

# Hope and Fear Thailand: Online Survey on Public Emotion during the COVID-19 pandemic

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## **Abstract**

This study argues that COVID-19 pandemic, though has profound impacts on everybody's lives, has more severe effects on Thai people whether in the domestic or public spheres. Even though the COVID-19 outbreak is a primary health problem, it has much greater effects on everybody lives from health to economic, from domestic affairs to political concerns. How government handles the outbreak has significant impact on people's way of lives and their feeling toward the issue and the government. We argue that pandemic mitigation policies such as a lockdown order, school closure, social distancing measures, health restrictions, etc. have greater negative impacts on mental well-beings of Thai people. The study collected 1,003 individual survey using online platform to collect data from Thai population nationwide. The survey investigates effects of Thai government's pandemic mitigation policies on physical and mental well-beings of Thai citizens and their examines coping strategies. The result reveals pre-existing sources of vulnerabilities in the society which exacerbates their situation once the pandemic takes place. The study aims to provide policy recommendation to responsible government authorities to reduce risks and lessen burdens to Thai citizen.

## **Problem statement**

The World Health Organization<sup>1</sup> announced the COVID-19 outbreak on March 11, 2020, and several countries have previously taken measures to contain the virus. However, the number of cases and deaths continues to increase and spread to other continents and new countries.

Although the COVID-19 outbreak is a health concern, it has sent huge impact on the economy of every country in the world. This is because government measures to control the outbreak and reduce the number of cases through social isolation, which vary in severity in many countries, cause severe interruption in business activities. These effects were inevitably affecting the livelihood of the population in each age group.

In Thailand, various vulnerable groups are facing different social and economic impacts. Social distancing and lockdown measures may not be realistic options for some vulnerable groups. While the economic and

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<sup>1</sup> WHO. (2020). *WHO Director-General's opening remarks at the media briefing on COVID-19 - 11 March 2020*. Retrieved April 30, 2021. From: <https://www.who.int/dg/speeches/detail/who-director-general-s-opening-remarks-at-the-media-briefing-on-covid-19---11-march-2020>

social impacts on society are severe, they are more so for the vulnerable groups, especially those in the informal economy sector such as market vendors and agriculture due to a lack of social security.<sup>2</sup>

City lockdown and the implementation of exclusionary policies have a direct effect on the economy and society in Thailand especially the mental health crisis during the pandemic. Suicide cases are increasing during the COVID-19 outbreak. According to the Thai Department of Mental Health populations at risk of having mental health breakdown are, for example, people who are living in red and dark red zones (highly risky areas of COVID-19), and patients of COVID-19, and people whose close relatives or friends have contracted the corona virus. Root causes of such devastating phenomenon are financial insecurity, unemployment, loneliness, isolation, loss of social support, and fear of infection and death. All contribute to the high degree of stress during the pandemic.<sup>3</sup>

Understanding impacts of COVID-19 on emotions of people in Thailand is paramount. This project aims to collect primary data on lives of ordinary people in Thailand and investigate the change in their lives before and after COVID-19. The expected result from this project is to provide a policy recommendation to Thai government authorities to provide suitable support for mentally affected Thai citizens.

### **Conceptual framework & Methods**

It has been over 2 years that we have been living with the COVID-19 since the World Health Organization announced that COVID-19 was a pandemic on March 11, 2020.

Many countries are preparing to cope with the epidemic through legal and social measures to contain the disease.

However, the outbreak of COVID-19 is not only related to health issues, but it also affects people's feelings and emotions.

Chiang Mai University School of Public Policy and Inside the Sandbox Company, given financial support by Facebook Thailand, created an online questionnaire series "ME: My Entity Survey (EPO: When the COVID-19 becoming an ordinary day)".

The purpose of the survey is to explore perspectives and feelings of Thai people during the COVID-19 pandemic situation. The total number of respondents is 1,003 people, obtained from March 5 2021 until April 22, 2021.

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<sup>2</sup> UN Women. (2020). *Against the Odds: Stories from women in Thailand during COVID19*. Retrieved April 30, 2021. From: <https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/en/news-and-events/stories/2020/06/against-the-odds-stories-from-women-in-thailand-during-covid19>

<sup>3</sup> Neill Fronde. (2021). Increase in suicide feared in Thailand as Covid-19 grows. Retrieved May 2, 2021. From: <https://thethaiger.com/news/national/increase-in-suicide-feared-in-thailand-as-covid-19-grows>

**Finding and Policy analysis**

The result of the online survey showed that most of the respondents felt hopeless and worried. When talking about the COVID-19, some people feel angry; while some feel lonely. There was a small number of respondents that said they felt happy.

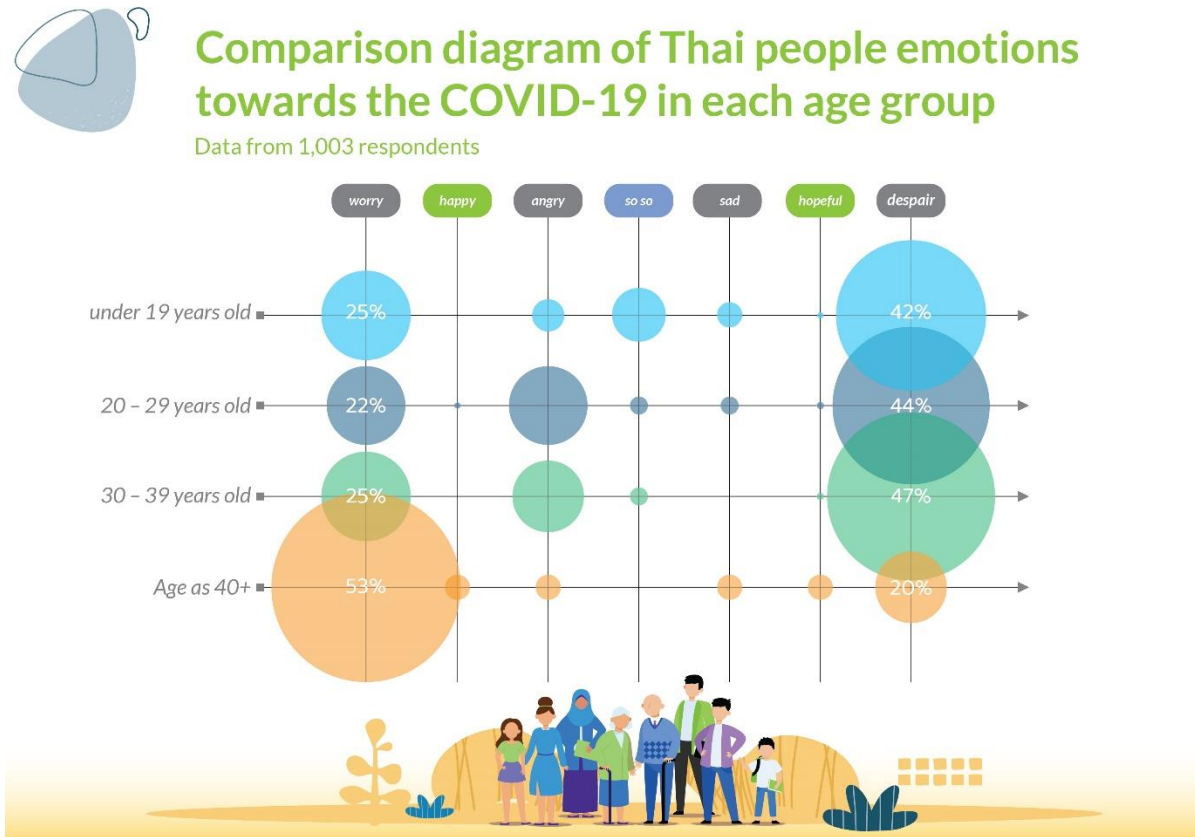


Figure 1. Comparison diagram of Thai people emotions towards the COVID-19 in each age group

According to Figure 1, respondents who are 40+ years old are the most anxious but surprisingly have the most hopeful attitude compared to other age groups. While at age of 30 - 39 years old, no respondents from this age group said that they felt sad or happy. However, they are the age group which expressed feeling hopeless the most. Respondents at the ages of 20 – 29 years old, mentioned that they were very angry. Lastly, respondents of the ages of 0-19 years old, felt very indifferent. It is presumably because they are still school students and too young to be worried about the future of education and earning incomes.

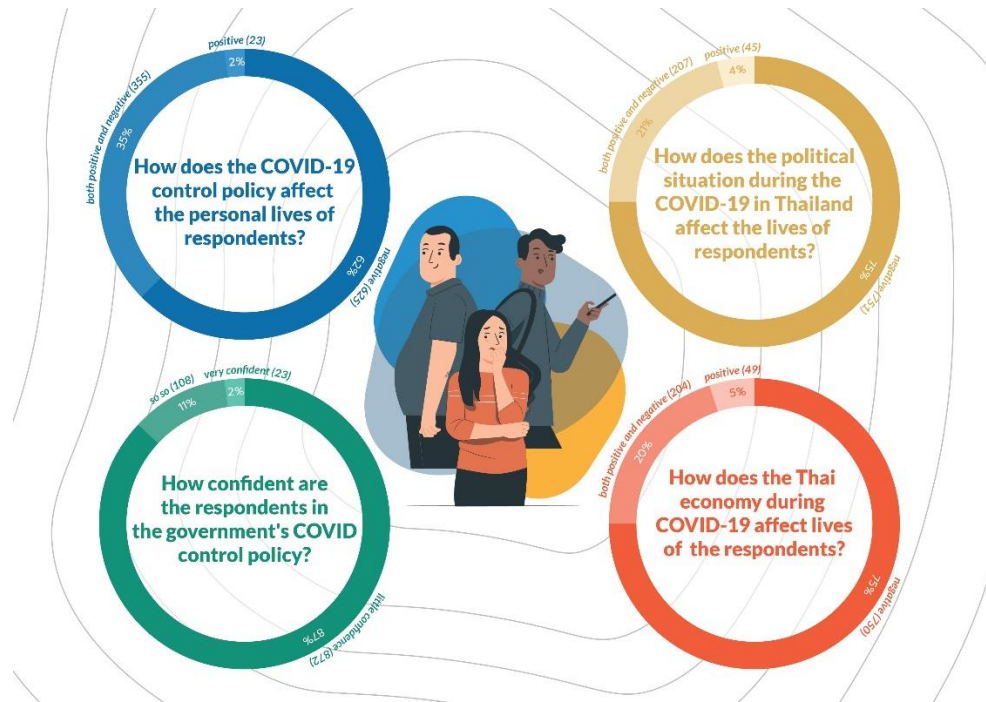


Figure 2. Thai people's feelings towards the government's economic and political policies during the COVID-19 pandemic

This survey finds a negative impact on the livelihood of the population because of the economic and political conditions of Thailand. Figure 2 shows that most of the respondents had only little confidence about the government's capability to solve economic problems caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.



Figure 3. Thai people's feelings towards the COVID-19 pandemic when asked "COVID-19 made me..."

Respondents expressed depressive words when asked how COVID-19 has affected your feelings. The answers of respondents in Figure 3 revealed negative statements and words such as "sad", "bored", "hopeless", "discouraged", "worried", "stress", "crazy" and "tired", etc. These reflected the problems of Thai people's emotions which is severe mental health issue and could potentially lead to the increase of suicide cases in Thailand.

Information from the Department of Mental Health shows suicide rate in Thailand has continued to rise every year. The data in 2019 reveals 4,419 Thai people committed suicide. During the first 6 months of 2020, 2,551 Thai people ended their lives. This is higher than the first 6 months of 2018 in which 2,092 people died from committing suicide.<sup>4</sup>

While Dr. Worat Chotpitayasunon, Spokesperson for the Department of Mental Health, Ministry of Health, stated that the COVID-19 crisis leads to the stress of a large number of Thai populations. Some people are stressed, worried if they will contract the virus. Some people are stressed because they can't do their business. Some employers have their employees quit their job to reduce the cost. Some people are stressed as they are unable to travel. Many families had children who are studying from home. Mothers need to look after their children while working from home. These problems have changed everyone. Sometimes it opens the wounds that people already have. The COVID-19 made them more stressful.<sup>5</sup>

### **Policy recommendation**

This survey is a tool that helps reflect the feelings of Thai people during the pandemic. Based on results of 1,003-survey respondents, it is shown that many people are psychologically devastated by the impact of COVID-19. Our result reveals that the mental health problem is a major issue that we all need to focus on.

We found that unhealthy emotional state of Thai people can lead to psychiatric diseases such as chronic stress, depression, and ultimately suicide.

The answer from this questionnaire reveals that most people feel hopeless in their lives and there are very small number of respondents who still felt confident in the government's ability to solve COVID-19 and side-effects on economy. Most of them are worried about their lives as well as the unstable political and economic situation.

It is thus recommended that the Thai government should urgently pay more attention to mental health of Thai people and provide urgent assistance on elevating mentally well-beings of Thai population. Lastly, there should be a professional program providing free consultation for people who feel stressed, depressed, and are prone to commit suicide.

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<sup>4</sup> Thongpet, kanchana, and Maneewan. (2020). Check your mental health easily with 5 applications. Retrieved April 30, 2021. From: Department of Mental Health: <https://www.dmh.go.th/news-dmh/view.asp?id=30501>.

<sup>5</sup> Thitiphon Yothaphan. (2021). Advice on dealing with stress during the Covid-19 situation. Retrieved April 30, 2021. From: <https://www.thaihealth.or.th/Content/53769-แนะรับมือกับภาวะเครียด%20ในช่วงสถานการณ์โควิด-19.html>.

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