



# Life Under Lockdown

How does a neighborhood in Brussels  
transform under lockdown?

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# 31 days

LOCKDOWN MEASURES AND  
SOCIAL DISTANCING  
PRACTICES IN BELGIUM

Observations  
from Flagey

# CONTENTS

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INTRODUCTION	1
RESEARCH FOCUS	3
METHODOLOGY	4
COVID OUTBREAK IN BELGIUM	5
ACTUAL LOCKDOWN	7
WINDING DOWN A LOCKDOWN	11
END OF LOCKDOWN	13
RESULTS	16
OBSTACLES AND DILEMMAS	17
SUMMARY	18
CONCLUSION	19

# 01

# Introduction

My initial project idea for my ethnographic research was on access to care for women and girls who have undergone FGM who now live in Brussels, Belgium. Due to time constraints, I struggled to connect with the necessary people to complete my research on time.

I changed the the scope of my research to explore how gender is interpreted, reinterpreted, and performed in local Brussels drag performances. I identified local bars and performers I was interested in working with. Then COVID-19 struck and the city went into lockdown.

I had conducted preliminary research on both topics; however, I did not feel either was enough to make for a convincing ethnographic study.

I started reducing the amount of time I spent outside of my house when Italy, my partner's home, went into lockdown. As someone who survived an extreme ten-day hospital stay with an unidentifiable illness that turned out to be pneumonia. I felt that reducing any unnecessary risk was the best course of action. Shortly after, Belgium announced its preliminary social distancing measures.

Over the subsequent days, we were surprised to see how many people were using their “stay-at-home” time sitting around the ponds in Brussels’ Place Flagey. A local doctor, among others, spoke out. We were not surprised when the official lockdown went into place.

I used my time at home to take my dog on walks around our neighborhood. During these early walks, I had the idea of documenting how this busy corner of my city would change under the new lockdown measures.

As if a cruel twist of fate, Belgium decided that after months of the cold, grey, damp winter, it was time for the sun to finally come out.

Would residents be able to resist the temptation of being outside? What, if any, further measures would be implemented to ensure public safety? How would this lively area transform in the coming weeks? Would I be able to recognize it?

03

Research  
Focus

**WHO**

Residents around Flagey in Brussels, Belgium

**WHAT**

How lockdown measures transform a lively neighborhood

**WHERE**

Pond, Abbey, and square in Place Flagey in Brussels, Belgium

**WHEN**

Daily walks between 3 and 4:30 pm from 18 March to 1 May 2020

## **PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION**

As a member of the community, I too observed lockdown measures and remained indoors except for essential activities and the encouraged exercise.

## **AUTOETHNOGRAPHY**

Due to the nature fo the virus and the restrictions on social interaction, my own observations serve as the primary source of information regarding the transformation.

## **OBSERVATION DURING DOG WALK**

The primary methodology of this research was observation taking place during daily walks with my dog from 18 March to 1 May between 3 and 4:30 pm around Place Flagey in Brussels, Belgium.

## **ADDITIONAL OBSERVATIONS**

I include additional observations and observations from other residents gathered through virtual means where relevant.

# **Methodology**

Due to the nature of the virus and lockdown restrictions, I focused on the transformation of a location under state-imposed lockdown measures, eliminating the need for in-person social interactions.

# COVID OUTBREAK IN BELGIUM

## THE EARLY STAGES OF LOCKDOWN

Belgium announced its first attempt at restricted measures and “stay at home” orders on Thursday, 11 March 2020. These measures were intended to go into effect the following day, Friday, 12 March 2020.

05

## End of Winter

As if a cruel joke, the sun finally came out, raising the temperature, after five months of grey, damp Belgian winter (no sunlight).

## Number of people

Over the following weekend, while walking my dog or running around the Flagey ponds, I was surprised by the number of people around despite the growing number of cases in Belgium and the discouragement to be outside.

## Stricter Measures

The number of people outside did not escape the attention of decision makers and the following Tuesday, stricter lockdown measures were announced.





## **FRIT'FLAGEY**

Local fixture closed under  
lockdown measures

Lockdown measures encouraged Belgium residents to stay home and imposed the closure of local bars and cafes until April 3.

Local fixtures closed:

- Frit' Flagey
- Cafe Belga
- Weekend Market

# ACTUAL LOCKDOWN

## HOW STRICTER MEASURES CHANGE A NEIGHBORHOOD

As the new lockdown and “stay-at-home” measures were announced, people were encouraged to stay at home except for essential activities, such as grocery shopping, and to practice social distancing. However, the day these measures went into effect, once again the sun was out and many residents of Flagey were sitting around the ponds or out for walks.

## Stricter Lockdown

Stricter lockdown measures were implemented to encourage more people to remain home except for essential activities or for exercise.

## Number of people

Still a large number of people were outside, walking, running, etc.

## Symbols of Authority

Police were regularly present enforcing lockdown measures, repeatedly telling people to move along, writing tickets, or just observing.



If you did not know what you were looking for, it would have looked like any other day. People sitting outside around the ponds having beers with friends or just enjoying the sun while reading.

But if you looked closely and knew what you were looking for, you would see people either by themselves, in pairs, or in small groups maintaining a safe distance.

A doctor wrote an article published in The Brussels Times criticizing people for being outside and behaving as if this were a holiday rather than a pandemic, and police measures increased.

Due to the amount of people outside, and the growing criticism, the additional measures, such as police tape preventing people from sitting around the ponds, the growing police presence, and the posting of signs around Flagey, did not come as a surprise.





The increased visual presence of authority—police tape and police presence—along with the occasional mask were all symbols of the COVID-19 pandemic and that it was still taking place around Flagey.

As the possibility to sit around outside disappeared, it appeared that a growing number of people turned to getting some exercise: a large number of runners, walkers, dog walkers and cyclists were out around the ponds. Parents used these measures as ways to keep their children active.

# WINDING DOWN A LOCKDOWN

As the weeks went on, the number of people outside between 3 and 4:30 pm on weekdays decreased. The signs of lockdown, although there, were cast aside. There appeared to be an easing of the concerns around the pandemic.

## People Outside

People continue to be outside, Foot traffic is less concentrated, even on days with nice weather.

## Traces of Lockdown

Evidence of lockdown can be seen around the neighborhood, including police presence, Personal Protective Equipment, and banners supporting healthcare workers.

## Shifts in behavior

There are evident shifts in behavior, including wearing PPE, and maintaining distance from strangers. but there is closer proximity and appears to be more people out in groups.

# Symbols of Authority

The police seem less involved with policing residents' behaviors.

They instead direct their attentions to people in vehicles, on motorbikes, and delivering food.

Traces of them and their earlier efforts remain around the neighborhood, but they are no longer strictly enforced.

People return to sitting on benches and back to sitting in the grass.



# END OF LOCKDOWN

After the initial deadline of 19 April had passed, things looked more or less normal, although the market and the other fixtures took longer to return. The lockdown was extended several times, but local attitudes seemed to ease after this milestone.

## Lockdown Phases

Lockdown in Belgium is ending in phases. Starting May 4, restrictions reduced allowing for more of a feeling of normalcy.

## Businesses Still Closed

Many local businesses are still closed; however, shops have been allowed to open but restaurants and cafes have not yet been allowed to.

## New Normal

Local residents are adapting to the "new normal," walking around in masks and gloves with other household members or one or two friends with proper social distance.





People, although fewer, are still enjoying their time outside, happy to be able to sit on benches, some still wearing masks, other sitting at opposite ends of the benches from people they know.

Even though the phase out of lockdown is not complete, life more or less looks like it would have any other year other than the masks, gloves, and closed businesses.

If you look closely, you can observe that people are gathered in clusters of two or families rather than the large groups normally seen around the ponds.

# Symbols of Lockdown

The symbols of lockdown, the police tape, the mask, gloves used by people to carry out their shopping now cast aside found on the ground throughout the neighborhood.



# Findings

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## PEOPLE IN FLAGEY

Initially, there appeared to be a larger number of runners outside. As time wore on, the number of runners decreased, but the general number of people outside remained relatively constant.

Flagey was significantly more crowded on days with nice weather, indicating the significance of the season change on people's decisions to spend time outside rather than feelings of pure necessity.

Towards the end of lockdown, the number people around the ponds and square decreased. It is unclear exactly why this occurred.

## SYMBOLS OF AUTHORITY

Symbols of the state/authority, including signs, police presence and police tape served as physical reminders of what was and was not permitted. These symbols appeared early on in lockdown to encourage compliance with restrictions.

Additionally, the visible handing out of fines, regular clearing of the Flagey square, and insistence for people to move along and get off benches were further reminders.

Over time, the general efforts of the police appeared to diminish and people returned to their pre-lockdown patterns of behavior of enjoying the weather around the ponds.

## SYMBOLS OF LOCKDOWN

The mask, and, to a lesser extent, the latex glove have become symbols representing lockdown. Throughout the neighborhood, the ubiquity of these symbols has grown from the start of lockdown measures.

During the early stages of identifiable mask use, people who had mask were not wearing them properly in order to to carry on conversations, drink beers, or for no apparent reason, suggesting the discomfort as a factor.

However, as mask use became more common, more and more people walked around wearing their masks over their noses and mouths.

**RULE BREAK**

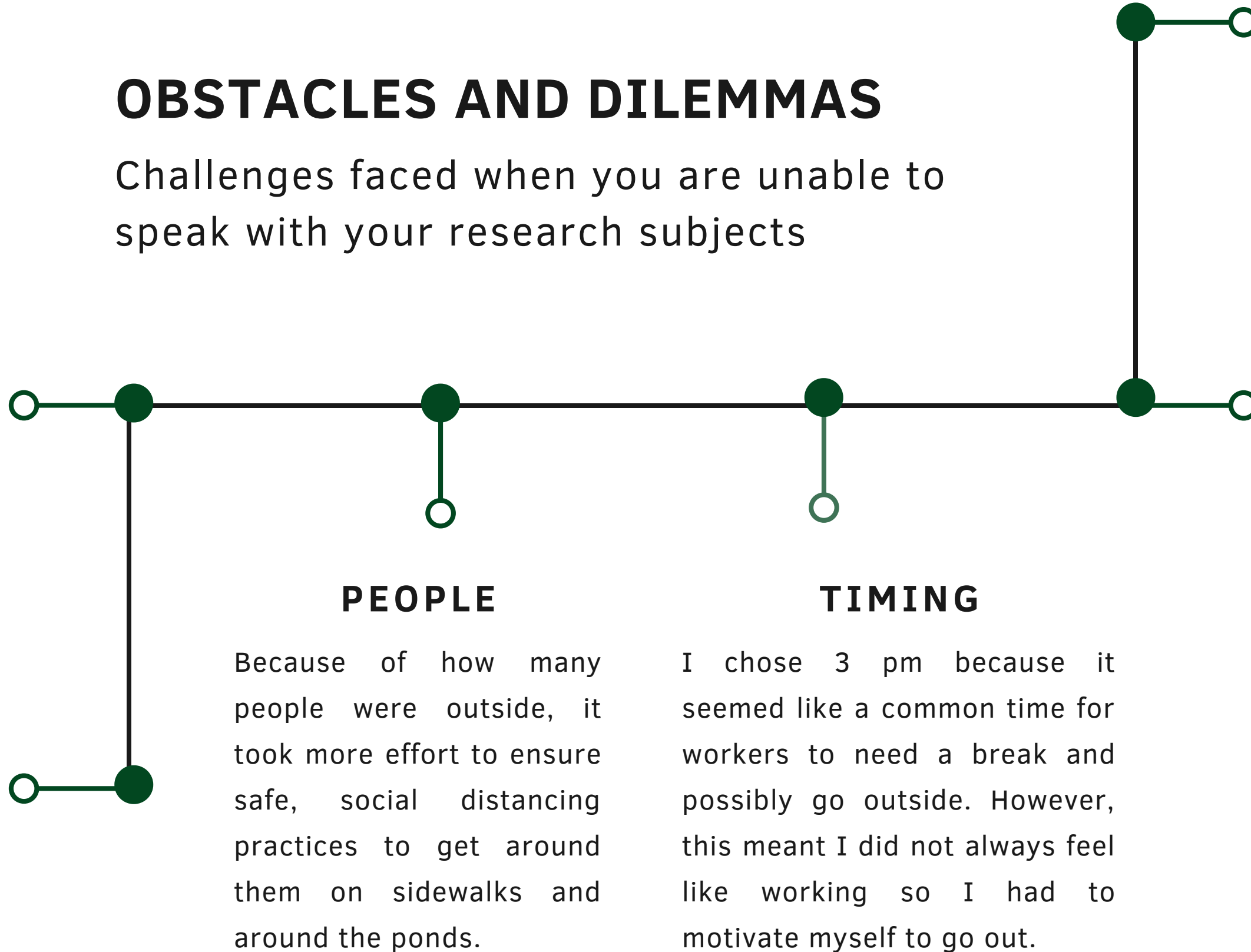
I opted to conduct fieldwork during the outbreak despite being instructed not to. I adhered to all safety practices to ensure the safety of myself and the people around me.

**TOPIC**

I needed to find a topic that could be researched and presented in a visual format that could be researched under the new lockdown measures

**OBSTACLES AND DILEMMAS**

Challenges faced when you are unable to speak with your research subjects



**PEOPLE**

Because of how many people were outside, it took more effort to ensure safe, social distancing practices to get around them on sidewalks and around the ponds.

**TIMING**

I chose 3 pm because it seemed like a common time for workers to need a break and possibly go outside. However, this meant I did not always feel like working so I had to motivate myself to go out.

**NO INTERACTION**

The inability to speak with people while out meant I was unable to uncover their attitudes about the lockdown and their motivations for being outdoors.

**DOG SCENTS**

With all of the additional dog walkers, my dog companion wanted to stop more frequently than she usually does on walks which kept us in place more often than I would have liked.

## Summary

During Belgium's lockdown measures, 12 March through 1 May, Place Flagey's fixture businesses and markets closed. The local residents, took advantage of the opportunities and encouragement from the government to go out and exercise during lockdown.

### **PEOPLE OUTSIDE**

Local residents found opportunities to go outside to exercise, particularly on days with nice weather.

### **SYMBOLS OF AUTHORITY**

After early ambivalence around lockdown measures, symbols of authority, such as police, tape, and signs, became ubiquitous to remind residents of acceptable behavior.

### **SYMBOLS OF LOCKDOWN**

Mask and glove use became more common as lockdown measures went on.

# CONCLUSION

The COVID-19 lockdown measures closed down local fixtures in Brussels' neighborhood of Flagey including the market, Café Belga, and Frit Flagey. The residents of Flagey, rather than staying at home with nothing to do, have looked for alternative activities to do outside that allows them to enjoy the ponds, Abbey de la Cambre, and the sun that has finally come out after a grey past couple months.

It appears that this lively neighborhood has not lost its soul or life, despite several of its primary fixtures being closed. However, people are still present and enjoying walking around the ponds and continuing to find ways to be outside: biking, walking around the pond, going for ice cream.

The question remains as to whether or not the measures taken and the awareness built up over the two month lockdown period was enough to fight the virus long-term or if with the reopening of the economy there will be a resurgence of the virus.

Other questions remain unanswered such as when a vaccine will be available, if people are immune after surviving the virus, will life be able to return to normal, do we want it to return to normal?

We will find out as we move forward into the still unknown.



**Many questions remained unanswered**

# Contact Information

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## **WEBSITE AND FULL VERSION OF THIS ARTICLE**

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