

Policy Implications Paper:

What was the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on breastfeeding rates?

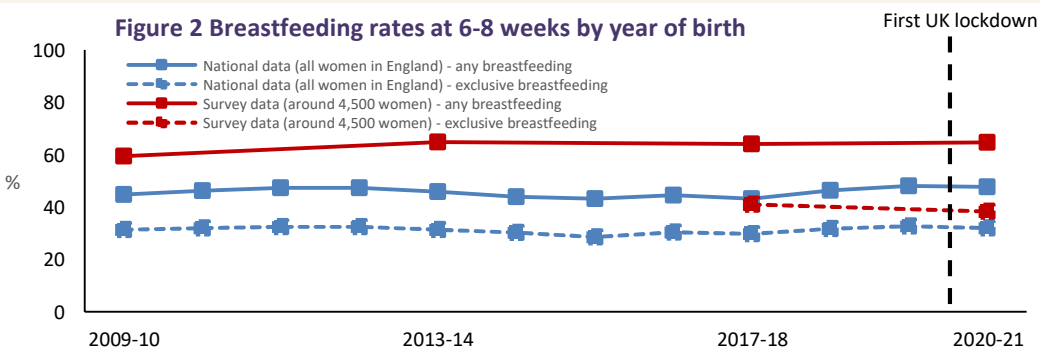
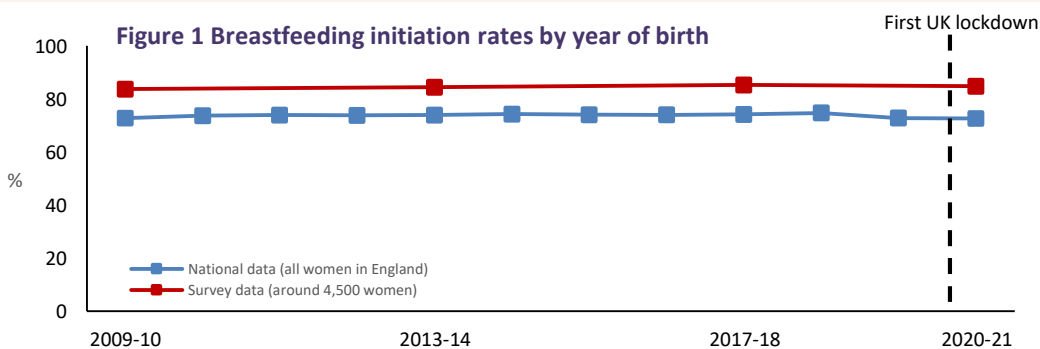
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Policy implications

- Pregnancy and the postnatal period is a vulnerable time for women, and effective infant feeding support, with flexibility to access help when needed, should be available and included in future emergency planning.
- Services should aim to reduce the stark and persistent inequalities in breastfeeding which have been documented since the 1970s.

Key findings

- The first year of the pandemic resulted in significant changes to maternity services, and many aspects of life, yet it appears that breastfeeding rates at the population level were not substantially affected by this.



- Figures 1 and 2 show that the rates of breastfeeding initiation and breastfeeding at 6-8 weeks remained high during the pandemic, however these figures do not necessarily reflect quality of care or breastfeeding experiences more generally.

- Women were less likely to breastfeed their baby if they :
 - were younger
 - left full-time education earlier
 - were living in more socially deprived areas
 - were of white British ethnicity
 - were born in the UK

How we did the research

We used data from the national maternity surveys (NMS) to compare breastfeeding rates in England before and during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Analysis was conducted using the NMS from 2010, 2014, 2018 and 2020. Women were contacted 3-6 months after giving birth and between 4,509 and 5,333 women took part in each survey.

The proportion of women who initiated breastfeeding, and the proportion of women who were breastfeeding (any breastfeeding) and exclusive breastfeeding at 6-8 weeks were compared between the surveys.

Data were interpreted in the context of underlying trends in these prevalences from national routine data for England published by NHS Digital and Public Health England (from 2009-10 to 2020-21).

These patterns were identical before and during the pandemic and highlight the need for services to tackle these inequalities.

Further information

Quigley MA, Harrison S, Levene I, McLeish J, Buchanan P, Alderdice F (2023) Breastfeeding rates in England during the Covid-19 pandemic and the previous decade: Analysis of national surveys and routine data. *PLoS ONE* 18(10): e0291907.

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