

COVID-19 mitigation at EURO 2020

Insights from the 'Limiting Virus Transmission during Sporting Mega Events (LIVE)' project

The EURO 2020 football tournament was the first sporting mega event (SME) to be held during the COVID-19 pandemic. In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, large events such as SMEs present a challenge to public health and governments as the circulation of athletes and spectators poses issues for different risk environments such as transport, local hospitality venues and the event venue itself. To minimise transmission of infection, it is imperative that we analyse and evaluate the COVID-19 mitigation measures and related behaviours around large sporting events to inform future mitigation strategies.

Postponed from 2020, the EURO 2020 tournament took place across eleven host cities including London and Glasgow between June and July 2021. Following [risk assessments of each stadium](#), COVID-19 mitigation measures were put in place that were consistent with national government public health policies and guidance. Spectators were expected to comply with UEFA's [Code of Conduct](#), which included staggered ingress timeslots, mask wearing, directional signage and queuing systems. However, host countries differed in the enforcement of restrictions with relation to stadia capacities, COVID-19 testing, international travel, and hospitality. Stadia capacities for UK matches were calculated by the [social distancing requirement of 1 and 1.5 meters](#). Hampden Park in Glasgow operated at 25% of full capacity for group-stage and knockout matches. Matches at Wembley Stadium, London were part of the UK Government's 'Events Research Programme' and operated at [25% for group-stages, 50% for knockout, and 75% for semi-final and final matches](#).

[COVID-19 testing](#) was mandatory in the form of a negative lateral flow test result or proof of vaccination for matches at Wembley Stadium, but not at Hampden Park. Spectators were not permitted entry if they were in close contact, showed symptoms, tested positive, or were required to self-isolate due to travel restrictions of COVID-19. Spectators in the UK were required to follow domestic restrictions where mask wearing was required in indoor settings and public transport. [Border restrictions](#) required fans to show proof of a negative COVID-19 test and/or quarantine for up to ten days if travelling from an amber or red list country.

Hospitality, including food and drink concessions, was available to purchase at Wembley Stadium, but not at Hampden Park. Spectators were encouraged to eat and drink at their designated seat, to limit their movements at half-time, and maintain social distancing during goal celebrations. Despite [restrictions on hospitality](#), spectators could still visit local hospitality venues outside of the stadium before and after matches.

Study

This study provides evidence regarding measures to mitigate virus transmission risks during EURO 2020 to inform the planning and delivery of future large sporting or cultural events. The project was split into three work packages (WPs):

- **WP1** contextualised UEFA'S policies with host nations' approaches to reducing the transmission of COVID-19 by analysing policy documents, emerging evidence, and stakeholder views.
- **WP2** measured spectators' experiences regarding COVID-19 mitigation measures through an online questionnaire with those who attended UK-based EURO 2020 matches (n=509).
- **WP3** involved participant observation and data collection at UK-based EURO 2020 sites to monitor COVID-19 mitigation measures. Fieldwork supporters were trained to use a detailed observation report and to gather data on the COVID-19 mitigation measures in place in host cities and stadia on match days. In total, 31 observations were conducted across the 12 EURO 2020 matches played in the UK at Wembley Stadium, London and Hampden Park, Glasgow.

Key Findings

Work Package 1

- Risk assessments based on the epidemiological context of each host country (i.e., infection rates, testing, and vaccinations) determined a safe 'COVID-capacity' - from behind closed doors to full stadium - in each stadium.
- Mitigation measures were shaped by stakeholder working groups in host cities, some of which were exempted from national legislation.
- Multi-host city format proved difficult for UEFA to standardise the delivery of their 'product' to fans. In some cases, this led to disagreements between UEFA and the local organising structures in the implementation of public health procedures at stadiums.
- Host cities felt 'pressured' to achieve a minimum capacity of 25%. Political pressure also compromised public health recommendations on social distancing.
- UEFA were keen for higher attendances at showpiece matches. As stadium capacities increased, it became even more difficult to enforce mitigation measures.
- The emotion of football fandom made it difficult to achieve full compliance in changing previous norms into new behaviours. Mitigation measures were not enforced when there was potential to increase disorder among fans.
- EURO 2020 was considered a pilot for returning to 'normal life' without increasing the risk of infections or hospitalisations. Despite this, the finals brought about many COVID-19 cases, perhaps because of ticketless fans who travelled and gained illegitimate entry at these matches. However, it is important to note many who travelled without tickets did not gain access to stadia.

Work Package 2

- Most spectators attending matches at Wembley used public transport to travel to the stadium (85% for group stage, 76% for semi-final and 79% for final), while only half did so for travel to Hampden (50% for group stage matches).
- Adherence to allocated entry slot seemed to decrease as the tournament progressed: from 73% during a group stage match at Wembley to 46% at the final.
- There seemed to be limited social distancing on public transport to Wembley. At the group stage fewer than half (46%) socially distanced for most/all of their journey. By the time of the final, only one in five (20%) did so.
- Social distancing on arrival at Wembley stadium seemed to be difficult for the semi-final and the final, with 69% and 86%, respectively, finding it very or quite difficult to socially distance on arrival.
- 68% of respondents who attended the semi-final and 65% who attended the final did not wear a mask at any point whilst watching the match.
- Although spectators tended to agree that there were organized systems in place for exiting both stadia, the majority agreed that the exit points at Wembley were very crowded (68% group stage; 84% semi-final; 71% final) and that it was difficult to maintain social distancing when exiting Wembley stadium (78% group stage; 89% semi-final; 83% final).
- Most believed that demonstrating proof of a negative COVID-19 test or proof of vaccination was important in preventing the spread of COVID-19 (68% and 79%, respectively, at group stage matches at Hampden and Wembley, 95% at the semi-final and 94% at the final).
- 81% of spectators who attended the final felt that it did a poor or very poor job of limiting the spread of COVID-19. Only a minority of those who attended a group stage match rated COVID-19 mitigation poor or very poor (26% at Wembley; 11% Hampden).
- 74% of respondents who attended the final at Wembley felt the COVID-19 mitigation measures in place were too little.

Work Package 3

- Spectators were provided with information before attending EURO 2020 matches via email and push notifications from the UEFA EURO 2020 app. Certain instances of miscommunication from the tournament organizers led to confusion regarding the wearing of face coverings and the requirement to show proof of a negative test/vaccination to gain entry.
- Spectators were advised to enter the stadium more than 3 hours before the match. Those who did not adhere to this time slot cited the lack of entertainment and affordable refreshments on offer within the stadia.
- Proof of negative lateral flow test/proof of vaccination was required at Wembley stadium. However, this check was not always conducted and when it was, the test result was not cross-referenced with the spectators' ID.
- During the semi-final and final, there were many examples of individuals attempting to gain entry to Wembley using screenshots of tickets on their mobile phones. When they were turned away, they had no route away from the stadium so were able to access the turnstiles and gain entry to the stadium. This led to overcrowding and further risk of transmission.
- Mitigation measures such as mask-wearing and physical distancing had low compliance within the stadia, with regular announcements on video screens being greeted with hostility by some spectators.
- Limited intervention from stewards meant that those who did not comply with measures went unchallenged.
- No procedure was in place for egress leading to crowded exits where physical distancing was not possible. Face coverings were also noted as being largely absent as spectators exited the stadia.

Recommendations

- Event organisers should set up a working group partnership with key stakeholders (i.e., public health experts, local authorities, government advisors and spectators) to identify and embed best practices for reducing COVID-19 transmission.
- Organisers must provide all mitigation measures and equipment and be agile to adapt their procedures to changes in government legislation and local authority guidelines.
- Spectators will check COVID-19 guidelines before attending the event and it is essential that spectators need to be provided with clear, up to date information regarding entry procedures and mitigation.
- Strict policing of teams/athletes (i.e., mitigation measures or a 'bubble') is essential for the feasibility of the event – if you lose a team/athlete, then you lose the structure of the event.
- Proof of vaccination status or proof of a negative test was viewed as the most important way to prevent the spread of COVID-19. If proof of vaccination status or proof of a negative test is to be implemented at events with large attendances, staggered entry may be required to avoid large queues. To support staggered entry, offerings within the stadia/premises need to be attractive and competitively priced.
- Ticketing and entry processes need to be clear and straightforward and, if possible, information should be held in one place to limit the need for multiple checkpoints, apps, or websites.
- Mitigation measures within the stadia need to be enforced or alternative approaches considered so that mitigation measures are adopted as the 'new normal' by spectators.
- COVID-19 training is essential for staff responsible for applying and implementing mitigation measures, including de-escalation training. If you insist on 100% compliance, then you change the nature of the event and run the risk of inciting disorder.
- Egress procedures need to be developed and implemented to ensure safe departure from the event.
- Mitigation measures should be developed to include international and local transport links as well as primary access routes to host venues from main transport hubs.

About this research

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