

Work and wellbeing during Covid-19

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The effect of the coronavirus pandemic on working lives has been both dramatic and well documented: who hasn't now heard of being furloughed? And for many of those still in work, home working (and what was once called 'teleworking') has become the norm. The term 'key worker' has taken on a new meaning and they are now genuinely appreciated as having kept the country running.

Behind the headlines though are some more worrying issues, such as the disparate effect on already disadvantaged people such as those on lower incomes or with a disability¹. It is also worth remembering that working from home does not work well for everyone, and that lockdown can mean loneliness (a fifth of adults report feeling lonely at least some of the time).

One positive contribution of the Office of National Statistic (ONS), aside from sharing data on Covid infections and mortality, is to monitor some of the wider social effects of the pandemic and in this article I share some of the results relating to work and wellbeing with the aim of digging down beneath some of the headlines.

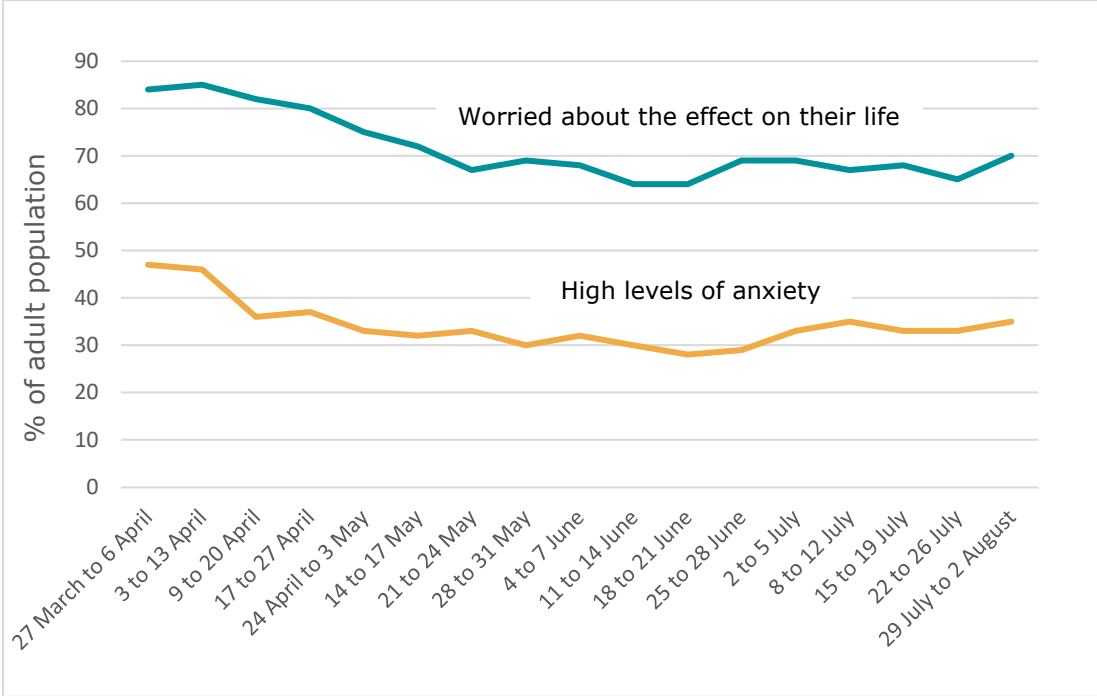
Overall trends in levels of concern and anxiety

Before delving into some of the detail, it's worth setting the scene in terms of how the levels of concern over Covid-19 have evolved over the course of the pandemic up to the beginning of August 2020. As illustrated in Figure 1, worry and anxiety about Covid fell between the end of March until around

¹ <https://www.ifs.org.uk/inequality/covid-19-and-inequalities/>

mid-May as people became used to the new normal. It then flattened out, but there are some signs that anxiety is increasing again as people worry about returning to normality and the effects of a second wave.

Figure 1: trends in concern and anxiety about Covid-19



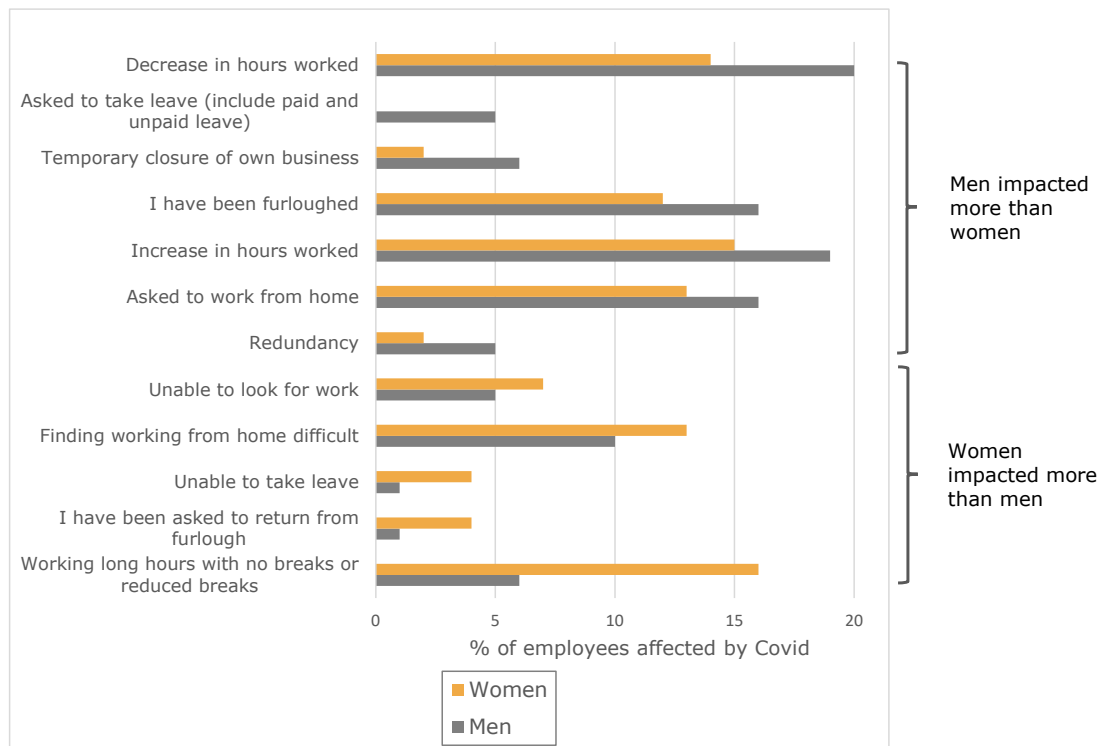
Source: ONS Opinions and Lifestyle survey (Covid-19 module). Note: the data shown is the Percentage of adults very or somewhat worried about the effect of COVID-19 on their life right now; and the Percentage of adults with high levels of anxiety.

Reflecting on the trends over time is interesting, but focusing on the most recent wave of the survey, it is a concern that in over a third of adults said they had high levels of anxiety about Covid-19, with this rising to 44% amongst those that had an existing health condition.

Gender gap

Many of the effects of Covid-19 on work are well known: employees being furloughed, being asked to work from home, or to change their hours (either up or down). What is less well known is how these effects vary across the working population, with one interesting difference being between genders. This is illustrated in Figure 2 which shows the impacts on work, but ordered from top to bottom in terms of the difference in impact between men and women. So for example, men are more likely than women to decrease their hours or to take leave. On the other hand, women are more likely than men to work long hours with no or reduced breaks.

Figure 2: Impact on work for women and men



Source: ONS Opinions and Lifestyle survey (Covid-19 module). Note: percents shown are the % of employees who said they have been affected by Covid-19, which was 37% of men and 32% of women.

Return to car?

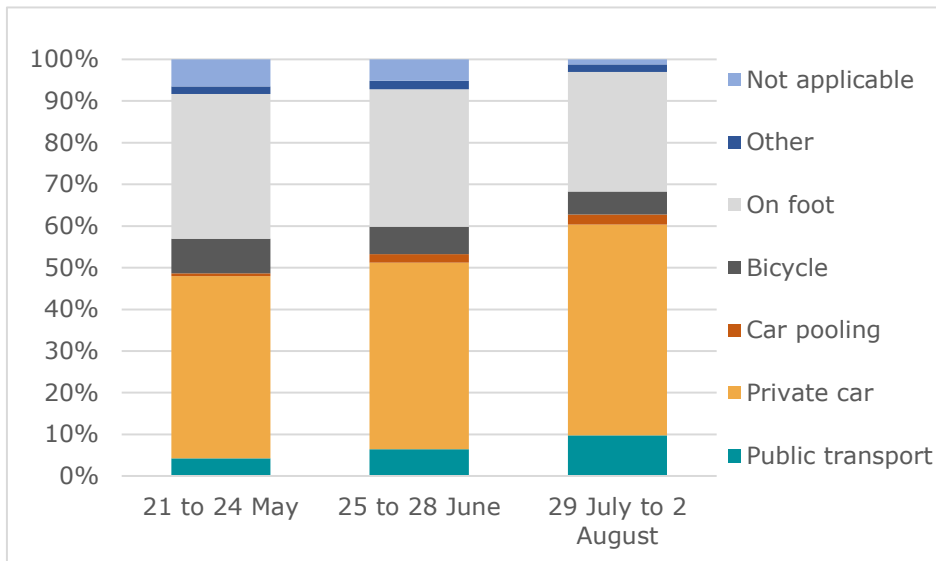
One of the positives to come out of lockdown was the reduction in car traffic and associated pollution, and an increase in walking and cycling. There’s increasing evidence that active travel improves mental wellbeing as well as physical fitness. For example, amongst 5-11 year old’s it’s been shown that physical activity improves self-esteem, reduces anxiety & stress, improves academic achievement, and increases attention & concentration². The Department for Transport also recognises the value of active travel and provides guidance on how to calculate the value of shifting commuting trips from car to walk or cycle³.

It is therefore disappointing that these effects seem to be in decline: as shown in Figure 3, the proportion of people who walked or cycled in the last 7 days fell from 65% to 56% between 24st May and 2nd August, with a corresponding increase in car use (up from 66% to 83%). It can be hoped that measures being put in place by local councils using the Emergency Active Travel Fund will capture the benefits of increased walking and cycling in at least some locations, and that this will also lead the way for others to follow.

² See Change4Life Evidence Review, Public Health England 2015.

³ See TAG UNIT A5.1 Active Mode Appraisal, Department for Transport, May 2020

Figure 3: Means of transport used in the last week

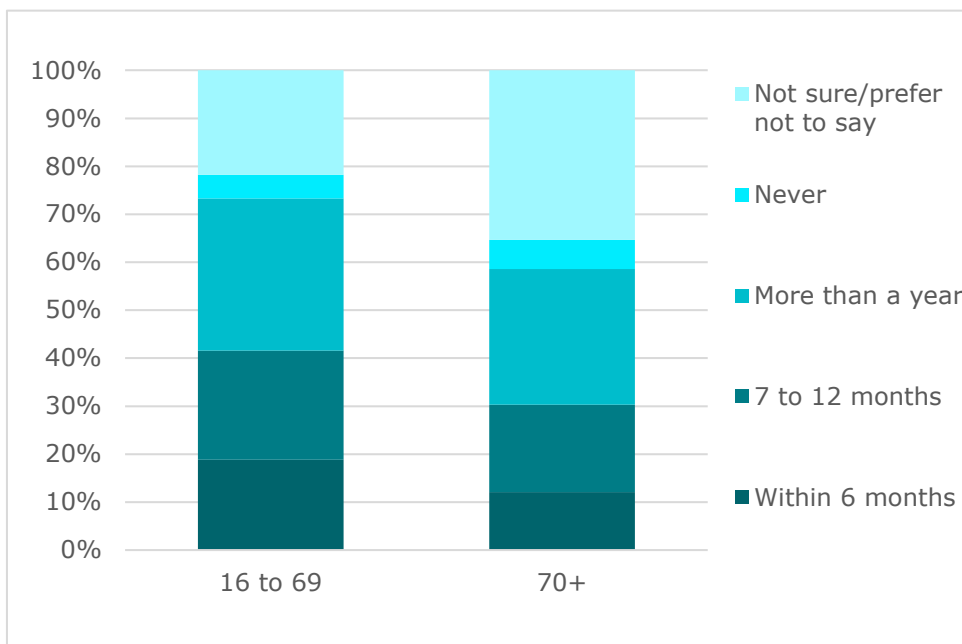


Source: ONS Opinions and Lifestyle survey (Covid-19 module). Note: responses to the question "In the past seven days, which modes of transport have you used for personal travel?"

Feelings about the future

Expectations for how long the impact of Covid will last have become more pessimistic over time, so that back in May around a half thought that within a year things will be back to normal, whereas at the start of August this proportion had fallen to 39%. However, it is interesting to note that older people are less optimistic and, as shown in Figure 4, just 30% of those aged 70+ expect a return to normality within a year.

Figure 4: Means of transport used in the last week



Source: ONS Opinions and Lifestyle survey (Covid-19 module). Note: responses to the question "How long do you think it will be before your life returns to normal?"

Crossroads

As we start to come out of lockdown and emerge into a new future we're at a crossroads. Do we return to 'normal', to a better place, or to somewhere which is even more unequal? The way many people work is unlikely to return to how it was pre-Covid, so there is an opportunity to improve the wellbeing of employees by supporting more flexible working arrangements which in turn can reduce the burden of the daily commute.

Perhaps the key to pursuing a positive route is to recognise the differences: not everyone can work from home, there are still significant gender differences, and there are generational effects to consider also. However, by acknowledging the various barriers and opportunities affecting different groups it should be possible to celebrate the variety for the benefit of all.