

COVID-19 mitigation at EURO 2020

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

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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 (World Health Organization 2019), 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 (2021) 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 (Sports Ground Safety Authority Guidance 2020). 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 (Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport 2021a).

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 (DCMS 2021b). 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 (Scottish Government 2021; Department for Transport and Department of Health and Social Care 2021).

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 (British Beer & Pub Association 2021; Scottish Beer & Pub Association 2021).

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.

Researchers recruited football supporters who were planning to attend EURO 2020 matches to act as ‘fieldwork supporters’ and gather data via structured observations at EURO 2020 matches. 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

* Spectators were provided with information before attending EURO 2020 matches via email and push notifications from the UEFA EURO 2020 app. 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 given a 30-minute time slot to arrive at the stadium, sometimes 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.
* Gaining entry was described as a complicated procedure as it required two different apps and for the electronic ticket to be ‘activated’ via a QR code. Older spectators or those unfamiliar with the technology struggled with this.
* 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 / Implications for policy and practice

* Spectators need to be provided with clear, up to date information regarding entry procedures and mitigation.
* 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 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.
* Egress procedures need to be developed and implemented to ensure safe departure from the event.

About this research

This briefing is based on research funded by the ESRC (grant no: EP/V055291/1) and undertaken by:

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