these practices, with considerable social, environmental and spatial impacts.

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Lockdown

The lockdown measures implemented throughout 2020 in the context of the Covid-19 crisis, while varying from one country to the next, implied a major restriction on people’s freedom of movement for a given period. Presented as a solution to the spread of the virus, the lockdown impacted local, interregional and international travel. By transforming the spatial and temporal dimensions of people’s lifestyles, the lockdown accelerated a whole series of pre-existing trends, such as the rise of teleworking and teleshopping and the increase in walking and cycling, while also interrupting of long-distance mobility. The ambivalent experiences of the lockdown pave the way for a possible transformation of lifestyles in the future.

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Movement

Movement is the crossing of space by people, objects, capital, ideas and other information. It is either oriented, and therefore occurs between an origin and one or more destinations, or it is more akin to the idea of simply wandering, with no real origin or destination.

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Teleworking

The remote performance of a salaried activity outside of the company’s premises, at home or in a third place during normal working hours and requiring access to telecommunication tools.

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Lifestyle

A lifestyle is a composition of daily activities and experiences that give sense and meaning to the life of a person or a group in time and space.

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The lockdown is revealing the limits of our lifestyles, pace of life and environments

Mobile Lives Forum

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