

Covid conspiracies and confusions: the impact on compliance with the UK's lockdown rules and the link with social media use

For more information, contact:

Bobby Duffy
bobby.duffy@kcl.ac.uk

Daniel Allington
daniel.allington@kcl.ac.uk

Thursday 18 June 2020



Introduction

This report includes findings from a survey of 2,254 UK residents aged 16-75 by [King's College London](#) and [Ipsos MORI](#), conducted on 20-22 May. It accompanies a [peer-reviewed article](#) published in *Psychological Medicine*.

The report finds that:

- People who believe conspiracy theories about Covid-19 are more likely to have broken key lockdown rules: for example, **38% of those who think there is no hard evidence that Covid-19 really exists have had family/friends visit them at home**, compared with 12% of those who think that's false.
- People who believe in conspiracy theories are more likely to be getting their information about Covid-19 from social media: for example, **60% of those who believe the symptoms are linked to 5G radiation say that much of their information on Covid-19 comes from YouTube**, compared with 14% of those who think that's false.
- People who have broken key lockdown rules are more likely to be getting their information about Covid-19 from social media: for example, **58% of those who have gone outside when they had symptoms that could be Covid-19 say that much of their information on Covid-19 comes from YouTube**, compared with 16% of those who haven't.

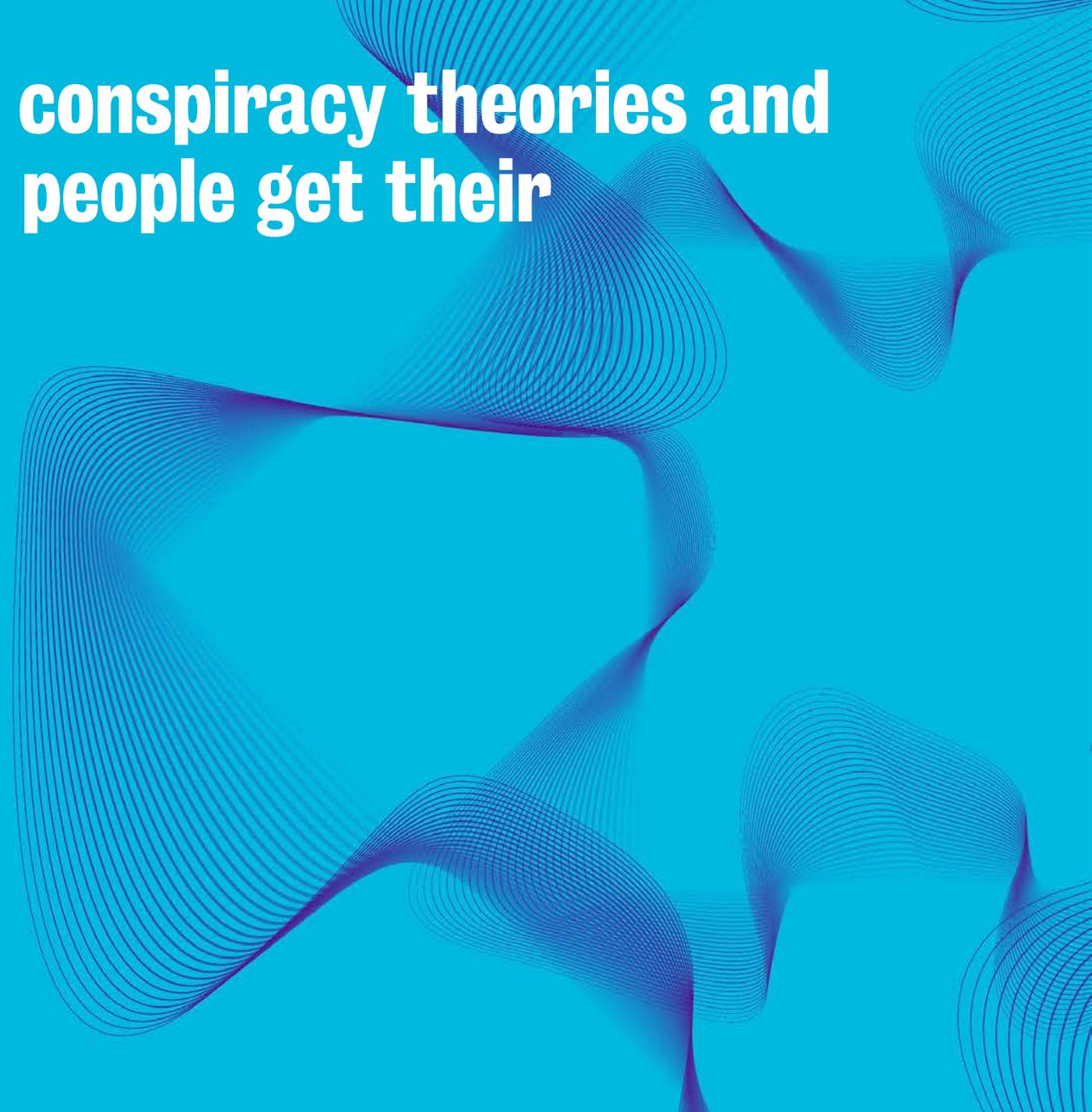
And significant proportions of the population believe in conspiracies or are confused about the virus:

- 3 in 10 think coronavirus was probably created in a lab, up from a quarter at the beginning of April.
- 3 in 10 think most people in the UK have already had coronavirus without realising it.
- 3 in 10 believe the Covid-19 death toll is being deliberately reduced or hidden by the authorities.
- 1 in 7 believe the death toll is being deliberately exaggerated by the authorities.
- 1 in 8 believe that the current pandemic is part of a global effort to force everyone to be vaccinated.
- More than 1 in 20 believe that the symptoms that most people blame on Covid-19 appear to be connected to 5G network radiation.
- More than 1 in 20 believe there is no hard evidence that Covid-19 really exists.

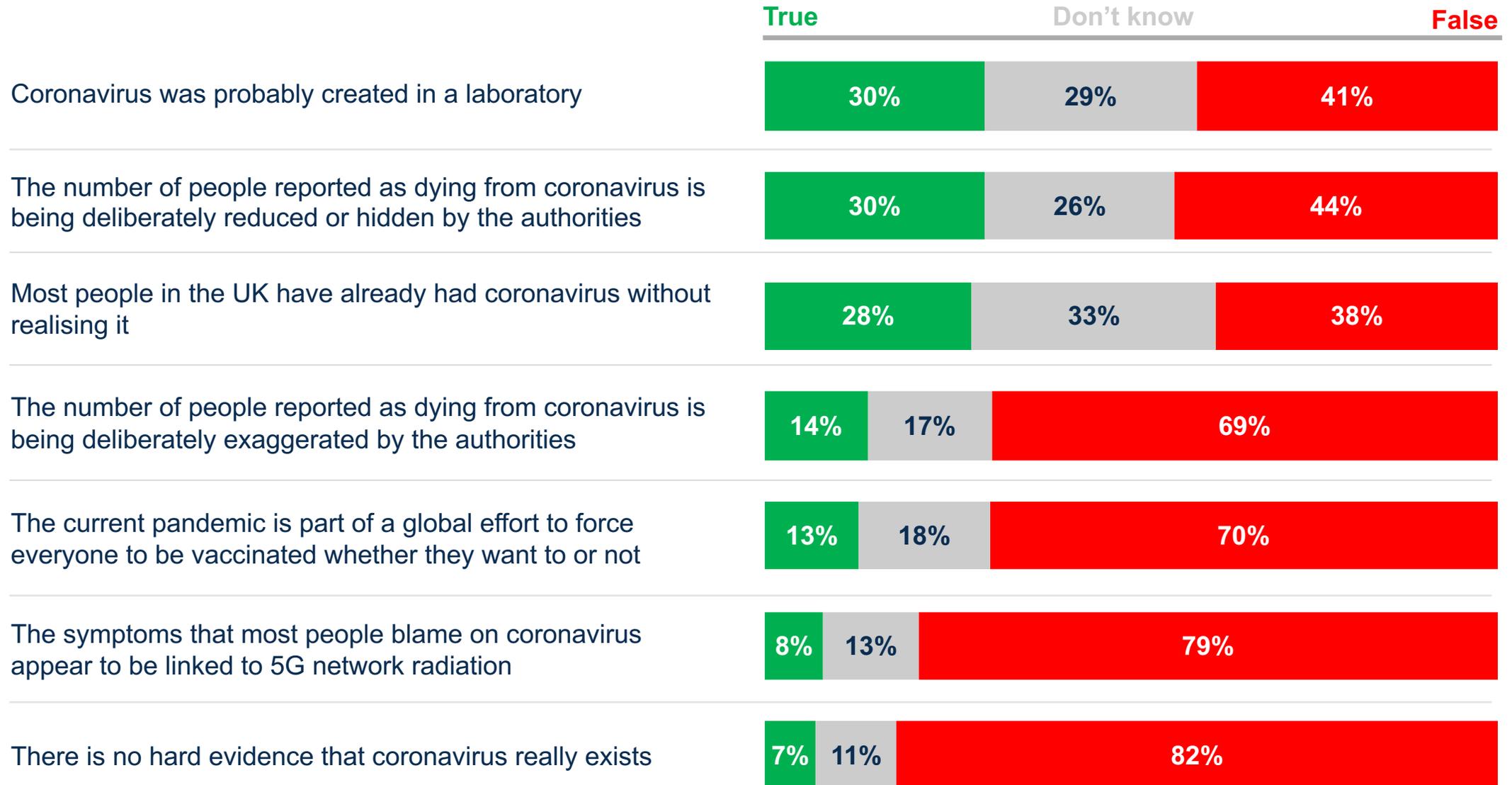
For demographic controls and tests of statistical significance, please see the [peer-reviewed article](#).

Belief in 7 coronavirus conspiracy theories and confusions, and where people get their information from

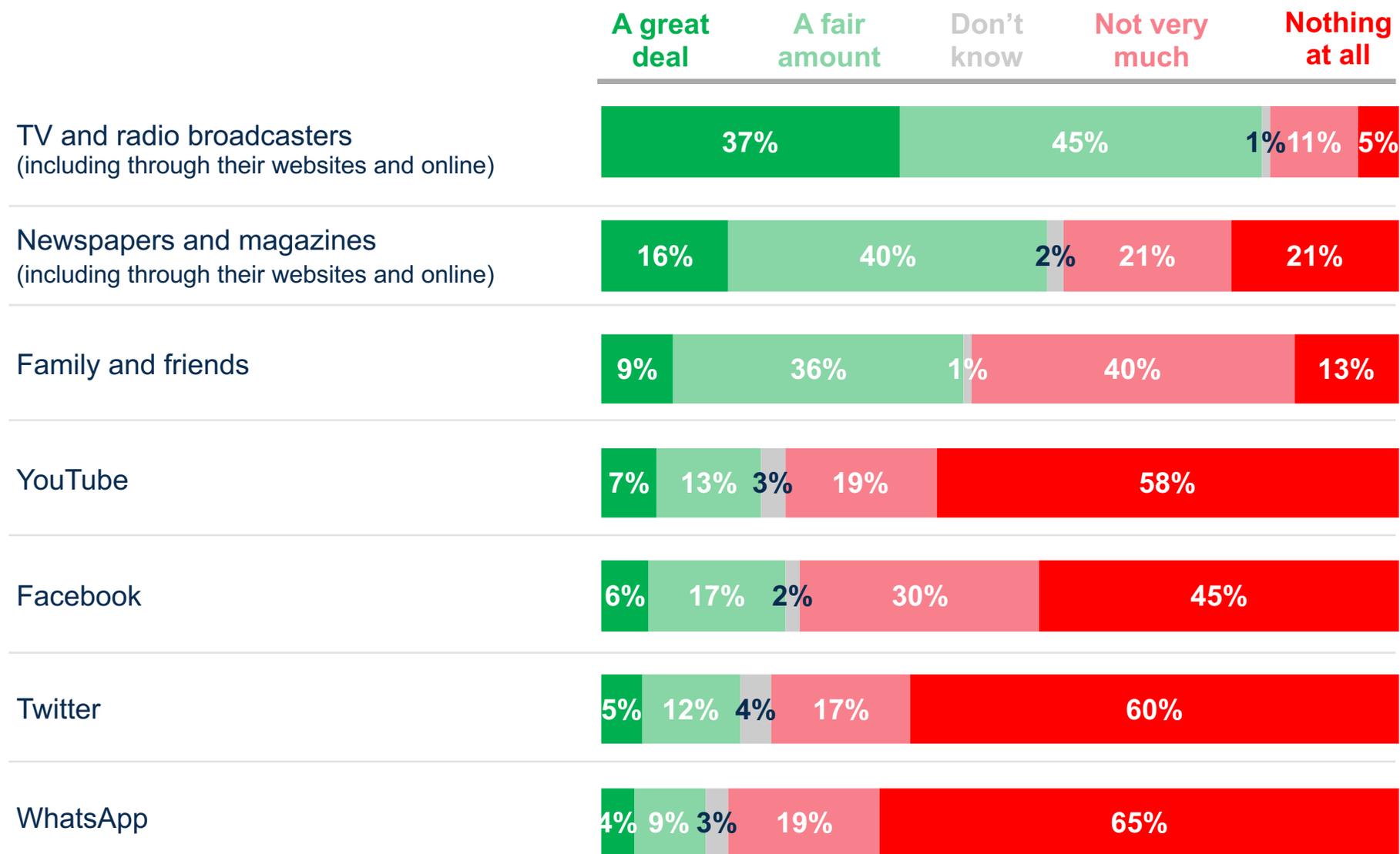
Summary



Are the following statements true or false?



Please tell us how much of what you know about coronavirus, if anything, comes from...



Who believes in coronavirus conspiracies?

Testing 7 key conspiracy theories and confusions...

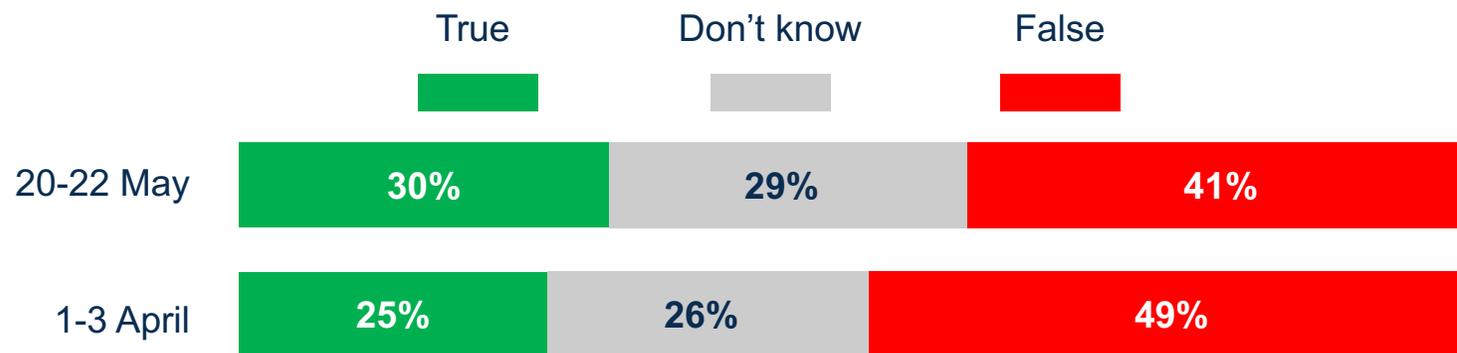
1. Coronavirus was probably created in a laboratory

The proportion of the UK public who think Covid-19 was probably made in a lab is **up 5 percentage points** since the second week of lockdown, **rising from 25% then to 30% now.**

There has been a **much bigger increase**, of 14 points, in the proportion of **Conservative voters** who believe this claim. **39% now think it is true, up from 25%.**

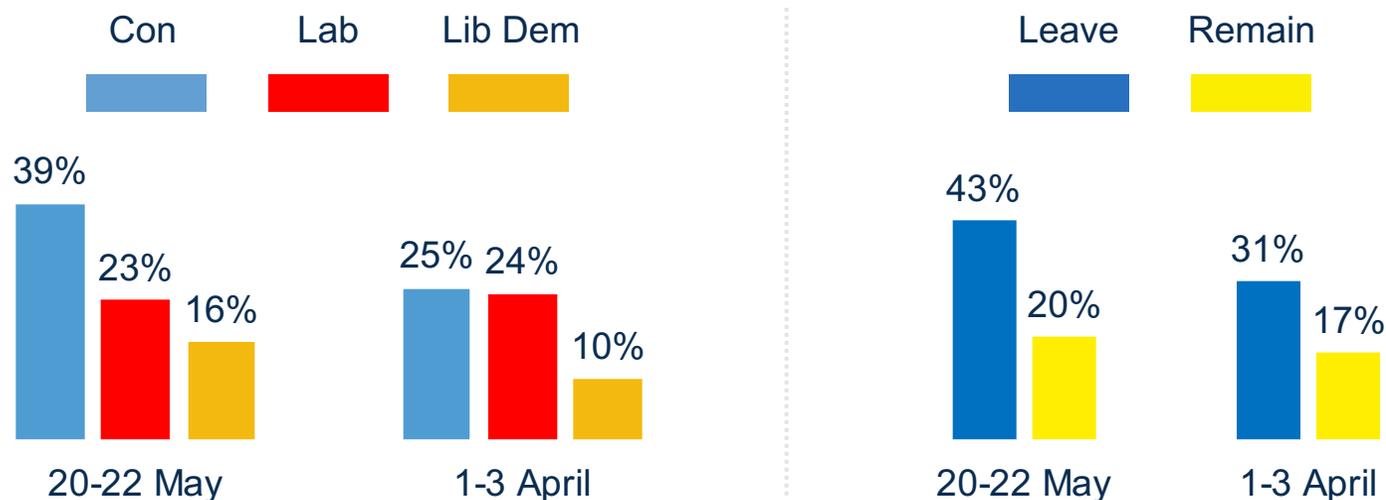
Belief among Leave voters has also risen significantly.

Are the following statements true or false? Coronavirus was probably created in a laboratory



Base: 2,254 UK residents aged 16-75, interviewed 20-22 May 2020 and 2,250 UK residents aged 16-75, interviewed 1-3 April 2020

% who think statement is true, by 2019 general election and EU referendum votes



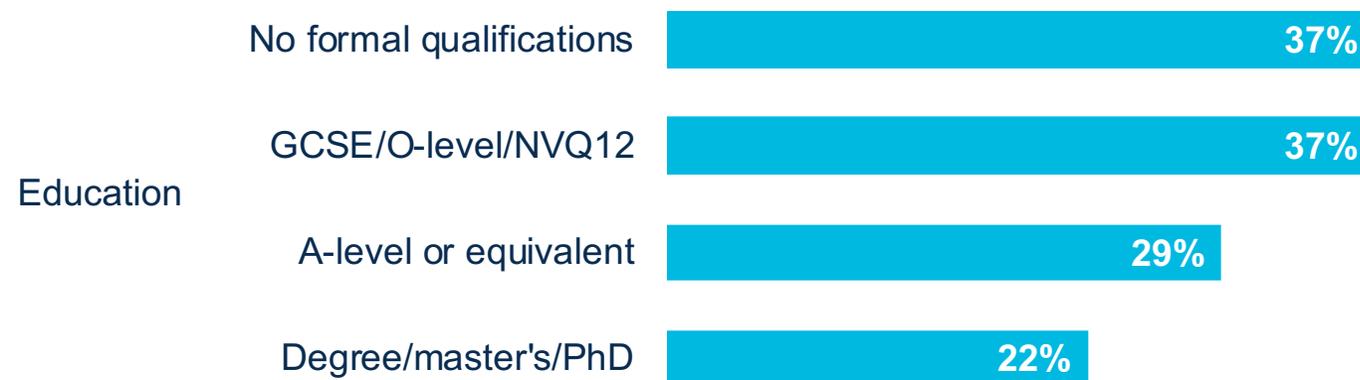
Base: 1,503 UK residents aged 16-75 who voted in the 2019 general election, and 1,775 UK residents aged 16-75 who voted in the 2016 EU referendum, interviewed 20-22 May 2020

37% of those with no formal educational qualifications and those with GCSE-level awards believe this claim, compared with **22%** of those with degrees or even higher qualifications.

Belief that Covid-19 was likely created in a lab is **relatively consistent** across all age groups, at around **30%**.

% who say statement is **true** among different groups

Coronavirus was probably created in a laboratory



Base: 2,254 UK residents aged 16-75, interviewed 20-22 May 2020



Base: 2,254 UK residents aged 16-75, interviewed 20-22 May 2020

Those who are **not concerned** about lifting the lockdown restrictions are **much more likely** to believe that coronavirus was created in a lab.

% who say statement is **true** among different groups Coronavirus was probably created in a laboratory

Not worried
about lifting
lockdown
restrictions

40%

Very worried
about lifting
lockdown
restrictions

26%

Who believes in coronavirus conspiracies?

Testing 7 key conspiracy theories and confusions...

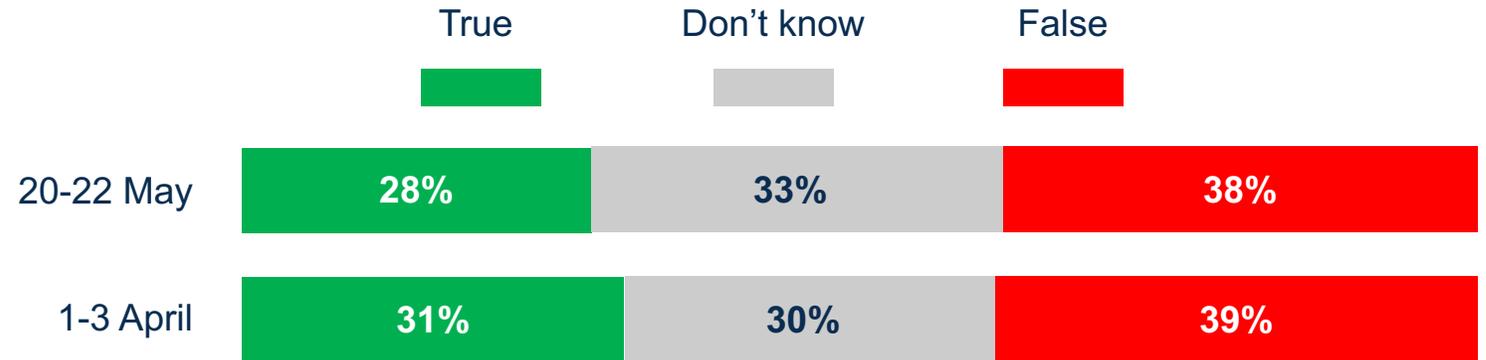
2. Most people in the UK have already had coronavirus without realising it

3 in 10 people believe “most people in the UK” have already had coronavirus, a claim made in media reports drawn from a model that has been challenged by many scientists for being based on unrealistic assumptions.

The proportion who believe this is virtually unchanged from the second week of lockdown.

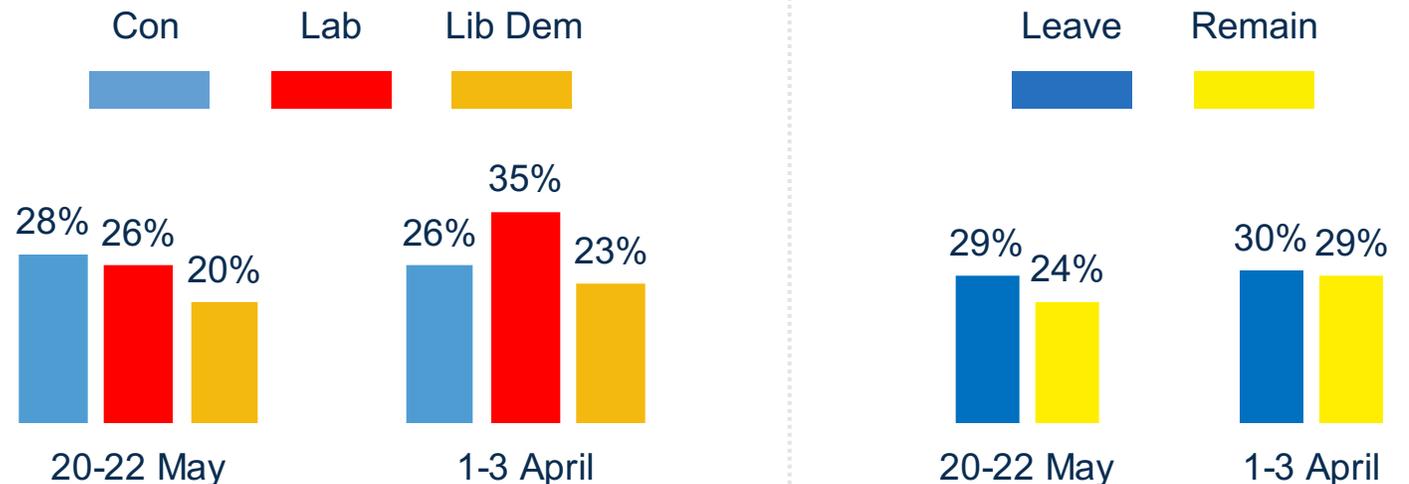
Are the following statements true or false?

Most people in the UK have already had coronavirus without realising it



Base: 2,254 UK residents aged 16-75, interviewed 20-22 May 2020 and 2,250 UK residents aged 16-75, interviewed 1-3 April 2020

% who think statement is true, by 2019 general election and EU referendum votes



Base: 1,503 UK residents aged 16-75 who voted in the 2019 general election, and 1,775 UK residents aged 16-75 who voted in the 2016 EU referendum, interviewed 20-22 May 2020

Those who believe the level of infection is so high are almost **twice as likely** to be unconcerned about lifting the lockdown restrictions.

They're also **more likely** to believe Covid-19 poses a low or no risk to people in the UK.

% who say statement is **true** among different groups

Most people in the UK have already had coronavirus without realising it

Not worried about lifting lockdown restrictions

40%

Very worried about lifting lockdown restrictions

22%

Base: 1,128 UK residents aged 16-75, interviewed 20-22 May 2020

Say **coronavirus poses low/no risk** to people in UK

37%

Say **coronavirus poses high risk** to people in UK

27%

Base: 2,219 UK residents aged 16-75, interviewed 20-22 May 2020

People who think they have had Covid-19 are **twice as likely** as those who don't to believe that a majority of the public have had the virus without realising it.

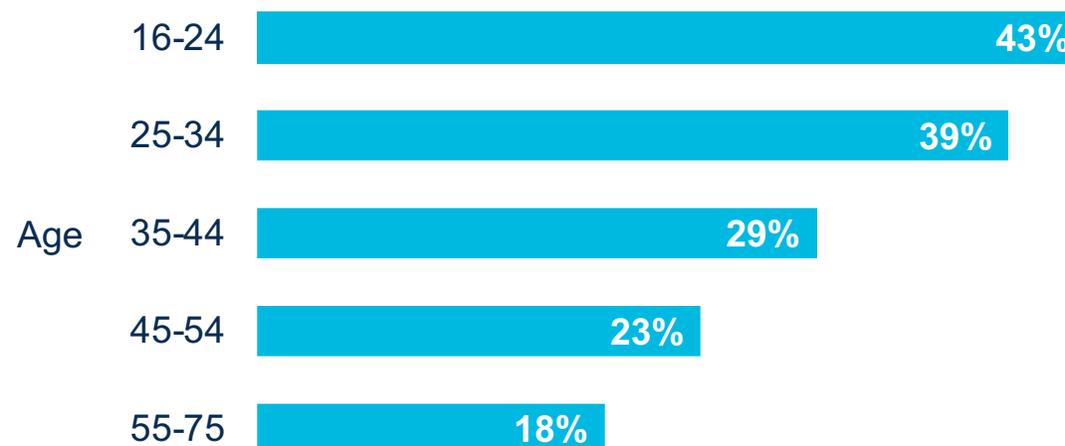
And **belief in this claim decreases with age:** 43% of 16-24-year-olds think it is true, declining to 18% among 55-75-year-olds.

% who say statement is **true** among different groups

Most people in the UK have already had coronavirus without realising it



Base: 1,125 UK residents aged 16-75, interviewed 20-22 May 2020



Base: 2,254 UK residents aged 16-75, interviewed 20-22 May 2020

Who believes in coronavirus conspiracies?

Testing 7 key conspiracy theories and confusions...

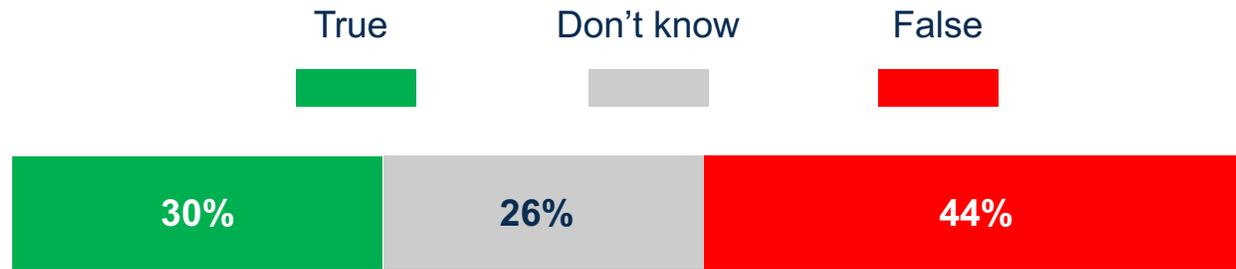
3. The number of people reported as dying from coronavirus is being deliberately reduced or hidden by the authorities

3 in 10 people also believe that the true number of Covid-19 deaths in the UK is being minimised or suppressed.

No doubt influenced by broader political differences with the Conservative government, **2 in 5 Labour voters** believe this claim – **double the proportion of Tory voters** who think the same.

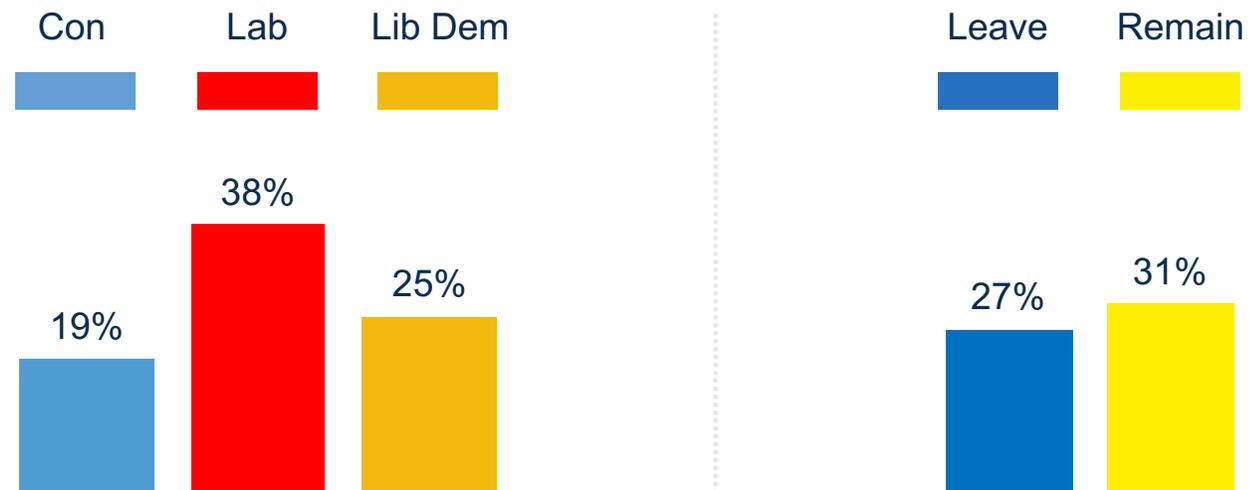
Are the following statements true or false?

The number of people reported as dying from coronavirus is being deliberately reduced or hidden by the authorities



Base: 2,254 UK residents aged 16-75, interviewed 20-22 May 2020

% who think statement is true, by 2019 general election and EU referendum votes



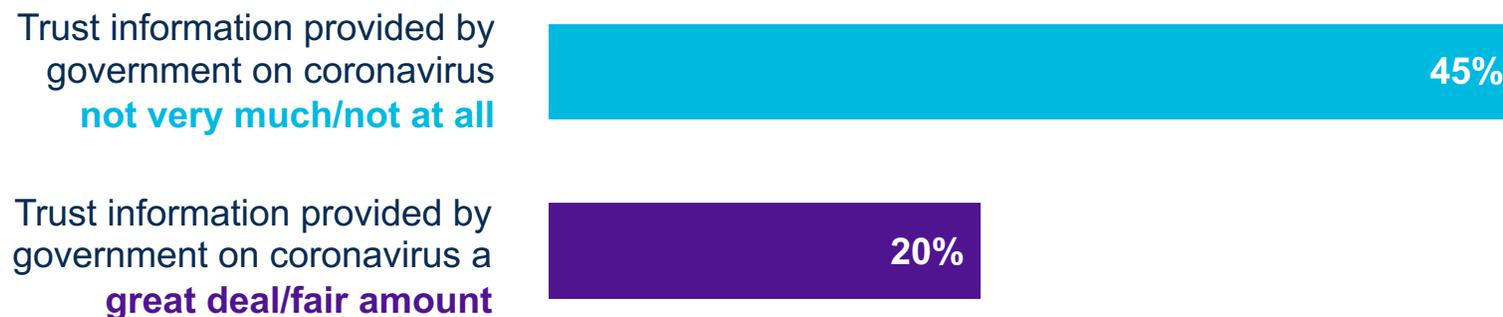
Base: 1,503 UK residents aged 16-75 who voted in the 2019 general election, and 1,775 UK residents aged 16-75 who voted in the 2016 EU referendum, interviewed 20-22 May 2020

As might be expected, people who **do not trust** government information on coronavirus are more than **twice as likely** as those who do to believe the authorities are minimising the Covid-19 death toll.

At least a **quarter** of people in each age group believe this is the case, rising to over a **third** among those aged 25-34 and 16-24.

% who say statement is **true** among different groups

The number of people reported as dying from coronavirus is being deliberately reduced or hidden by the authorities



Base: 2,216 UK residents aged 16-75, interviewed 20-22 May 2020



Base: 2,254 UK residents aged 16-75, interviewed 20-22 May 2020

Who believes in coronavirus conspiracies?

Testing 7 key conspiracy theories and confusions...

4. The number of people reported as dying from coronavirus is being deliberately exaggerated by the authorities

1 in 7 people (14%) think the authorities are exaggerating the real number of coronavirus deaths – **half as many** as those who think deaths are being minimised or hidden.

Conservative voters are **slightly more likely** than voters of the two other main parties to believe deaths are being exaggerated.

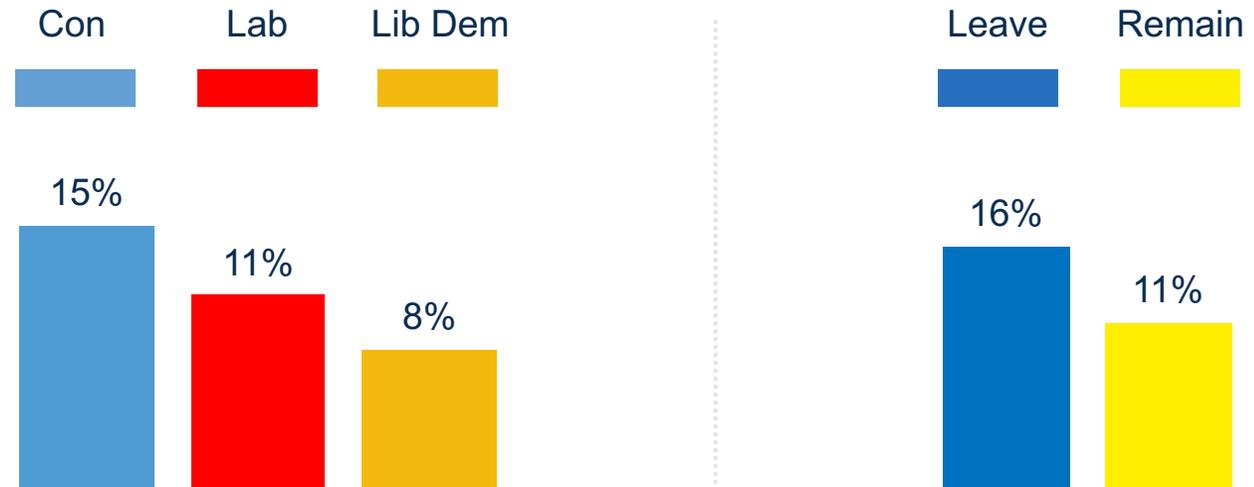
Are the following statements true or false?

The number of people reported as dying from coronavirus is being deliberately exaggerated by the authorities



Base: 2,254 UK residents aged 16-75, interviewed 20-22 May 2020

% who think statement is true, by 2019 general election and EU referendum votes



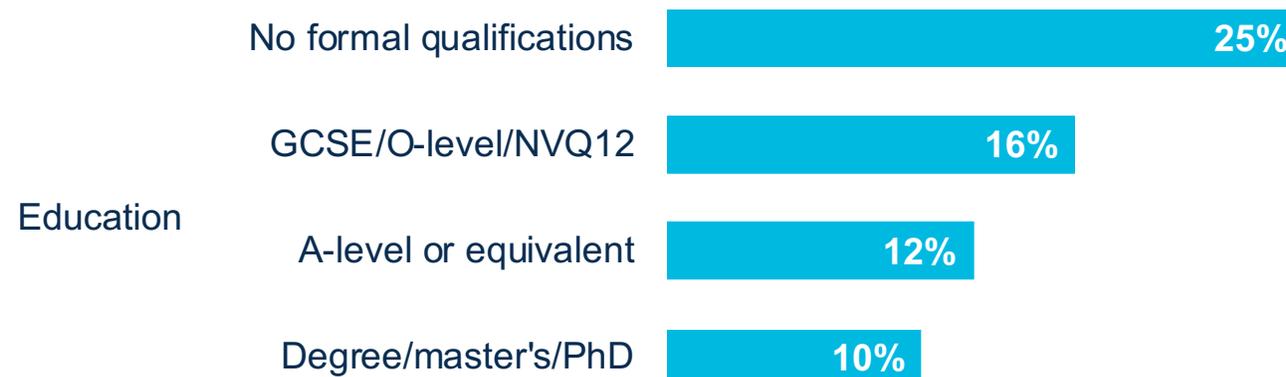
Base: 1,503 UK residents aged 16-75 who voted in the 2019 general election, and 1,775 UK residents aged 16-75 who voted in the 2016 EU referendum, interviewed 20-22 May 2020

1 in 10 degree holders think this claim is true, which rises to a **quarter** among those with no formal qualifications.

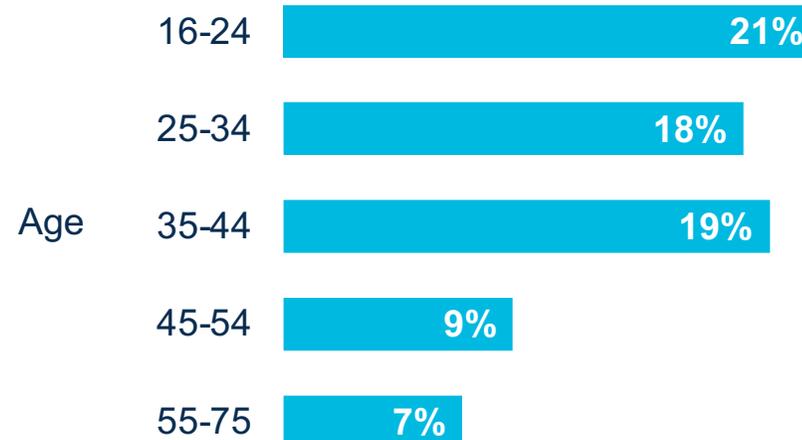
People aged 16-44 are **roughly twice as likely** as those aged 45+ to believe the death toll is being exaggerated.

% who say statement is true among different groups

The number of people reported as dying from coronavirus is being deliberately exaggerated by the authorities



Base: 2,254 UK residents aged 16-75, interviewed 20-22 May 2020



Base: 2,254 UK residents aged 16-75, interviewed 20-22 May 2020

People who think the death toll from coronavirus is being deliberately inflated are **much more likely** to think the virus poses a **low or no risk** to others in the UK.

% who say statement is true among different groups
The number of people reported as dying from coronavirus is being deliberately exaggerated by the authorities

Say **coronavirus poses low/no risk** to people in UK

29%

Say **coronavirus poses high risk** to people in UK

11%

Who believes in coronavirus conspiracies?

Testing 7 key conspiracy theories and confusions...

5. The current pandemic is part of a global effort to force everyone to be vaccinated whether they want to or not

More than **1 in 10 people** (13%) believe the pandemic is part of a forced vaccination programme.

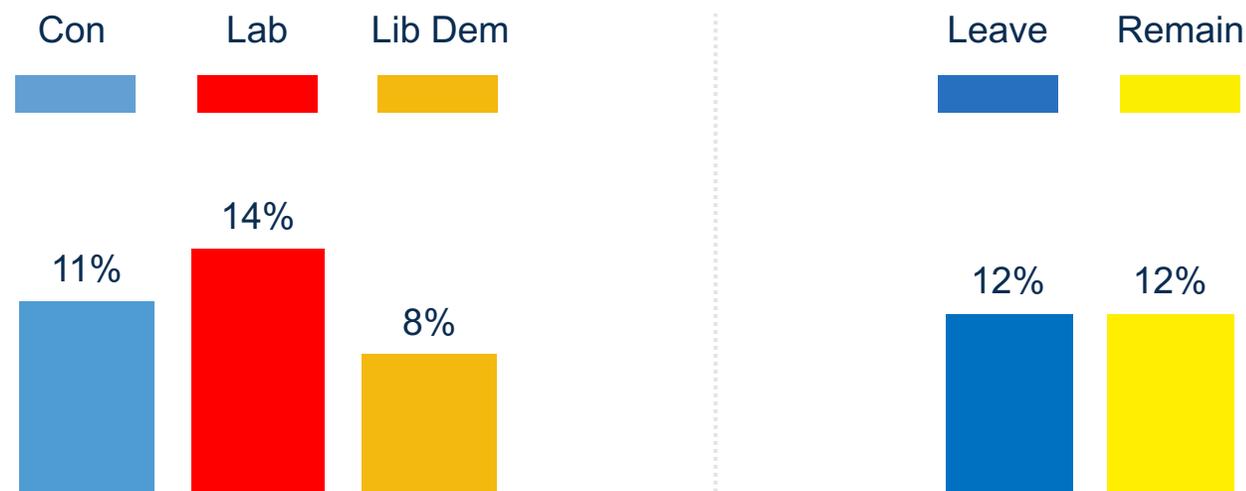
Are the following statements true or false?

The current pandemic is part of a global effort to force everyone to be vaccinated whether they want to or not



Base: 2,254 UK residents aged 16-75, interviewed 20-22 May 2020

% who think statement is true, by 2019 general election and EU referendum votes



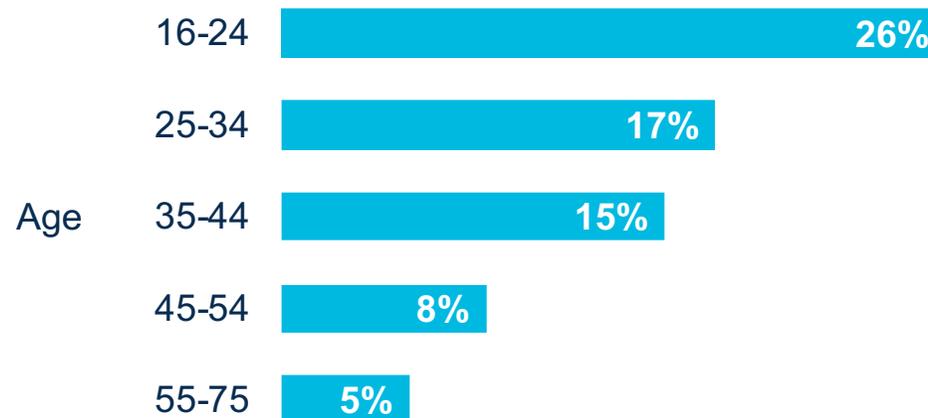
Base: 1,503 UK residents aged 16-75 who voted in the 2019 general election, and 1,775 UK residents aged 16-75 who voted in the 2016 EU referendum, interviewed 20-22 May 2020

A quarter (26%) of 16-24-year-olds believe this, **five times** the proportion of 55-75-year-olds who do.

2 in 10 of those with no formal educational qualifications are believers, which declines to around **1 in 10** among those with A-levels and above.

% who say statement is **true** among different groups

The current pandemic is part of a global effort to force everyone to be vaccinated whether they want to or not



Base: 2,254 UK residents aged 16-75, interviewed 20-22 May 2020



Base: 2,254 UK residents aged 16-75, interviewed 20-22 May 2020

Who believes in coronavirus conspiracies?

Testing 7 key conspiracy theories and confusions...

6. The symptoms that most people blame on coronavirus appear to be linked to 5G network radiation

Despite much media coverage and discussion of those who believe in a link between 5G and Covid-19, **only 8%** of the think such a link exists.

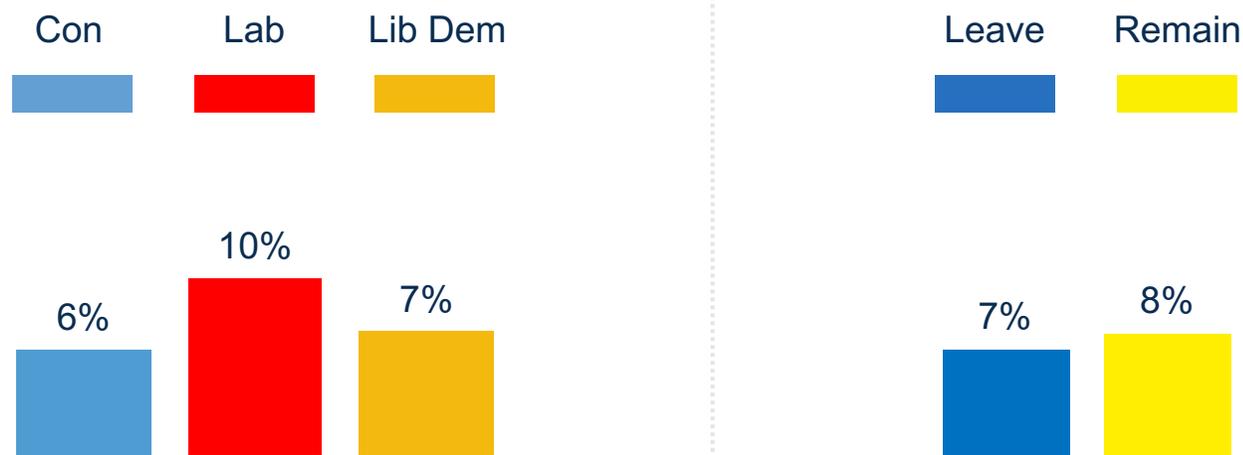
Are the following statements true or false?

The symptoms that most people blame on coronavirus appear to be linked to 5G network radiation



Base: 2,254 UK residents aged 16-75, interviewed 20-22 May 2020

% who think statement is true, by 2019 general election and EU referendum votes



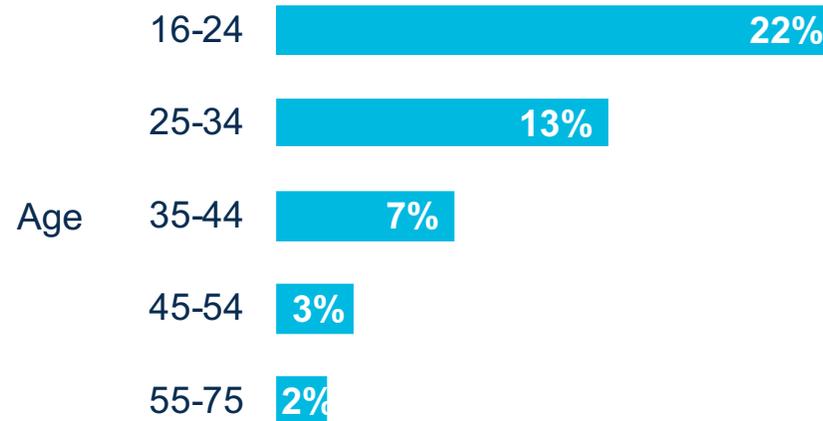
Base: 1,503 UK residents aged 16-75 who voted in the 2019 general election, and 1,775 UK residents aged 16-75 who voted in the 2016 EU referendum, interviewed 20-22 May 2020

People aged 16-24 are **10 times as likely** as those aged 55-75 to believe that 5G is a factor in producing coronavirus symptoms.

1 in 7 people with no formal educational qualifications and **1 in 11** with GCSE-level qualifications think this is true.

% who say statement is **true** among different groups

The symptoms that most people blame on coronavirus appear to be linked to 5G network radiation



Base: 2,254 UK residents aged 16-75, interviewed 20-22 May 2020



Base: 2,254 UK residents aged 16-75, interviewed 20-22 May 2020

Who believes in coronavirus conspiracies?

Testing 7 key conspiracy theories and confusions...

7. There is no hard evidence that coronavirus really exists

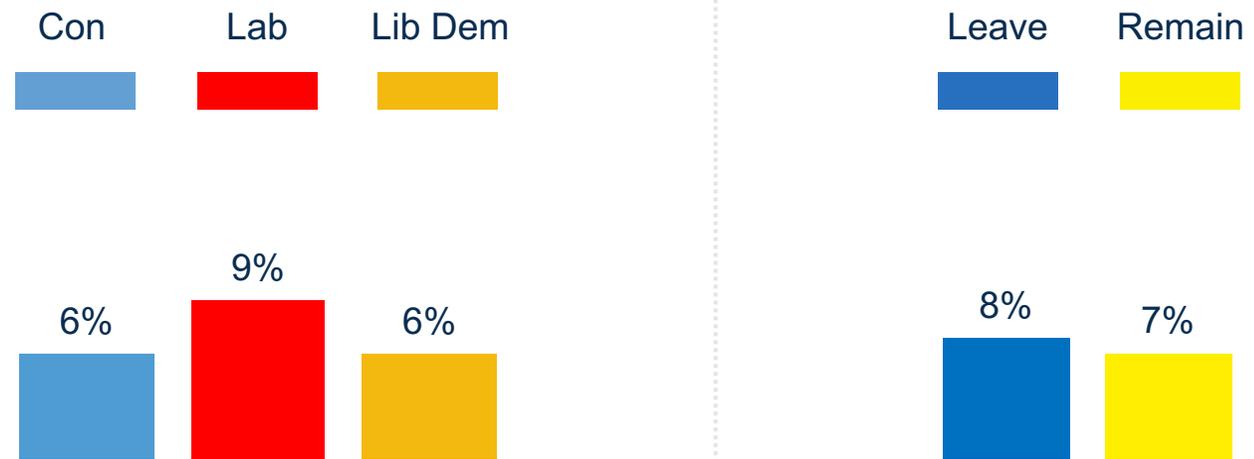
And around the same proportion – **7%** – believe there’s no hard evidence that the coronavirus actually exists.

Are the following statements true or false? There is no hard evidence that coronavirus really exists



Base: 2,254 UK residents aged 16-75, interviewed 20-22 May 2020

% who think statement is true, by 2019 general election and EU referendum votes



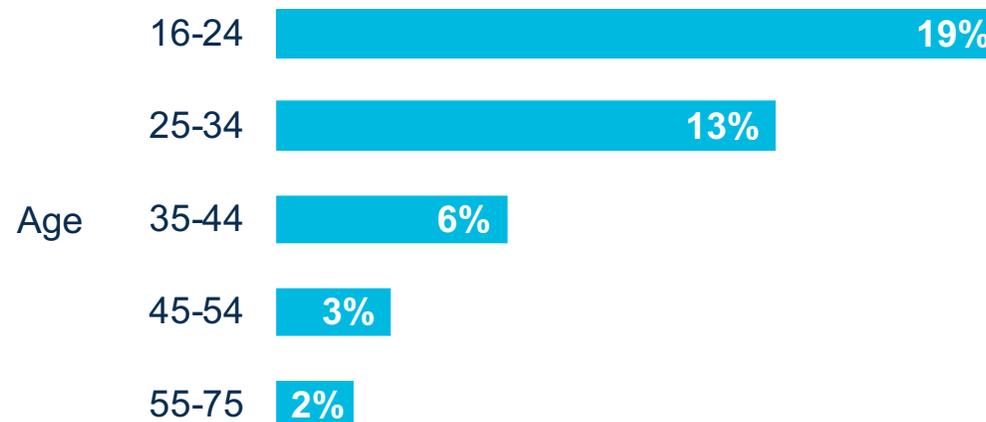
Base: 1,503 UK residents aged 16-75 who voted in the 2019 general election, and 1,775 UK residents aged 16-75 who voted in the 2016 EU referendum, interviewed 20-22 May 2020

1 in 5 16-24-year-olds think there's no hard evidence coronavirus actually exists, compared with fewer than **1 in 20** 45-75-year-olds.

Belief in this claim varies little by education level.

% who say statement is **true** among different groups

There is no hard evidence that coronavirus really exists



Base: 2,254 UK residents aged 16-75, interviewed 20-22 May 2020



Base: 2,254 UK residents aged 16-75, interviewed 20-22 May 2020

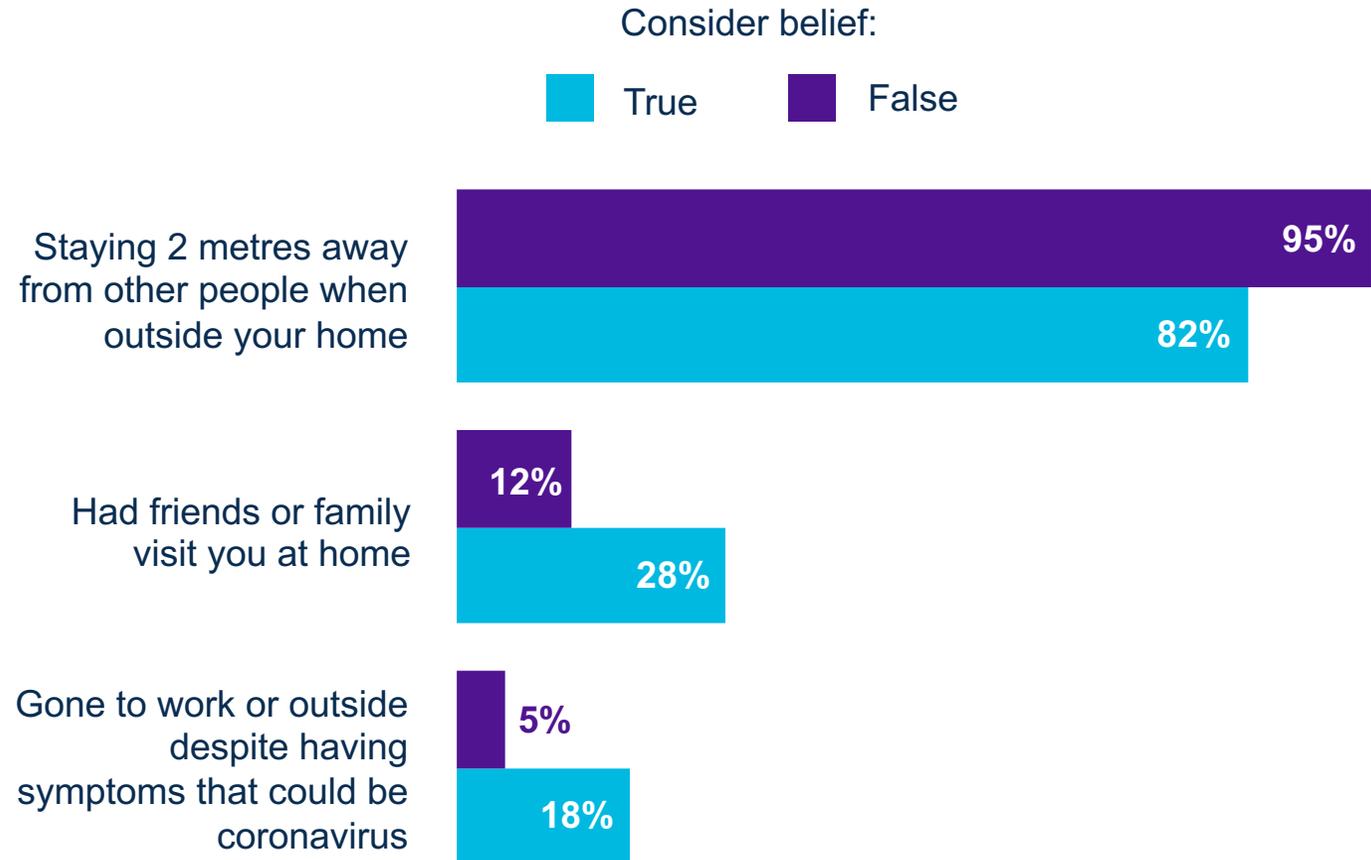
Several of these statements are conspiracy theories which suggest coronavirus may not be a threat to public health.

Belief in these is linked to breaking the lockdown rules...

3 in 10 of those who believe the Covid-19 death toll is being intentionally inflated have broken the lockdown rules by having had friends or family visit them at home – **more than twice as many** as those who don't believe this claim.

And just under **1 in 5** who believe this have gone outside with coronavirus symptoms: nearly **4 times more** than the proportion of non-believers.

% engaging in behaviours among those who do / don't believe the number of people reported as dying from coronavirus is being deliberately exaggerated by the authorities

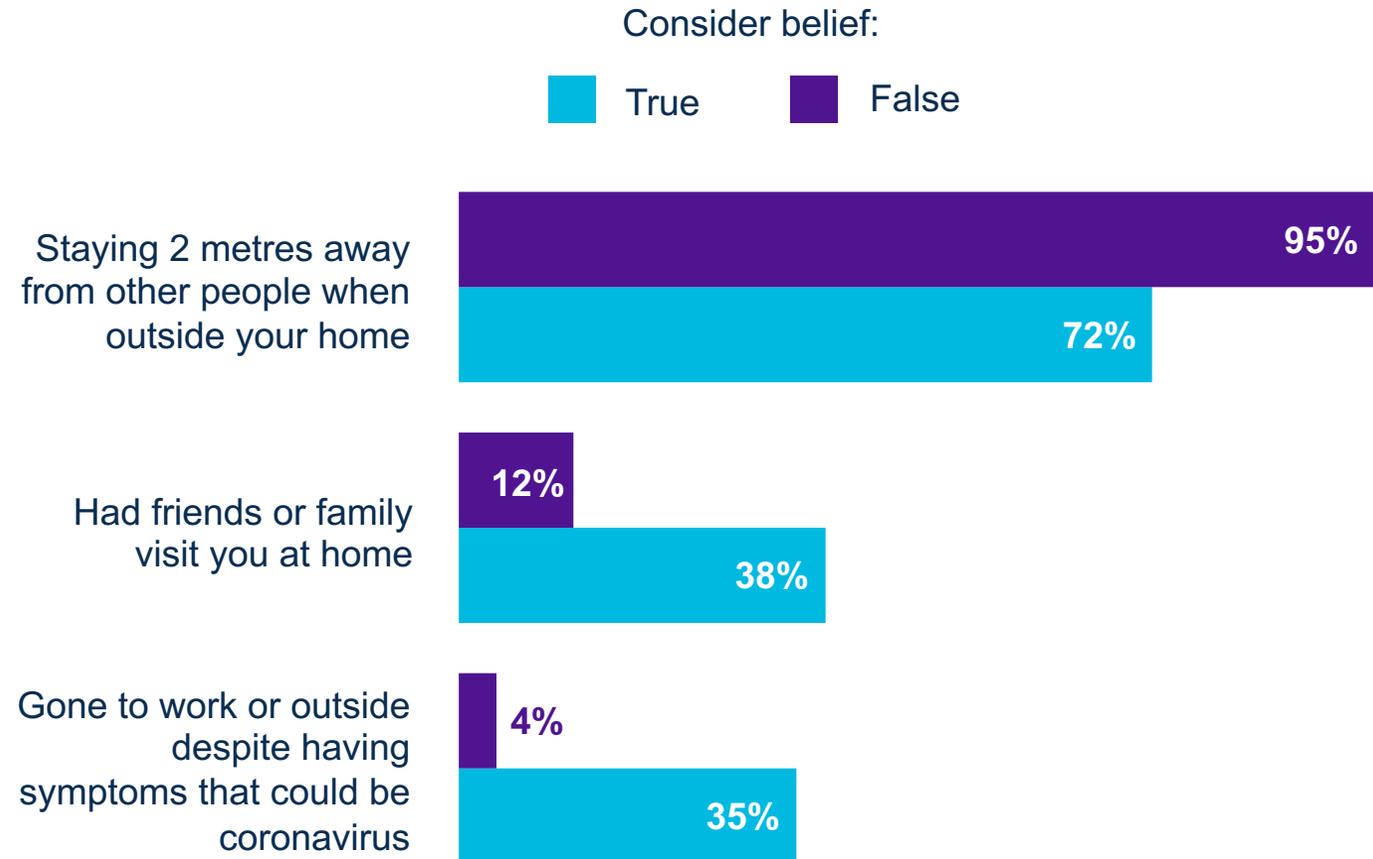


4 in 10 people who believe there's no hard evidence Covid-19 really exists have had friends or family visit them, compared with just over **1 in 10** of those who do not believe this.

And **35%** of believers of this claim have gone to work or outside when they should have been in quarantine, almost 9 times higher than the **4%** of non-believers who have done the same.

There is also a significant difference in compliance with the 2-metre rule, with believers much less likely to have adhered to it.

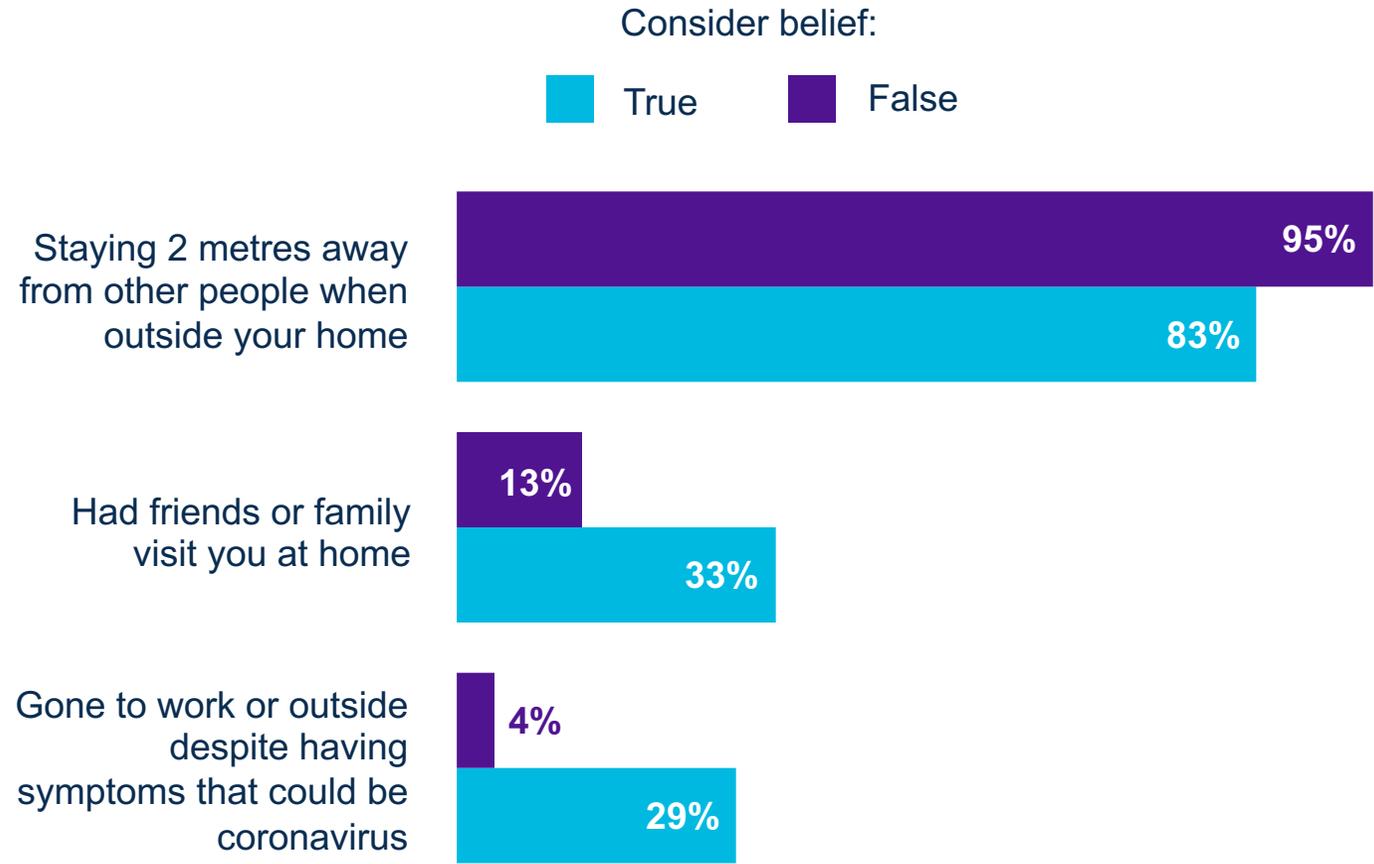
% engaging in behaviours among those who do / don't believe there is no hard evidence that coronavirus really exists



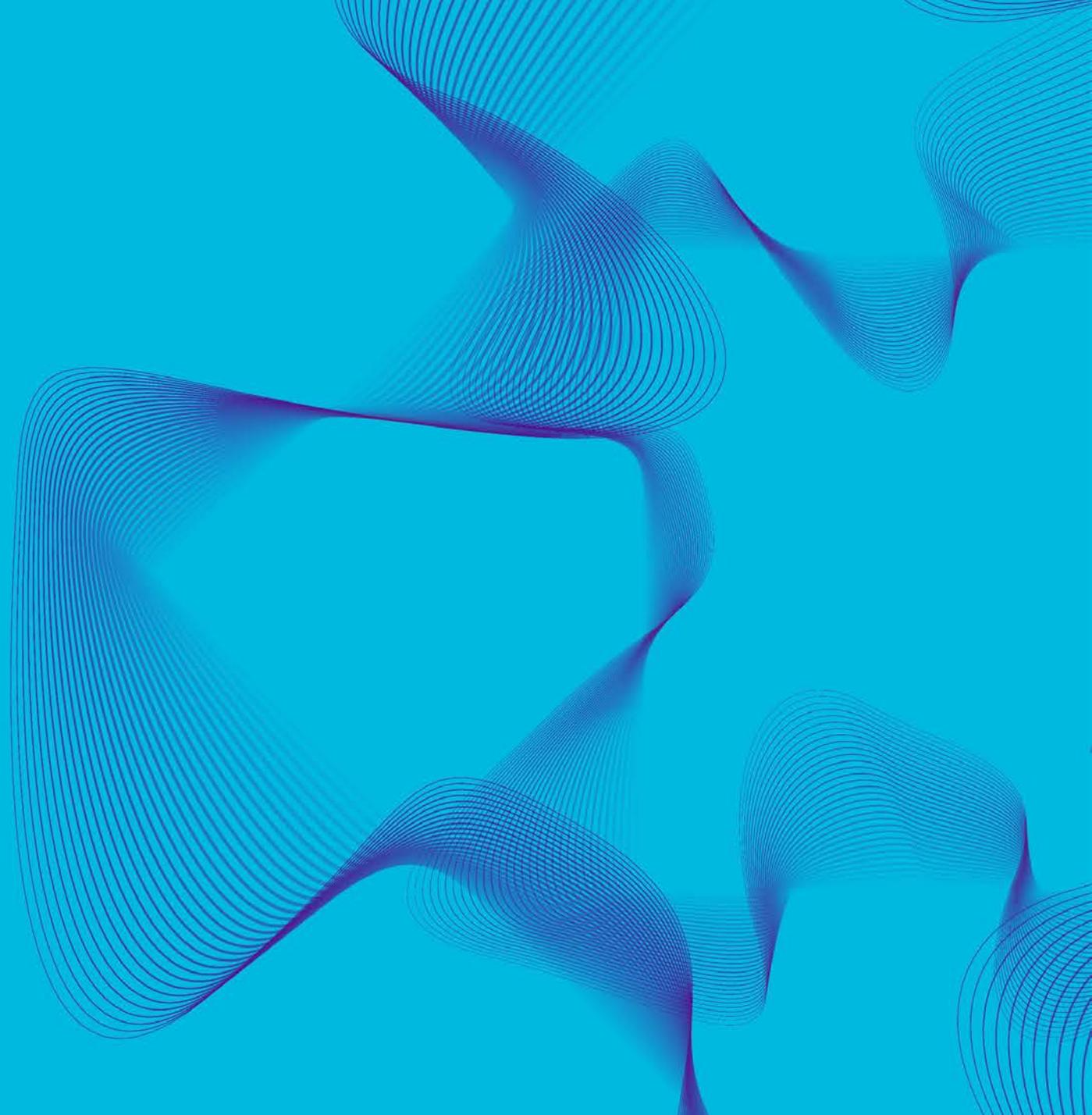
3 in 10 people who believe that 5G is causing Covid-19 symptoms have gone outside despite suspecting they may have the virus, compared with just **4%** among those who reject this belief.

A third of believers have had friends or family to visit them at home, which falls to **1 in 8** among non-believers.

% engaging in behaviours among those who do / don't believe the symptoms that most people blame on coronavirus appear to be linked to 5G network radiation



**Where do people
get their
information from?**



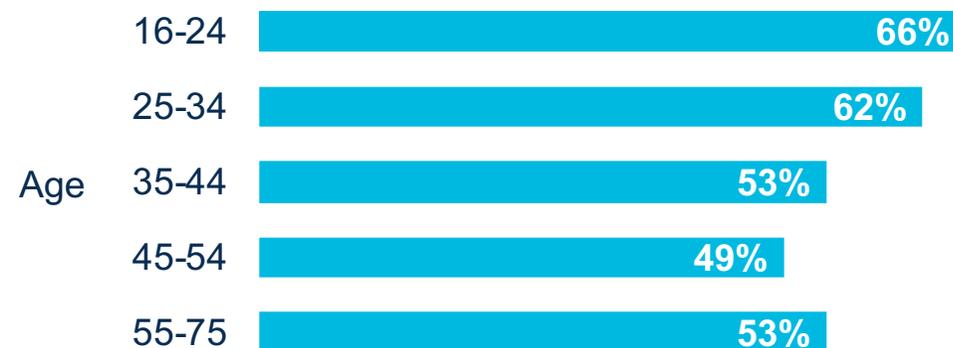
TV and radio outlets are the main sources of information on Covid-19 in the UK, with those aged 16-24 the only age group where less than **80%** get a fair amount or great deal of their information from them.

Newspapers and magazines are the next biggest source of information on the virus.

% who get a fair amount or great deal of information about coronavirus from **TV and radio** (including through their websites and online)



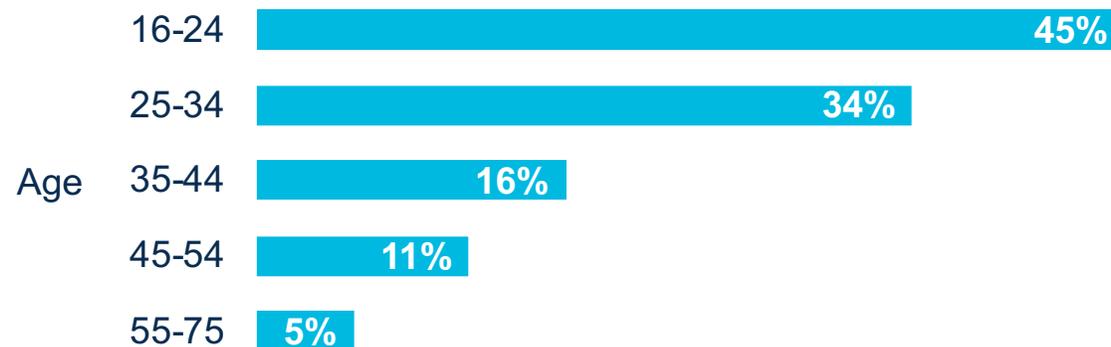
% who get a fair amount or great deal of information about coronavirus from **newspapers and magazines** (including through their websites and online)



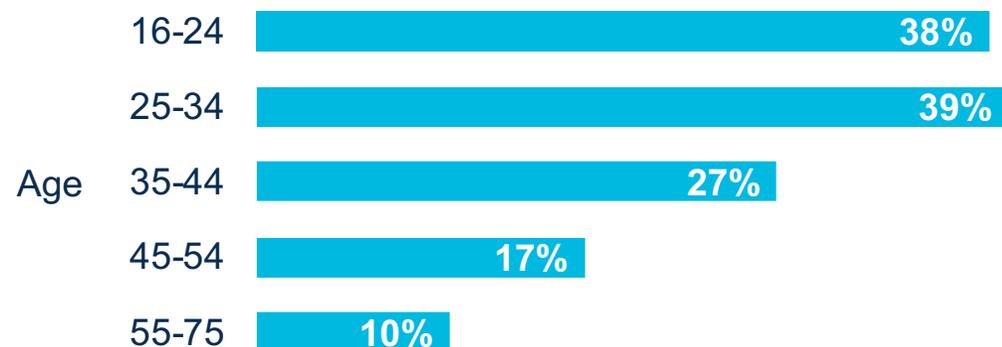
Nearly **half** of those aged 16-24 get a lot of their information about Covid-19 from YouTube.

And among both this age group and 25-34-year-olds, **2 in 5** say the same for Facebook.

% who get a fair amount or great deal of information about coronavirus from **YouTube**

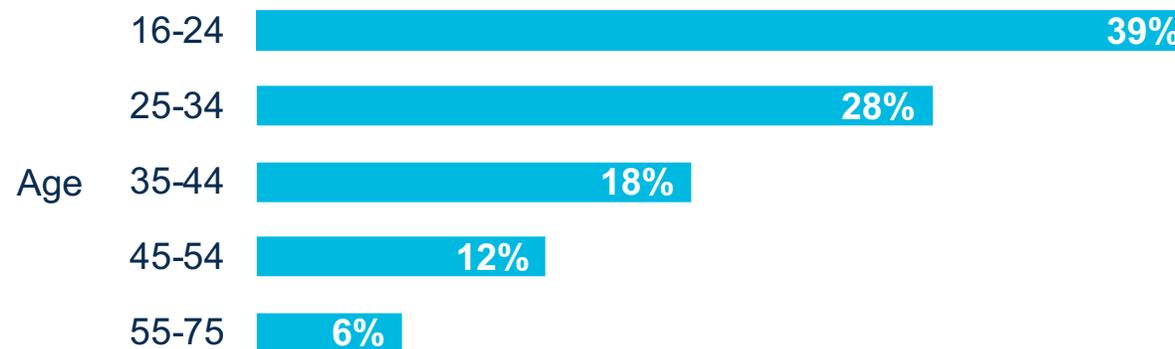


% who get a fair amount or great deal of information about coronavirus from **Facebook**

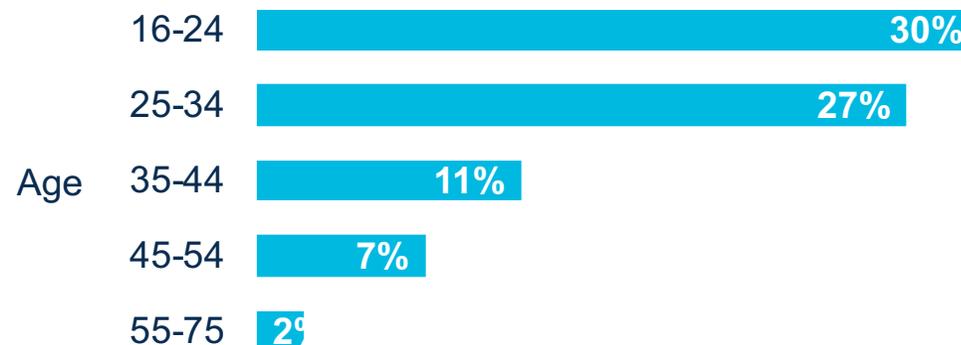


Younger people are also much more likely to get a fair amount or great deal of their information on Covid-19 from Twitter and WhatsApp. **2 in 5** 16-24-year-olds get their information from the former, while around **3 in 10** 16-34-year-olds say the same for WhatsApp.

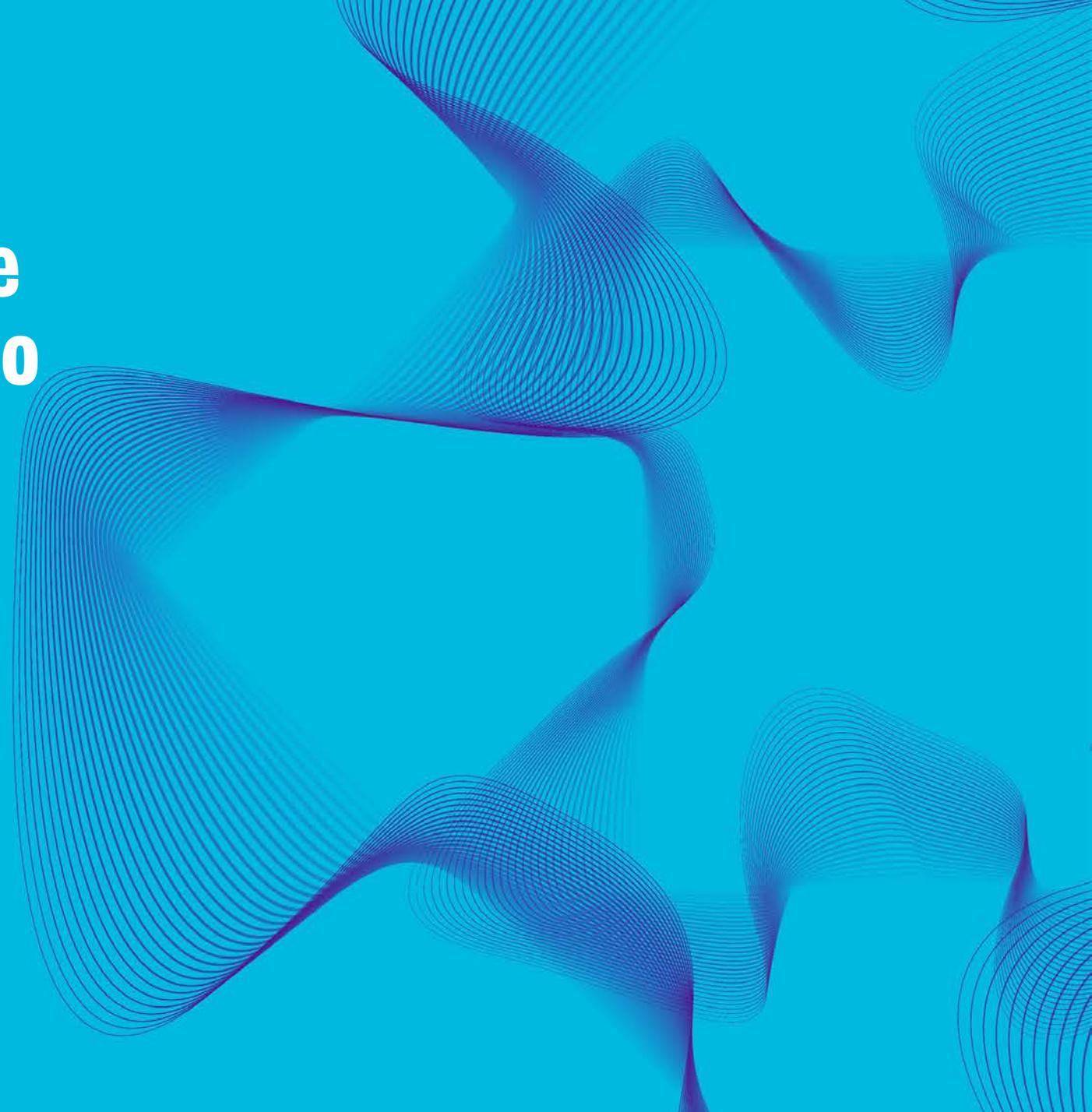
% who get a fair amount or great deal of information about coronavirus from **Twitter**



% who get a fair amount or great deal of information about coronavirus from **WhatsApp**



**Those who believe
in conspiracies are
much more likely to
be getting their
information from
social media...**

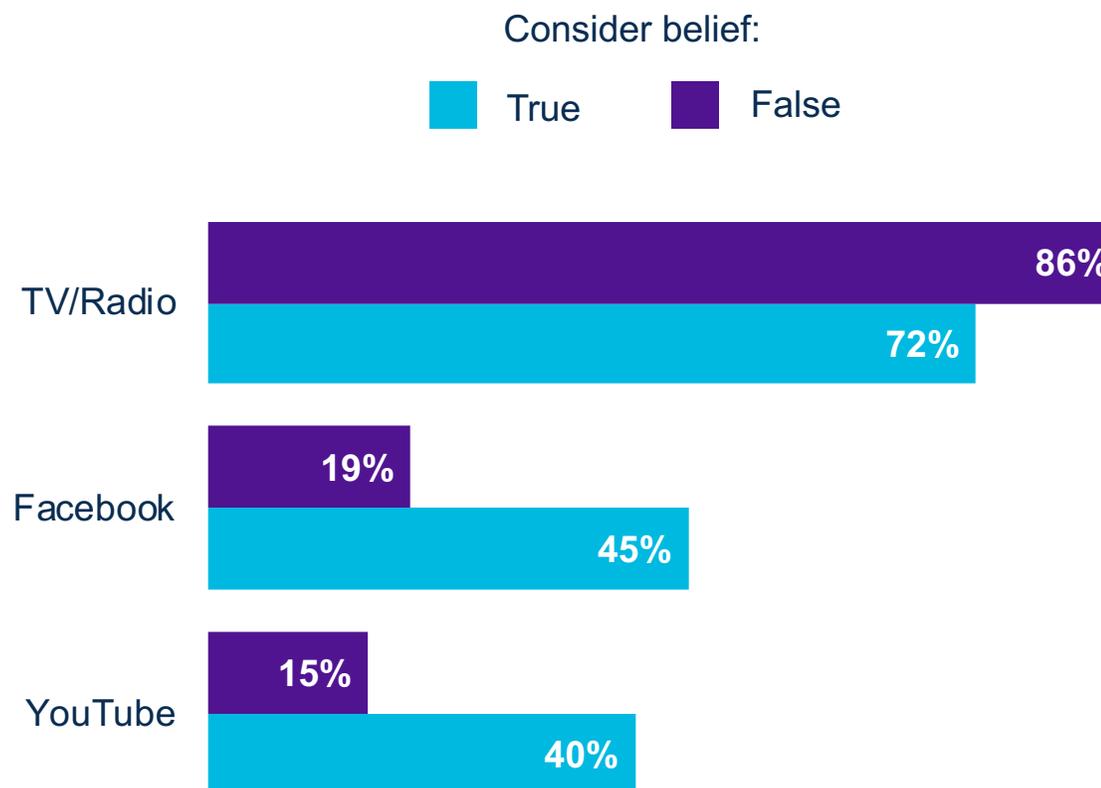


45% of people who believe Covid-19 deaths are being exaggerated get a lot of their information on the virus from Facebook, more than twice the 19% of non-believers who say the same.

And by 40% to 15%, believers in this conspiracy are more likely than non-believers to be getting their information from YouTube.

% of conspiracy believers and non-believers who get a fair amount or great deal of information about coronavirus from following sources

The number of people reported as dying from coronavirus is being deliberately exaggerated by the authorities

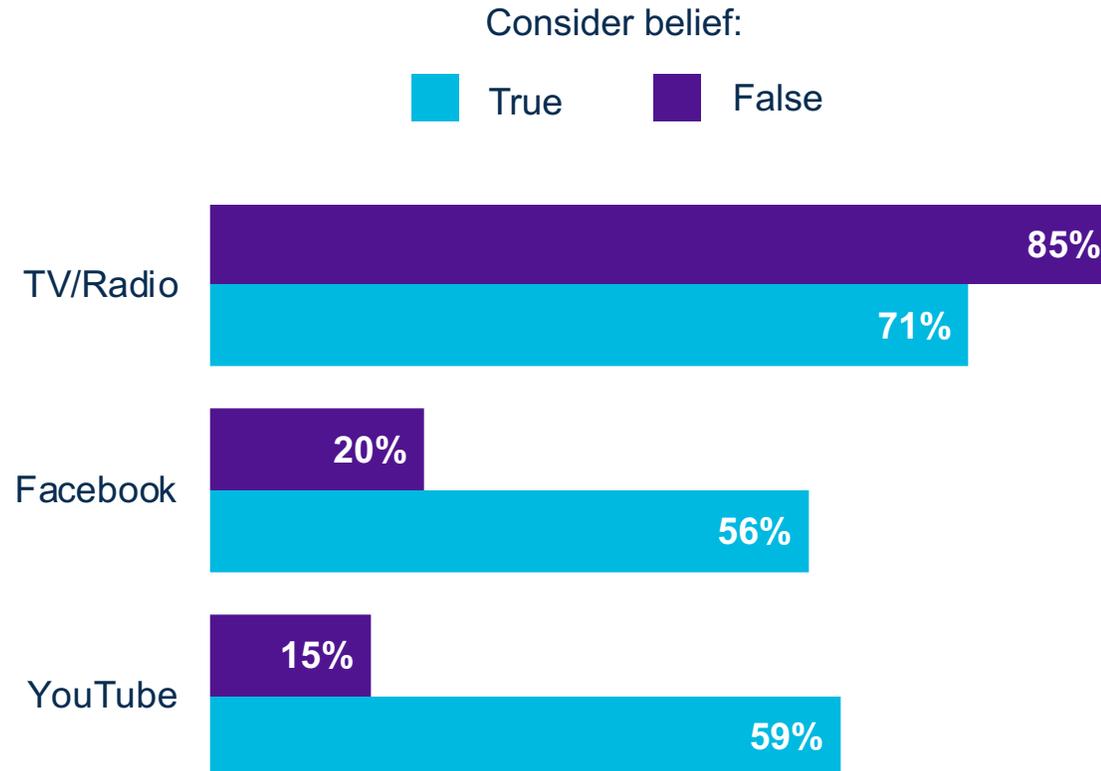


56% of people who believe there is no hard evidence that Covid-19 exists get a lot of their information about the virus from Facebook, compared with **20%** among non-believers.

There is an even bigger divide among believers and non-believers when it comes to YouTube as a source of information.

% of conspiracy believers and non-believers who get a fair amount or great deal of information about coronavirus from following sources

There is no hard evidence that coronavirus really exists

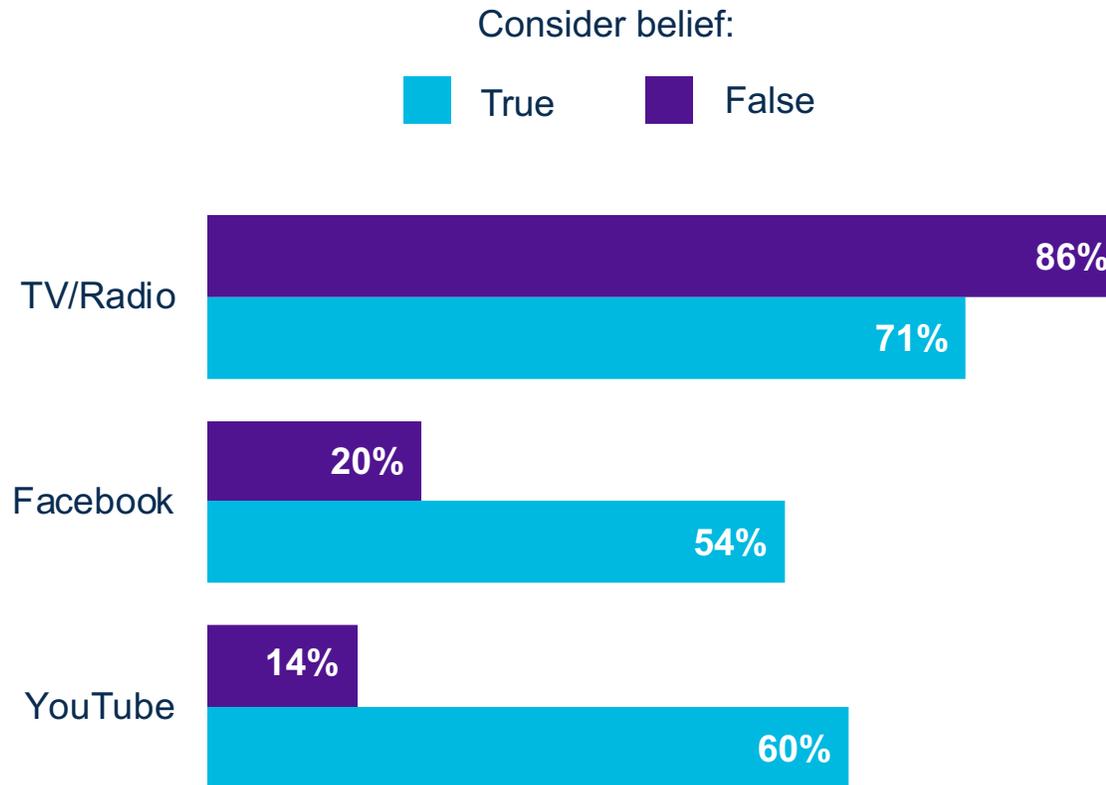


60% of those who believe there is a link between 5G and Covid-19 get a fair amount or great deal of their information on the virus from YouTube. This falls to 14% among non-believers.

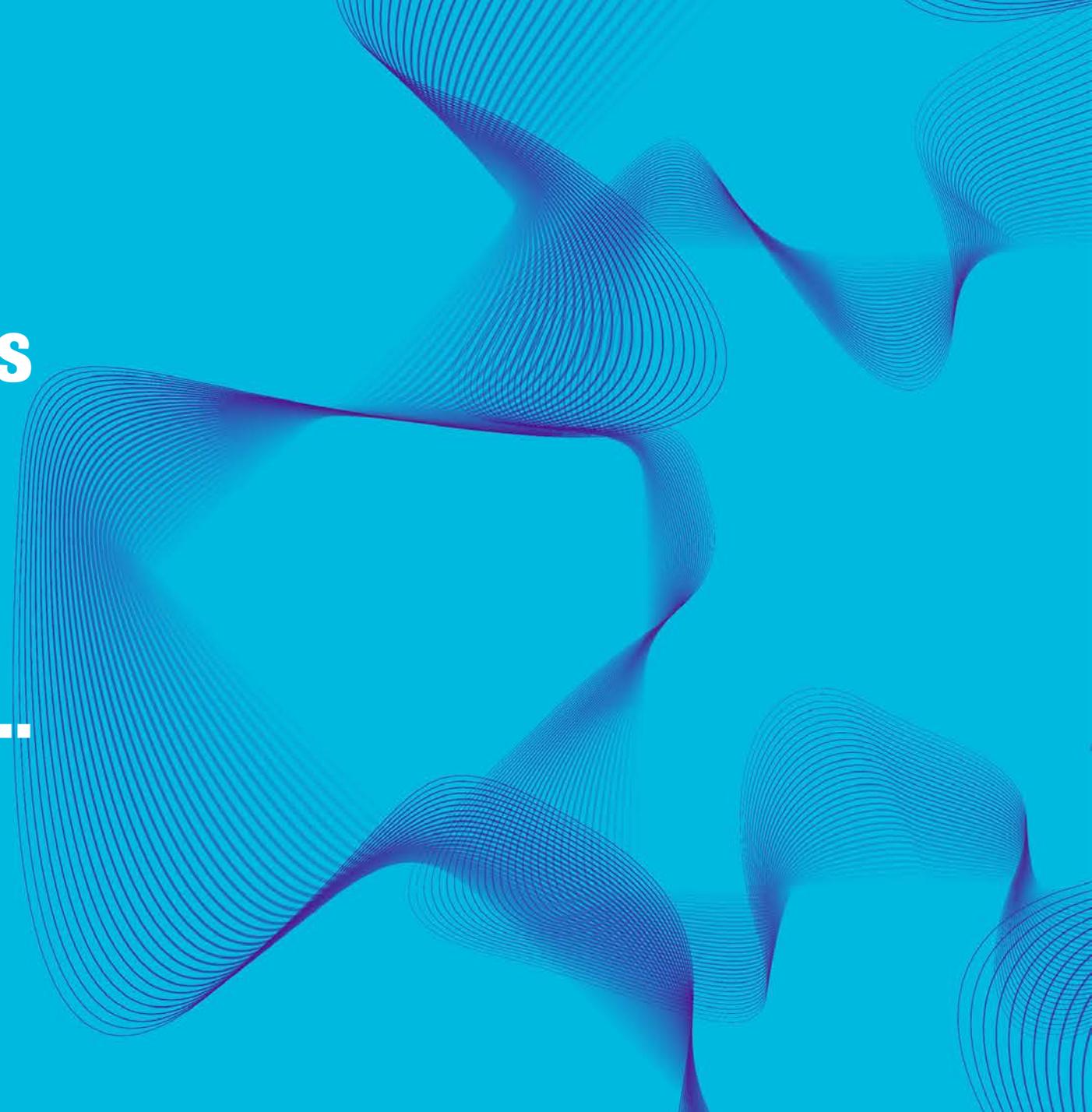
And 20% of non-believers report Facebook as a main information source, less than half the 54% of believers who say the same.

% of conspiracy believers and non-believers who get a fair amount or great deal of information about coronavirus from following sources

The symptoms that most people blame on coronavirus appear to be linked to 5G network radiation



**Those who are not
complying with
lockdown measures
are much more
likely to be getting
their information
from social media...**

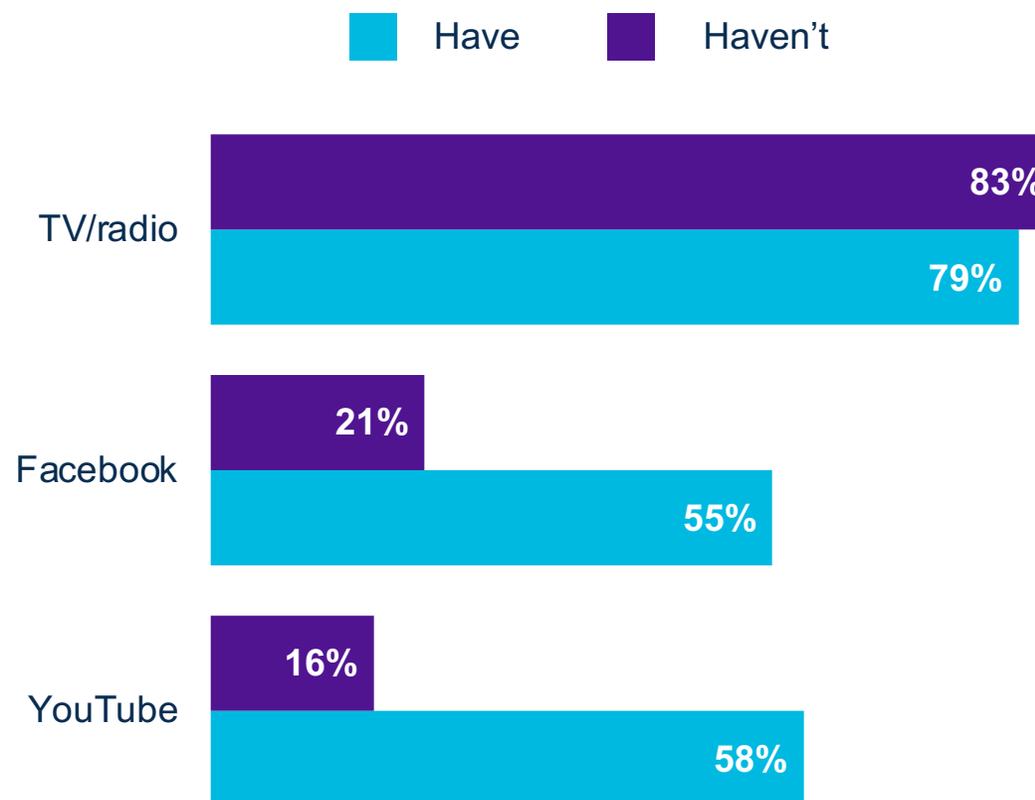


People who have gone to work or outside with possible Covid-19 symptoms are **more than three times as likely** than those who haven't to get a fair amount or great deal of their information about the virus from YouTube.

The situation is similar when it comes to getting information from Facebook.

With TV and radio, it's the other way around – albeit with a much smaller difference.

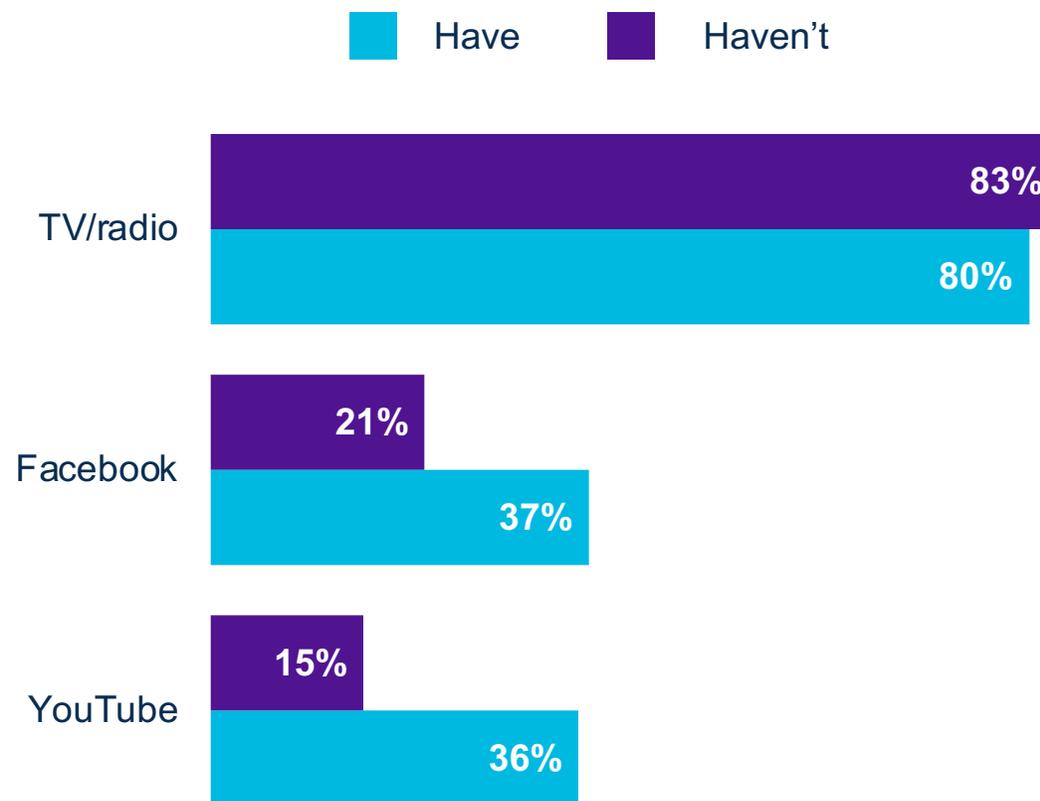
% of those who have / haven't gone to work or outside despite having symptoms that could be coronavirus who get a fair amount or great deal of information about coronavirus from...



Those who have broken the lockdown rules by having friends or family visit them at home are **much more likely** to be getting a lot of their information about coronavirus from social media than those who haven't.

The situation is reversed with TV and radio, but again, with a much smaller difference.

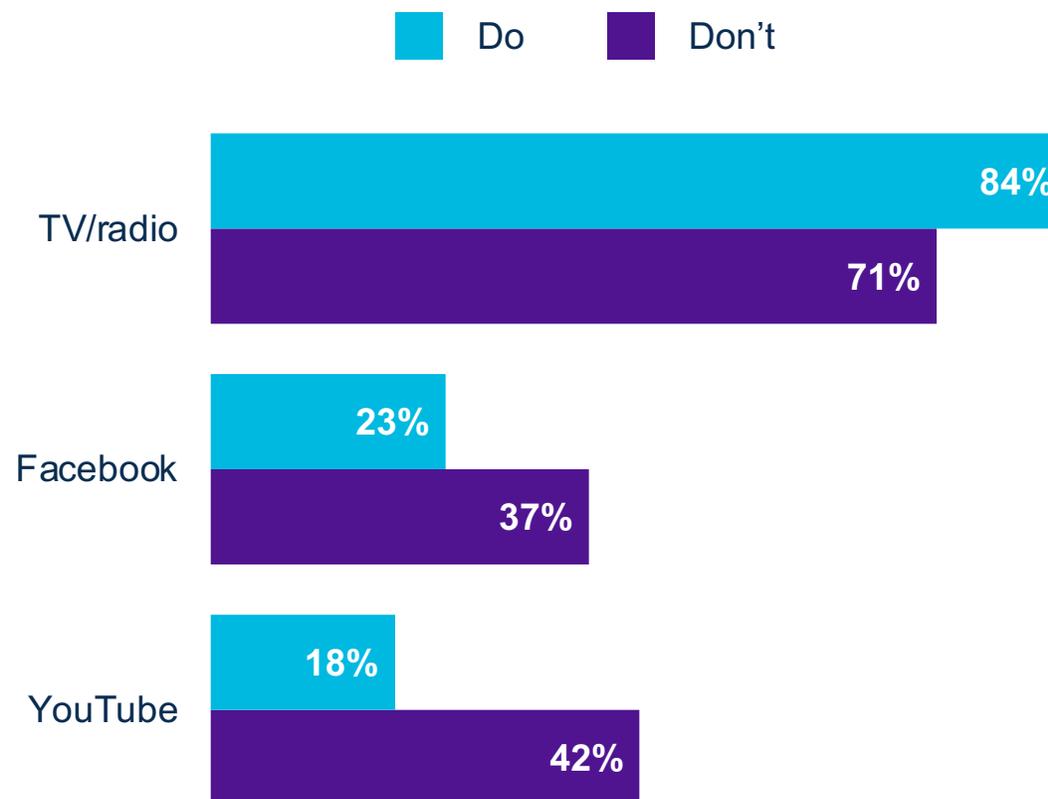
% of those who have / haven't had friends or family visit them at home who get a fair amount or great deal of information about coronavirus from...



People who don't stay 2 metres away from others outside are **more than twice as likely** as those who do to get a fair amount or a great deal of information about Covid-19 from YouTube.

Again, there's a similar situation with Facebook, and the opposite applies to TV and radio.

% of those who do / don't stay 2 metres away from other people when outside their home who get a fair amount or great deal of information about coronavirus from...



Technical details

Ipsos MORI interviewed a sample of 2,254 adults aged 16-75 in the UK using its online i:omnibus between 20 and 22 May 2020. Data has been weighted to the known offline population proportions for age within gender, government office region, working status, social grade and education. All surveys are subject to a range of potential sources of error.

For demographic controls and tests of statistical significance, see 'Health-protective behaviour, social media usage, and conspiracy belief during the COVID-19 public health emergency' by Daniel Allington, Bobby Duffy, Simon Wessely, Nayana Dhavan, and James Rubin, in the journal *Psychological Medicine*.

THE POLICY INSTITUTE

For more information, contact:

Bobby Duffy

Director
The Policy Institute
King's College London

bobby.duffy@kcl.ac.uk

[@bobbyduffyking](https://twitter.com/bobbyduffyking)

Daniel Allington

Senior Lecturer in Social and
Cultural Artificial Intelligence
King's College London

Kelly Beaver

Managing Director of Public
Affairs
Ipsos MORI

Bobby Duffy

Director
The Policy Institute
King's College London

Christoph Meyer

Professor of European &
International Politics
King's College London

Vivienne Moxham-Hall

Research Associate
The Policy Institute
King's College London

George Murkin

Senior Communications
Manager
The Policy Institute
King's College London

James Rubin

Assistant Director
NIHR Health Protection
Research Unit in
Emergency Preparedness
and Response

Gideon Skinner

Research Director
Ipsos MORI

Louise Smith

Senior Research
Associate
NIHR Health Protection
Research Unit in
Emergency Preparedness
and Response

Lucy Strang

Research Associate
The Policy Institute
King's College London

Simon Wessely

Professor of
Psychological Medicine
King's College London

Connect with us

[@policyatking](https://twitter.com/policyatking) [kcl.ac.uk/policy-institute](https://www.kcl.ac.uk/policy-institute)