

Towards Mental health in Belgium: survey results before and during the pandemic

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Sciensano, 22nd September 2022



COVID HEALTH SURVEYS

IMPACT OF THE PANDEMIC ON MENTAL
HEALTH

IMPLICATIONS & SUGGESTIONS FOR THE
FUTURE

COVID HEALTH SURVEYS

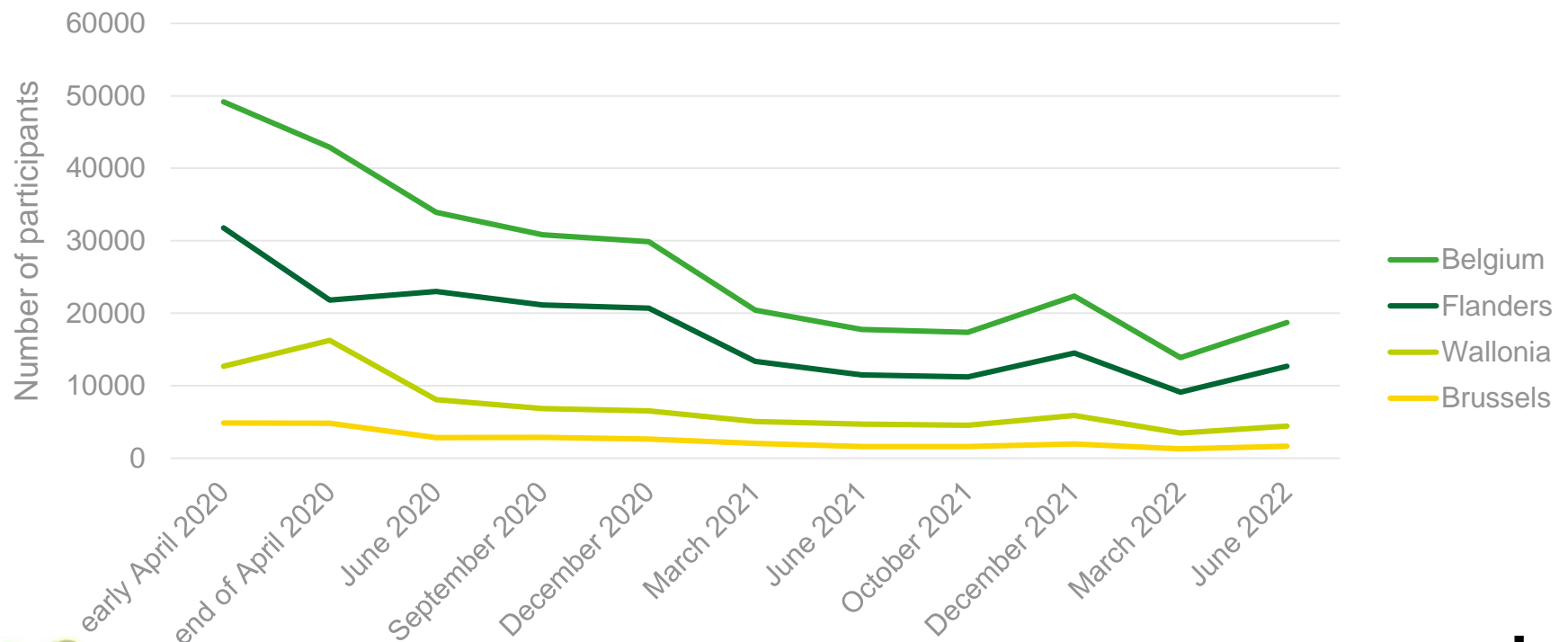
APRIL 2020-JUNE 2022

COVID-19 HEALTH SURVEY

- Main goal: monitor and examine the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the health and health behavior of the Belgian adult population
- Online survey organized between April 2020-June 2022
- Announcement of survey through
 - Sciensano website
 - Invitation email to Sciensano employees
 - Snowball approach
 - Press
 - Social media
 - Invitation email to participants of previous waves
 - Specific organisations: sport clubs, health insurance company, etc.

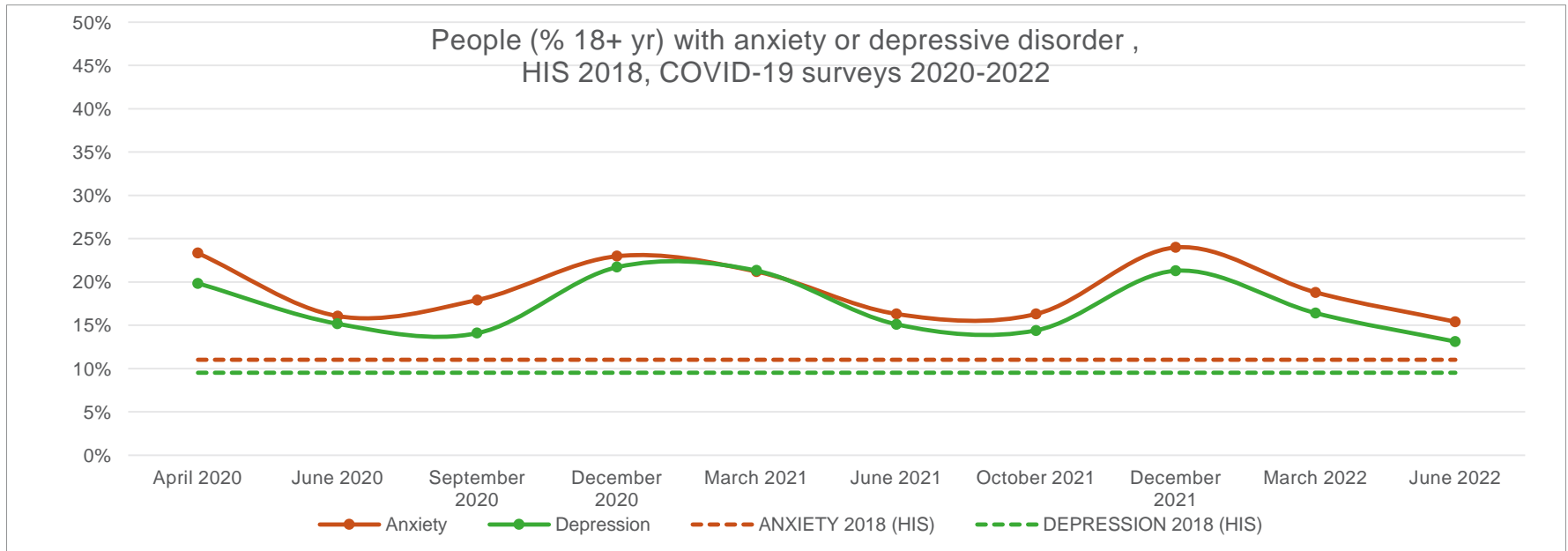
Who are the participants?

- N = 297,135 datapoints
- 11 waves over more than 2 years
- 65% female, 71% higher educated, > 96% older than 25



IMPACT OF THE PANDEMIC ON MENTAL HEALTH

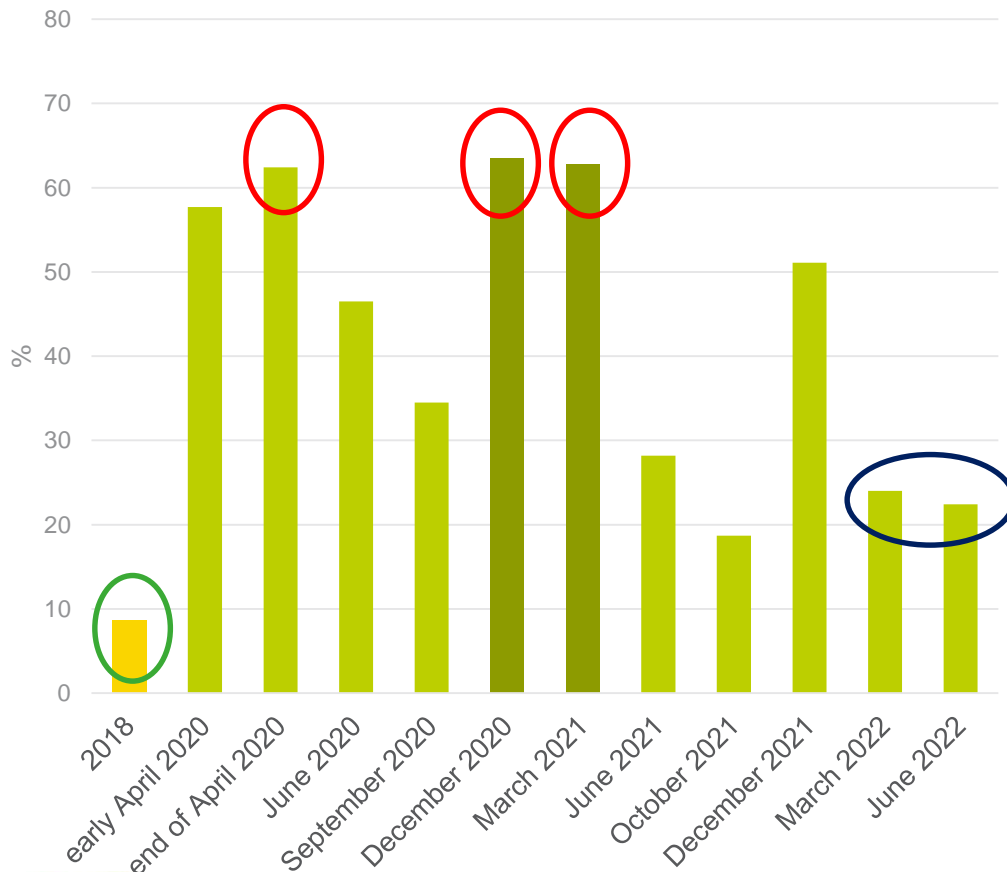
Depression and anxiety before and during the pandemic



- Highly increased levels of both depression and anxiety, even at times when there are lower rates of COVID-19 infections
- The evolution is closely related to the rise in Covid contamination and virulence, as well as to the strictness of the measures (see Figure)
- Women, people living alone, people with a lower educational level and younger people (18-29 years old) were more vulnerable to mental health problems during the pandemic

Dissatisfaction with social contacts

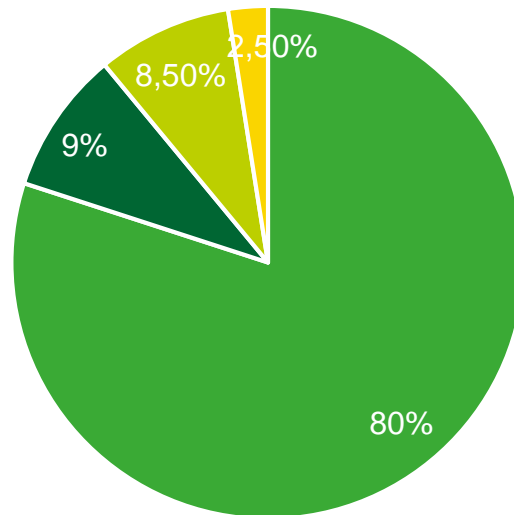
People (% 18+ yr) unsatisfied with their social contacts,
HIS2018, COVID-19 surveys 2020-2022



- Highly increased levels of social dissatisfaction during the pandemic
- The evolution is closely related to the strictness of the measures (Figure)
- In March 2022, 1/5 reported to feel severe loneliness
- Age group +65 were least unsatisfied

Suicidal thoughts – March 2022

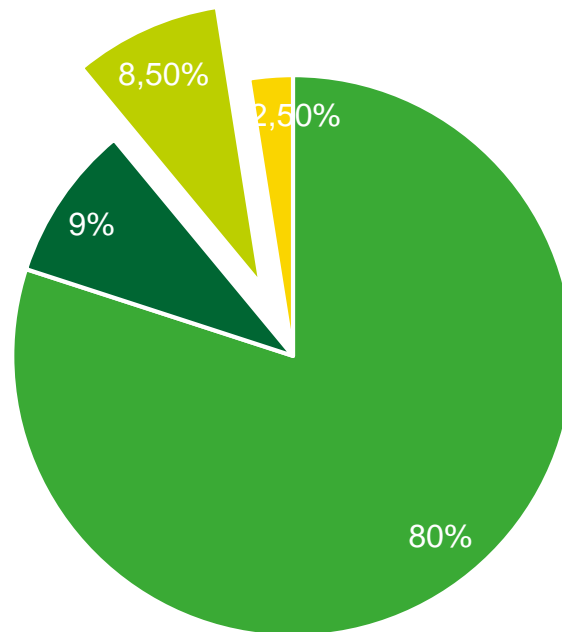
Percentage of population (18+) that reported the presence of suicidal thoughts before and/or during the COVID-19 pandemic, March 2022



■ Never ■ Only before ■ Both before and during ■ Only during

Suicidal thoughts – March 2022

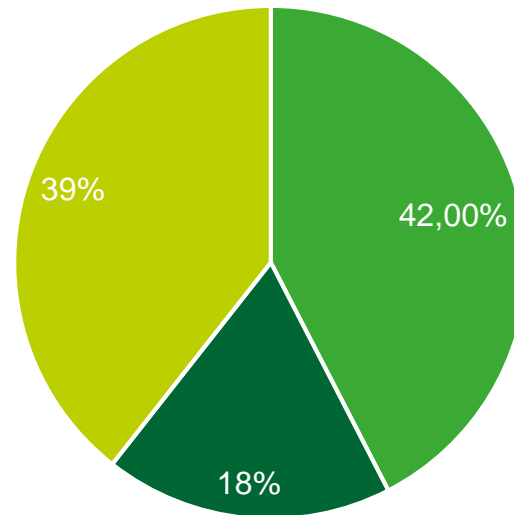
Percentage of population (18+) that reported the presence of suicidal thoughts before and/or during the COVID-19 pandemic



■ Never ■ Only before ■ Both before and during ■ Only during

Suicidal thoughts – March 2022

Frequency of suicidal thoughts compared to before pandemic among those who reported suicidal thoughts both before and during the pandemic



■ Did not change ■ Decreased ■ Increased

Vulnerable groups

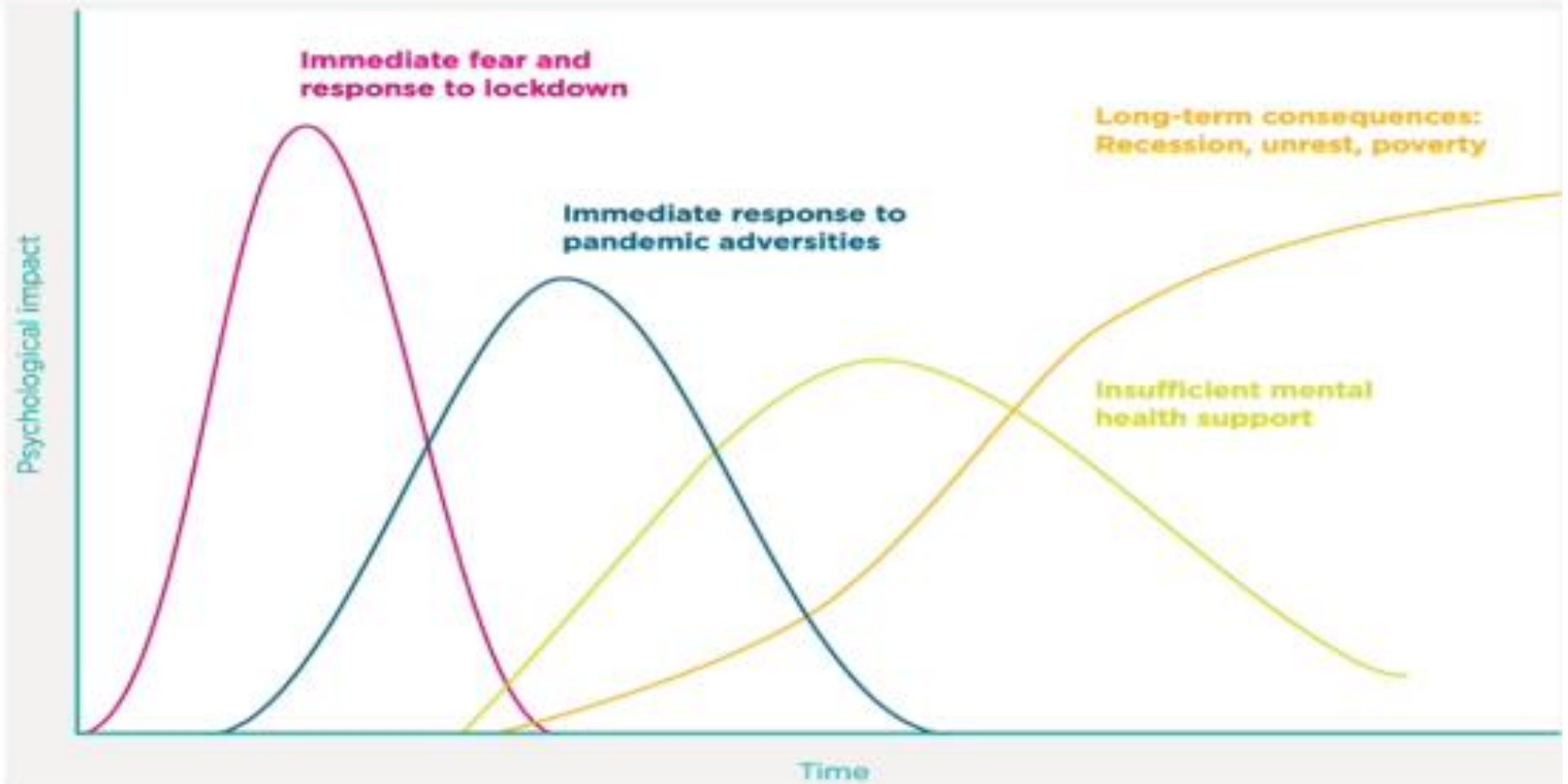
The direct and indirect consequences of COVID-19 (including measures taken and economic downturn) have impacted mental wellbeing. The impacts are felt disproportionately amongst :

- Young people (18-29 years old)
- Women
- People living alone or alone with children
- People with lower education
- People unintentionally out of work
- People with incapacities
- People with prior psychological fragility

IMPLICATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR THE FUTURE

Long term effects and needs

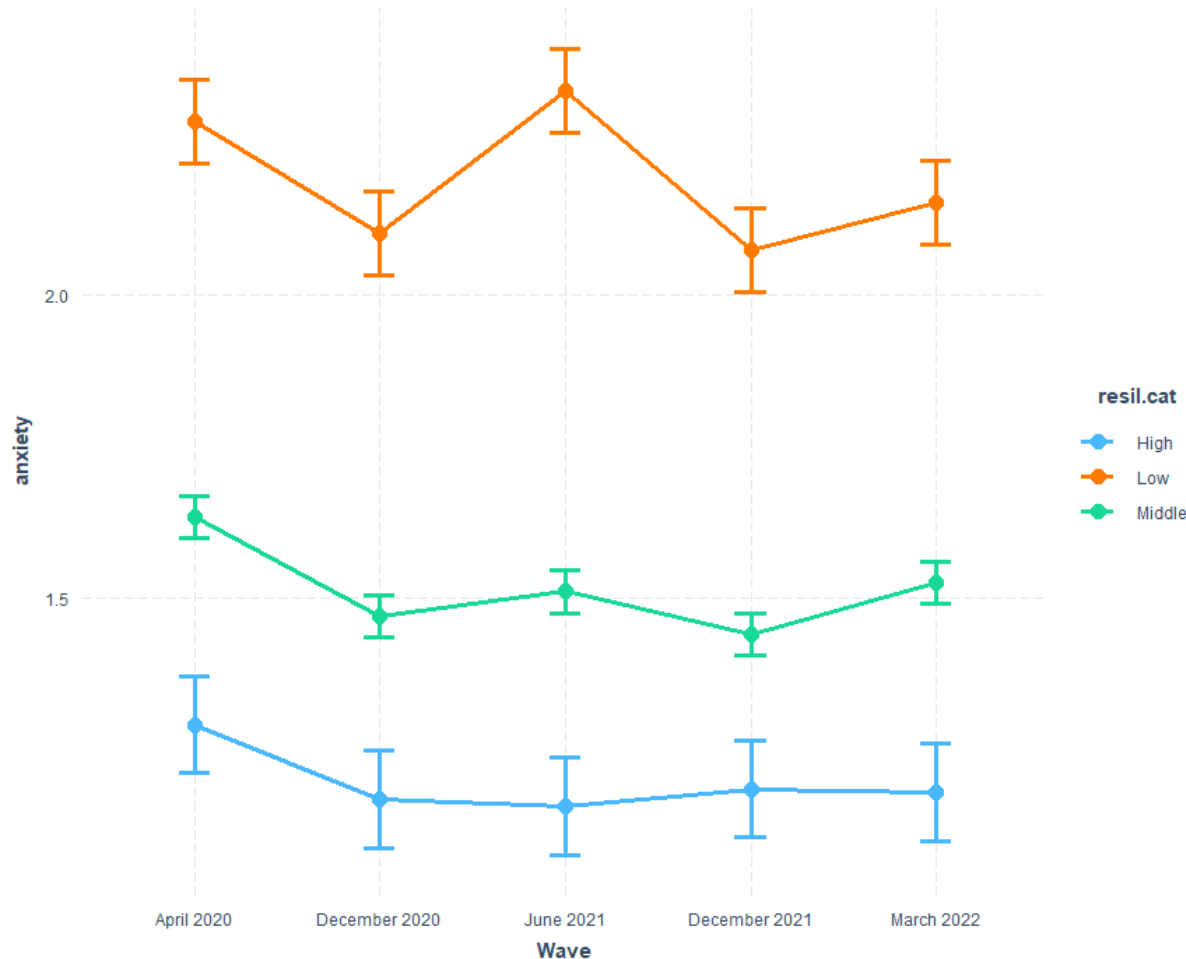
TIME HORIZONS OF KEY MENTAL HEALTH EFFECTS OF THE PANDEMI



From: Banks et al., World Happiness Report, 2021

Importance of strengthening resilience during times of crisis

Average anxiety over time according to level of resilience



- Preliminary analyses suggest that resilience can buffer the detrimental impact of the COVID-19 crisis on mental health

What factors may protect us during times of stress?

- Social support
- Coping
- Emotion regulation

Take-home message

- ❖ The COVID-19 pandemic did not only affect physical health, but has also severely impacted mental health and well-being
- ❖ Even when the pandemic is over, it remains important to keep monitoring the long-term effects of the pandemic on mental health
- ❖ Important to examine changeable factors that could protect us in times of crisis and which can be targeted in interventions and preventions (e.g., suicide prevention strategies, school-based social and emotional learning programmes)



BELHEALTH cohort

- ❖ A longitudinal epidemiological study in the general population living in Belgium (18+)
- ❖ First wave at the end of September with new waves every 3 to 4 months for at least two years
- ❖ Three main aims
 - Monitor the evolution of health and well-being in Belgium in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic
 - Identify the impact of major global threatening events (e.g., energy crisis, climate crisis) on the health and well-being of the Belgian population
 - Identify changeable factors that can increase resilience in times of uncertainty and distress



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Thank you for your time and attention!

Contact

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Reports

- <https://covid-19.sciensano.be/fr/covid-19-situation-epidemiologique>
- <https://covid-19.sciensano.be/nl/covid-19-epidemiologische-situatie>