



Insights 2021-22

Findings from the UK Household Longitudinal Study



About the Study

Understanding Society provides key evidence about life in the UK. It is the largest longitudinal study of its kind and provides crucial information for researchers and policy makers about the causes and consequences of change in people's lives.

Our participants come from every area of the UK and the Study covers issues that affect all our lives, from family relationships, education and employment to health, social attitudes and behaviour.



ALL AGES

We can see the experiences of the whole population over time.

WHOLE HOUSEHOLD

Relations between generations, couples and siblings can be explored.

CONTINUOUS DATA COLLECTION

We interview participants every year, so short- and long-term changes in people's lives can be investigated.

NATIONAL, REGIONAL AND LOCAL DATA

The Study includes all four countries of the UK, allowing researchers to compare the experiences of people in different places and policy contexts.

ETHNIC MINORITY BOOST

Sample sizes of ethnic minority groups allow their specific experiences to be investigated.

MULTI-TOPIC

We cover a range of social, economic and behavioural factors, relevant to many policy makers and researchers.

LINKED DATA

With consent, our data can be linked to administrative records from other sources, building a richer picture.

METHODOLOGICAL RESEARCH

Researchers get well-designed and harvested data supported by world-leading experimentation, development and testing.

BIOMARKERS AND GENETIC DATA

Data collected by nurses allow researchers to look at the relationship between social and economic circumstances and health.

Find out more about the Study online at

www.understandingsociety.ac.uk

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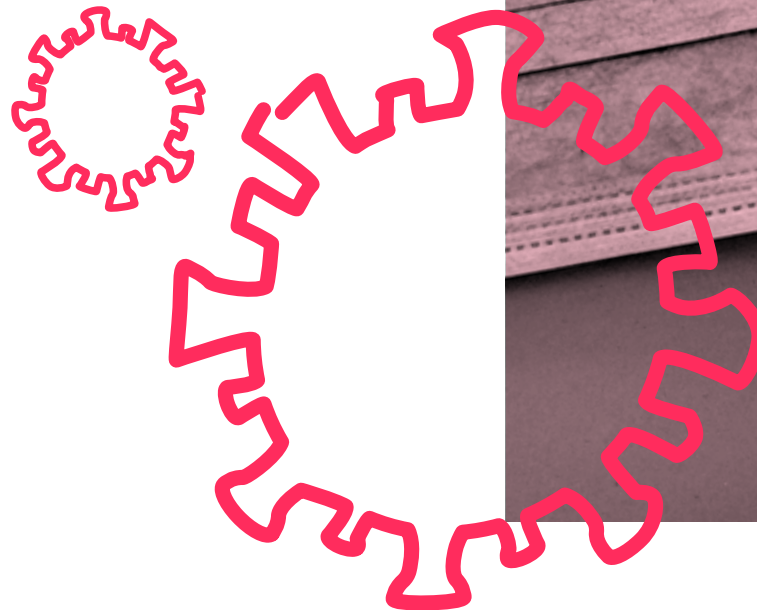
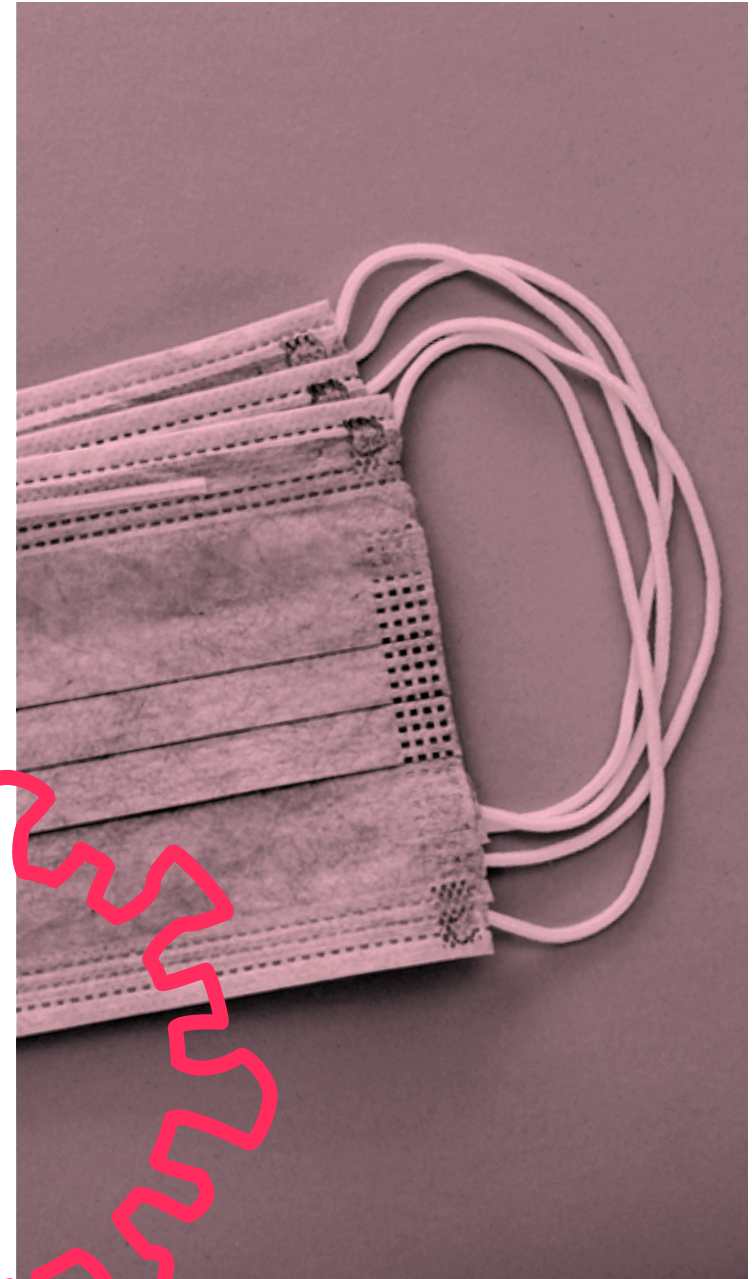
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 Understanding Society: UKHLS



Foreword	5
The mental health legacy	6
Did furlough help?	20
Children in the pandemic	36
Work with us	47



Foreword

TWO YEARS ON

Michaela Benzeval | Director | Understanding Society

One topic, more than any other, still dominates the news, government policy and the research agenda. In this year's Insights report, we have considered three different aspects of how COVID-19 has affected people's lives: the economic effects, particularly as a result of being on furlough; the impact on mental health; and what's happened to young people.

It's down to the great generosity of many people that we can present this research. We were able to field a regular new web survey thanks to funding from the Economic and Social Research Council, and The Health Foundation, who provided funding for our COVID-19 telephone survey.

Our fieldwork partners very quickly set up a high quality process for carrying out the survey and turning the data round rapidly, so that we could share them with the wider research community. Ipsos Mori ran the web survey on our behalf and Kantar Public the telephone survey.

The Study team worked incredibly hard at home during lockdown to design and implement the new survey and produce the dataset and supporting resources on top of their normal activities.

Hundreds of our data users contributed to rapid consultations on questionnaire content, and over a thousand have downloaded the data and produced timely, relevant and wide-ranging findings on the impact of the pandemic.

Most importantly, our participants selflessly give us their time every year for our annual survey – and many thousands of them also took part in nine waves of our COVID-19 Survey between April 2020 and September 2021. Without them, there simply wouldn't be any Insights. We're immensely grateful to them for their commitment, and I know many gave their thank you gifts from the Study to NHS Together – a double commitment to supporting efforts to tackle the pandemic.

We would like to thank all these people who made the COVID-19 Survey possible. I hope you enjoy reading the research from it which we've summarised here, and find it valuable.



The mental health legacy

Patterns in mental health during the pandemic

8



Immigrant men suffer more in lockdowns

11



Older people, seeing family, and mental health during the pandemic

14



The worsening mental health of carers during COVID

17



Commentary

Lucy Thorpe | Head of Policy | Mental Health Foundation

The COVID-19 road is being constructed as we move along it, and some people are travelling with greater ease than others.

It is clear from the research reported here, and the Mental Health Foundation's [Coronavirus: Mental Health in the Pandemic](#) study, that the pandemic and the measures to manage it have exacerbated inequalities. 'Building back better' must become 'Building Back Fairer', as stressed in the [COVID-19 Marmot Review](#).

The estimated scale of increased mental health need is enormous. [One in six children and young people now have a probable mental health disorder](#), and the Centre for Mental Health's [May 2021 forecast of mental health needs and risks linked to COVID-19](#), estimated that 1.5m children under 18, and 8.5m adults, will either need new or additional mental health support. This represents demand of two to three times the current mental health capacity of the NHS over a three-to-five-year period.

[More investment in mental health services is therefore vital](#), but the government must also invest much more in prevention and early intervention, tackling factors known to increase the risk of poor mental health and undermine people's resilience. These include poverty, financial insecurity, adversity in childhood, racial and other forms of discrimination. We also need more investment in factors that protect mental health, such as secure housing, well-funded social care, a living wage, and safe, accessible green spaces.

This requires a 'mental health in all policies' approach, and coordinated action across government, including by local authorities, [who currently spend very little on public mental health](#).

The need for whole-government action informed the [COVID-19 mental health and wellbeing recovery action plan](#), and the new mental health strategy planned for 2022, but to be effective the strategy will need resourcing, and the signs for public health investment are not good.

The [Comprehensive Spending Review](#) failed to deliver more investment in the Public Health Grant, and there was no extension of the current one-year Prevention Stimulus Fund for supporting mental health in the most deprived local authorities. However, some existing funding could be reorientated towards prevention.

The architecture of the system must also be orientated to reducing inequalities. The Health and Social Care Bill must: mandate public health and VCSE representation on integrated care partnerships; require the system to identify and address health inequalities, and specify that NHS England, Integrated Care Boards and Integrated Care Partnerships must pursue 'parity' between mental and physical health in all their functions.

To respond effectively to the needs of communities and marginalised groups, we need a bigger, more sustainably resourced, role for the voluntary, community and social enterprise (VCSE) sector, as proposed in [A New Social Contract for a Mentally Healthier Society](#).

The government should also introduce a [Wellbeing Budget, as New Zealand has done](#). These actions would smooth the road ahead for the most vulnerable, but they need long-term political and public commitment.

Patterns in mental health during the pandemic

Matthias Pierce | University of Manchester

The potential impact of COVID-19 on people's mental health is an increasing global concern. I led a team of 11 scientists across the UK using Understanding Society to identify groups which were particularly vulnerable.

We showed that people living in areas affected by lockdown, those who were struggling financially, people with pre-existing conditions, and those who have had COVID are all likely to benefit from government policy to support their mental health.

THE DATA

We used data from the first five waves of Understanding Society's COVID-19 Survey (April, May, June, July and September 2020), which covers the changing impact of the pandemic on the welfare of UK individuals, families and communities.

Understanding Society uses the GHQ-12 questionnaire to assess mental health, asking questions about sleep, concentration, problems in decision making, strain, feeling overwhelmed, and other indicators of distress. The COVID data are linked to responses from Understanding Society's main survey Wave 10 (2018-19), so we can make comparisons with a time before the pandemic.

For this project, we recalculated people's GHQ-12 score taking out the question "have you recently been able to enjoy your normal day-to-day activities?", because people's answers could have said more about the pandemic restrictions than about their mental health.



We took variables such as gender, age and ethnicity into account – and noted which respondents said they were:

- shielding because of their health
- keyworkers
- infected with or previously had COVID
- living with local lockdown measures
- having problems paying their bills

The results suggest that existing mental health inequalities are being exacerbated

FINDINGS

Our analysis led to two papers, one – covering the first lockdown – showing an increase in mental distress in the UK higher than would have been expected if the trajectories from 2014–19 (before the pandemic) had continued. The increase was greatest in 18–34-year-olds, women, and people living with young children.

Some research suggested that mental health began to recover quickly, but in our second paper we showed that mean population mental health deteriorated with the onset of the pandemic and did not begin improving until July 2020. We also identified five distinct mental health trajectories in the first six months of the pandemic.

More than three quarters of over 19,700 participants had either consistently good (39.3%) or consistently very good (37.5%) mental health over the first six months of the pandemic, with little divergence from their pre-pandemic scores. These were more likely to be men, over 45, with a partner, with no previous health condition, living in the most affluent neighbourhoods.

A ‘recovering’ group (12.0%) showed worse mental health during the initial shock of the pandemic, but recovered to around pre-pandemic levels by October 2020. They were more likely to be women, young adults, or have children living in the household.

The other two groups had poor mental health throughout. For one – 4.1% of the participants – their mental health score fell and remained worse. They were more likely than the general population to be of mixed ethnicity, women, shielding, living in deprived neighbourhoods, without a partner, and have previous mental illness.

The final group (7%) didn’t report an immediate acute deterioration in mental health, but a steady and sustained decline over time. Asian people, those living in an area under local lockdown measures, and people who were having problems paying bills were more likely to follow this trajectory.

We believe the subsequent lockdowns will have had similar effects.

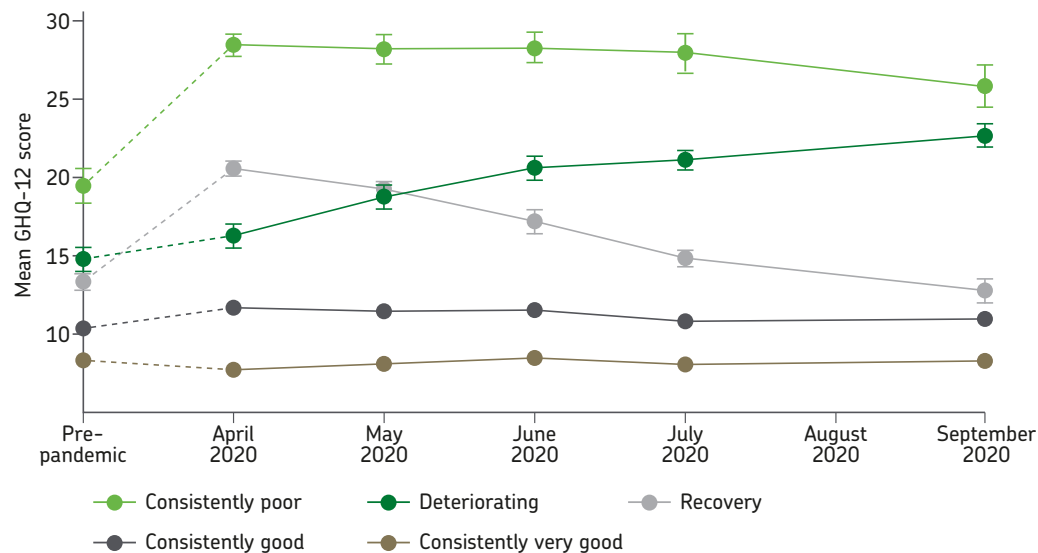
CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The five distinct trajectories we identified were strikingly similar to those reported in another analysis that included six years of data – suggesting that the pandemic has accelerated mental health changes among UK adults. Those in the lowest income areas were more likely to see declines in their mental health, which suggests that existing mental health inequalities are being exacerbated.

Preventive policies could be targeted at groups identified in this research. In advance of further lockdowns or future pandemics, public mental health should be a priority and support should be focused on deprived communities, while local authority public health measures and social welfare should target deprived families and individuals.



Five mental health trajectories during the pandemic



Dashed line indicates change from pre-pandemic score

CITATION:

Matthias Pierce, Sally McManus, Holly Hope, Matthew Hotopf, Tamsin Ford, Stephani L Hatch, Ann John, Evangelos Kontopantelis, Roger T Webb, Simon Wessely, Kathryn M Abel, Mental health before and during the COVID-19 pandemic: a longitudinal probability sample survey of the UK population (October 2020), and Mental health responses to the COVID-19 pandemic: a latent class trajectory analysis using longitudinal UK data (July 2021), *The Lancet Psychiatry*: [https://doi.org/10.1016/S2215-0366\(20\)30308-4](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2215-0366(20)30308-4) and [https://doi.org/10.1016/S2215-0366\(21\)00151-6](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2215-0366(21)00151-6)

Immigrant men suffer more in lockdowns

Jing Shen | University of Mannheim
David Bartram | University of Leicester

Lockdowns put pressure on the economy, and in some countries where lockdowns were implemented late or abandoned early, the consequences were more severe.

The US and the UK did not cope with the pandemic especially well during the early stage of lockdowns, and in both cases, pre-existing socioeconomic inequalities became more striking than they already were – with consequences for mental wellbeing.

We used Understanding Society to see if the psychological costs of economic lockdowns are different for UK-born working men compared to those who were born overseas. We found evidence of a greater cost in mental wellbeing for immigrant working men as a result of the widening socioeconomic gap between them and working men born in the UK.

THE DATA

We used the first two waves of COVID data (April and May 2020), linked to Wave 9 (2017-19) of Understanding Society's main survey to allow for comparisons with a time before the pandemic. We matched men who reported being either employed or self-employed or both in January/February 2020 between the COVID data and the Wave 9 main survey, to make sure that any changes in wellbeing weren't connected to changes in employment status that happened before the start of the pandemic.

Wellbeing is measured using the GHQ-12 questionnaire, which asks people about their ability to concentrate, sleep, ability to make decisions, feelings of being useful or under strain, and other factors such as enjoyment of day-to-day activities.



We used changes in work hours to measure employment disruption, identifying four categories:

- no hour reduction – which includes respondents whose work hours did not change or increased
- reduced hours with income protection – those whose work hours were reduced but whose income was substantially protected by furlough, the equivalent scheme for the self-employed people, or some form of sick pay
- reduced hours without income protection – those who didn't benefit from any of these schemes
- not working – those who were completely out of work in April/May.

We took various factors into account to make sure the results were robust, including whether respondents had: COVID symptoms; any long-term health conditions; a partner; children; or elderly people in the household.

FINDINGS

Before the pandemic, immigrant working men had better mental wellbeing than UK-born working men (that is, their GHQ scores were lower). In April and May 2020, there were falls in wellbeing across the board, but working men born outside the UK faced higher psychosocial costs when their hours were reduced. Existing research has shown that vulnerable groups such as immigrants face higher economic costs from lockdowns, because they are more likely to lose work hours without any financial compensation, and to lose work hours completely, than their UK-born counterparts.

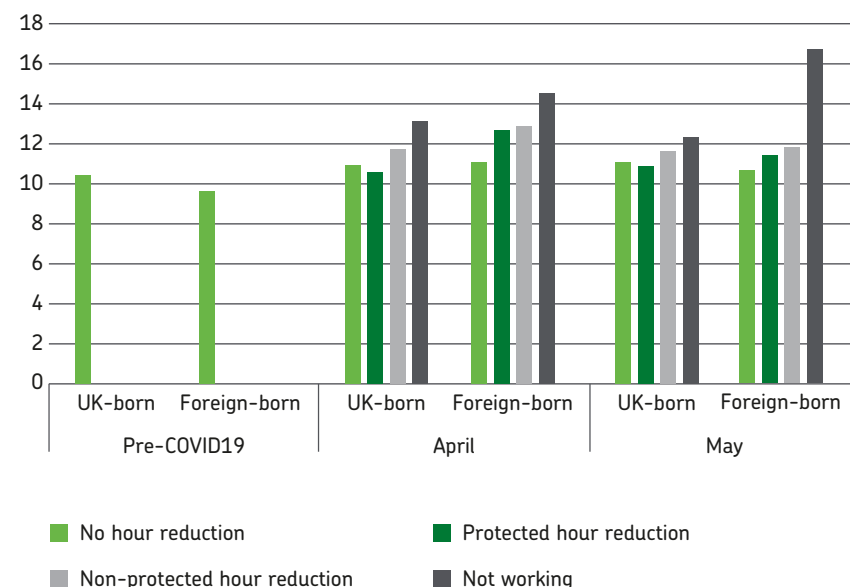
Immigrant men's mental wellbeing suffers more than that of native-born men from economic lockdowns



Compared to those whose work hours didn't change, the reduction of work hours hurt UK-born working men's mental state only if their income was not protected. For those whose income was protected, reduced work hours seemed to even benefit their mental wellbeing. However, work hour reductions hurt the mental wellbeing of foreign-born working men, whether their income was protected or not.

Men born overseas who faced reduced hours without income protection recorded increases in mental distress (GHQ scores) about three times higher than those of their UK-born counterparts. Men born outside the UK who found themselves not working at all reported increases almost twice as high as those of UK-born men who weren't working.

GHQ Mean scores of working men, by time and work hour changes



CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

We found clear evidence that immigrant men's mental wellbeing suffers more than that of native-born men from economic lockdowns, with those who are the most disadvantaged bearing the highest mental costs. These findings were based on data at the beginning of the pandemic, so as the situation continues, more research into long-term psychological effects will be important.

Future research could also look at participants' answers to questions about life satisfaction, to see if it falls over the long term, or remains stable as people adjust to the 'new normal'. This could also shed light on the reasons for the mental wellbeing gap between foreign- and UK-born workers.

Our findings have important implications, because any contraction in the economy could make disadvantaged groups more vulnerable than they are already, opening up greater economic and psychological gaps.



CITATION:

Fare differently, feel differently: mental wellbeing of UK-born and foreign-born working men during the COVID-19 pandemic, Jing Shen and David Bartram, European Societies, 2021: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616696.2020.1826557>

Older people, seeing family, and mental health during the pandemic

Yang Hu | Lancaster University
Yue Qian | University of British Columbia

Interacting with family members and friends who we don't live with is a key part of everyday life and crucial to people's mental wellbeing. COVID-19 severely curtailed this, particularly for older adults who were at high risk.

We studied face-to-face and virtual contact between households to examine older adults' mental wellbeing during the pandemic. Particularly, we focused on the patterns of contact they had with non-residential friends and family, and how they affected wellbeing.

THE DATA

We compared the UK and the US, using Understanding Society's COVID-19 and main surveys and the Health and Retirement Study (HRS), a longitudinal survey of older adults in the US. The surveys allowed us to compare data from 1,391 US respondents and 5,148 UK respondents aged 60 and above who were captured both before and during the pandemic.

Understanding Society measures mental wellbeing using the 12-item General Health Questionnaire (GHQ-12), which covers subjects such as depression, sleeplessness, enjoyment of daily activities, general happiness, and ability to face problems. The HRS uses the broadly comparable eight-item Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression (CES-D) scale. Both surveys also ask specifically about feelings of loneliness.

The HRS asked its respondents how often they met up with children, other family members, and friends they didn't live with. Understanding Society asked about face-to-face contact with non-residential family members and friends.



The HRS asked how often the respondents interacted with these people by telephone, email, and social media. Understanding Society asked about text contact (phone messages and email) and audio/video contact (including FaceTime, Zoom etc.). Inter-household contact was only measured once during the pandemic, so the findings reveal only an association, not causality.

We took into account age, gender, ethnicity, education, living alone, working during the pandemic, symptoms and infections, general health, financial satisfaction, and other factors including number of children and housing tenure.

FINDINGS

In the US, more than half of the respondents reported the best possible score for mental wellbeing both before and during the pandemic. There was no overall decline in mental wellbeing during the pandemic in the US, because similar proportions saw an improvement (26.4%) and a decline (24.5%). In the UK, the proportion reporting the best mental wellbeing fell from 62.6% before COVID to 46.3% during the pandemic, and a larger proportion experienced a decline in mental wellbeing (37.6%) than an improvement (20.3%).

In the US, 43.1% sometimes or often felt lonely, compared with 29.7% in the UK. In the US, 4.6% became less lonely than they were before the pandemic, but 28.7% became lonelier. In the UK, similar proportions became less lonely (13.6%) and lonelier (11.1%).

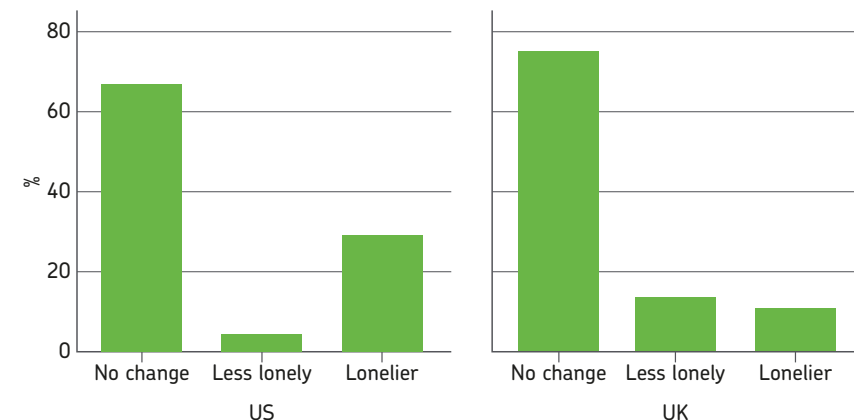
Face-to-face contact was more common in the US than in the UK, where lockdowns and staying in one's own household were more stringently implemented – and the more frequent inter-household face-to-face contact in the US was associated with better mental wellbeing. Similarly, in the UK, people who had frequent face-to-

face contact during the pandemic reported better general mental wellbeing and a smaller decline in mental wellbeing after the outbreak of the pandemic. In both countries, though, virtual contact was not associated with mental wellbeing during COVID or with the difference between before and during the crisis.

US respondents with more frequent face-to-face contact were less likely to feel lonely, and more likely to feel lonely if they had more frequent virtual contact. In the UK, those with more frequent virtual contact were more likely to have become lonelier during the pandemic. These results suggest that virtual contact has only a limited role in mitigating older adults' loneliness.

In both countries, older adults living alone, women, those with poorer self-reported health, and those with less financial satisfaction were more likely to exhibit poorer mental wellbeing and feel lonely. We didn't find any statistically significant disparities by racial/ethnic status.

Loneliness: COVID-19 vs. pre-pandemic




CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

In both the UK and the US, those who had frequent inter-household contact via both face-to-face and virtual means during the pandemic fared best in terms of general mental wellbeing, but virtual-only contact was associated with lower wellbeing, possibly due to digital stress or burnout.

The pandemic has undermined older adults' mental wellbeing, suggesting that public health practitioners and policymakers have a looming mental health crisis to address. Meeting people from different households is clearly a key resource to help sustain mental wellbeing during crises, and policies which enable strong inter-household ties will bolster public mental health in the long run.

We also showed specific groups – people living alone, and those with poorer health, for example – were more likely to rely on virtual contact, and governments can use these results to target interventions in the future.



The pandemic has undermined older adults' mental wellbeing, suggesting that policymakers have a looming mental health crisis to address

CITATION:

Yang Hu and Yue Qian, COVID-19, Inter-household Contact and Mental Well-Being Among Older Adults in the US and the UK, *Frontiers in Sociology*, July 2021: <https://doi.org/10.3389/fsoc.2021.714626>



The worsening mental health of carers during COVID

Elise Whitley | University of Glasgow

At the start of 2020 around 8.8 million adults in the UK were unpaid carers, around half of them caring for someone living in the same household.

We already know carers have poorer mental health than the general population, and that some carers struggle more than others. This is especially true for women; those who provide care for long hours or have been doing it for a long time, those who care for a spouse, and those caring for someone whose condition results in behavioural disturbances.

We used Understanding Society to assess the impact of lockdown on the mental health of people who were caring for another household member. The enforced closure of society during the COVID-19 pandemic led those they cared for to rely on them more and took away sources of support, such as respite care. We found that the mental health of unpaid carers deteriorated more during lockdown than that of non-carers. Declines in carers' mental health were particularly marked among those with a greater care burden, those who had formal help before lockdown but then lost it, and those looking after younger or adult children or someone with a learning disability or mental health problem.



THE DATA

We used data from Understanding Society's COVID-19 Surveys in April and July, plus pre-pandemic data from 2019, looking at more than 9,000 respondents who took part in all three surveys. They were asked how many people they cared for in their household, and the condition, disability or disorder involved. The carers' mental health was measured using the GHQ-12 questionnaire and they also answered questions about:

- who they care for, for example partner, child, parent, sibling, etc.
- how many hours they spend caring each week
- whether they get any support from others in the house, respite care or a day-care centre, or paid carers coming in etc.

On average, the people who described themselves as home carers were:

- older than non-carers (22% were over 70 compared to 16% of non-carers)
- more likely to be women (58% v 52%)
- less likely to hold a degree or higher qualification (36% v 43%).

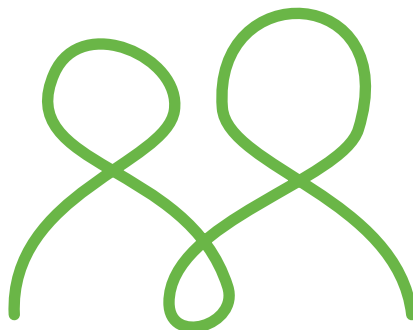
Of those who said they were a home carer in July 2020, the majority (73%) reported also being a home-carer in 2019.

FINDINGS

Before the pandemic, home carers had worse mental health on average than non-carers. By April 2020 mental health in both groups had deteriorated before improving again in July 2020, but home carers' mental health continued to be worse than it had been before lockdown.

When we looked at different groups of home carers, we found that people who cared for more than one person in the household reported particularly marked declines in their mental health in April 2020, and this trend continued in July. People who provided long hours of care (20 or more hours a week) had worse mental health than those who provided fewer hours. If people had help before the pandemic but then lost it, their mental health suffered more compared to people who had never had help.

Compared to respondents who were caring for a spouse/partner, those caring for a child under 18 had a particularly marked decline in their mental health in April 2020, but this improved somewhat by July 2020. However, people caring for children over 18 saw much greater declines in their mental health in the longer term. The decline in mental health was greatest for people caring for someone with a learning disability and smallest for those caring for someone with a problem related to old age. There were also marked declines for those caring for people with long term and mental health conditions and physical disabilities.



CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Home carers are the forgotten healthcare workers of the COVID-19 pandemic, with many existing carers providing more support and other people taking on new caring roles as health and social care services were withdrawn.

Responses to the pandemic have largely focused on infection control, but there is a growing recognition of the need to also support mental health. Our study shows that this is a particular issue for carers, and we need to see more policies that support the mental health of the population in general and of carers and the people they care for in particular. Governments need to prioritise restarting and creating services that support carers and protect their mental and physical health.

Home carers are the forgotten healthcare workers of the COVID-19 pandemic. We need to see the introduction and restarting of policies and services that support carers and the people they care for.

CITATION:

Tracking the mental health of home-carers during the first COVID-19 national lockdown: evidence from a nationally representative UK survey, Elise Whitley, Kelly Reeve and Michaela Benzeval, *Psychological Medicine*, 2021:
<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0033291721002555>



Did furlough help?

Did fiscal policy protect household incomes?

22



Has furlough increased financial distress?

25



Working class women bear the burden of COVID

28



Did furlough make people healthier?

31



Did furlough protect mental health?

33



Commentary

Kate Shoesmith | Deputy CEO, Recruitment & Employment Confederation

WITHOUT FURLOUGH, THE IMPACT ON EMPLOYMENT WOULD HAVE BEEN CATASTROPHIC

Before the pandemic, UK recruiters would help a million people find a new permanent job every year. In addition, [around a million people every day work on assignment via an agency in the UK as a temporary worker, contractor or freelancer](#). This direct contact with so many jobseekers and businesses looking to hire means recruiters are at the frontline of the labour market. Our industry is one of the first to feel the consequences of any economic downturn, and the pandemic had an instant effect, quite unlike any other.

The first impact we saw was a majority of businesses stopped or paused hiring, even when a role was actively being recruited. We even received anecdotal reports of employers withdrawing job offers. By April 2020, our tracking survey of job placements found [the rates of hiring had fallen at a record pace](#) – rates not seen in over 20 years of collecting these data.

The silver lining to this was the introduction of CJRS, which shored up the position for those in work. We were one of the business voices who [called for some form of wage protection as soon as lockdowns were imminent](#). Like many others, we worked behind the scenes and in public to inform the government's approach. There was significant evidence from overseas, most notably Germany's 'Kurzarbeit' system, that such an approach can help, particularly in terms of stabilising unemployment rates. In the recruitment industry, like many other sectors, the order books dried up almost

overnight. In that precarious situation, we knew businesses would have no choice but to look at how to jettison costs and manage a workforce that was not going to be needed while there was no work for them to do. The problem with making swingeing cuts and redundancies was that once the turbulence settled and demand started up again, those very same workers would be needed to deliver services.

CJRS worked. When they reported in May 2020, the Bank of England's Monetary Policy Committee estimated unemployment could at least double. By the third quarter of 2020, the UK unemployment rate sat at 4.9%. Sadly, this was 1.2 percentage points higher than it had been a year earlier but without furlough, many more people would have faced unemployment. There is a sense that some people are choosing to change careers – thinking to themselves “if not now, when?” – but the evidence for this is currently only anecdotal.

Since the conclusion of CJRS, businesses have recovered enough that they have not made redundancies and UK unemployment today sits at 4.3%. A full evaluation would provide evidence that can inform future policy approaches to economic downturns.

The Recruitment & Employment Confederation (REC) is the professional body for the UK recruitment industry

Did fiscal policy protect household incomes?

Iva Tasseva | London School of Economics
Mike Brewer | Resolution Foundation

The UK has been hit hard by the COVID crisis in both health and economic terms – [the country has been in the global top five for total cases](#), with the highest recorded drop in GDP per capita between the first and second quarter of 2020 among OECD countries.

Our research looks at the government's fiscal response, and asks whether the existing and emergency tax-benefit measures supported household incomes effectively in April and May 2020. We also examine how austerity in the preceding decade affected the UK's safety net, and ask whether a Universal Basic Income (UBI) would have been an effective emergency measure.

THE DATA

We used the Family Resources Survey (FRS) of 2018/19 to predict household incomes in 2020 as if COVID had not happened. We then simulated employment and earnings shocks on the sample of workers from the FRS using information from the Understanding Society COVID-19 Survey between February and April/May 2020. Finally, we used the tax-benefit model UKMOD to calculate household income tax liabilities and benefit entitlements before and after the pandemic began.



FINDINGS

We found that the pandemic hit household incomes hard. We simulated a substantial loss in household net income – 6.9% on average. Losses in income were proportionally largest for higher income families – for example the richest 10% of individuals lost 10.8% of net income compared to 0.2% for the poorest 10%. This is because earners tend to be concentrated in the middle and top of the net income distribution and were thus hit proportionally harder. Overall, income inequality remained broadly unchanged, while the income poverty rate moved in different directions depending on the poverty line. Income poverty went up using a poverty threshold fixed at 60% of median pre-COVID net income, and went down using a poverty line that moves with changes in the income distribution.

But the emergency policies – the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme (CJRS) for furloughed workers, the Self-Employment Income Support Scheme (SEISS), and increases to Universal Credit and other benefits – did protect household incomes to a substantial degree. They lowered the loss to net incomes by a substantial 9.3 percentage points on average, assuming that all furloughed workers would have been made unemployed in the absence of the emergency measures. Furthermore, compared to the estimated 6.9% drop in net income, [GDP per capita fell by 18.9% between the first and second quarter of 2020](#).

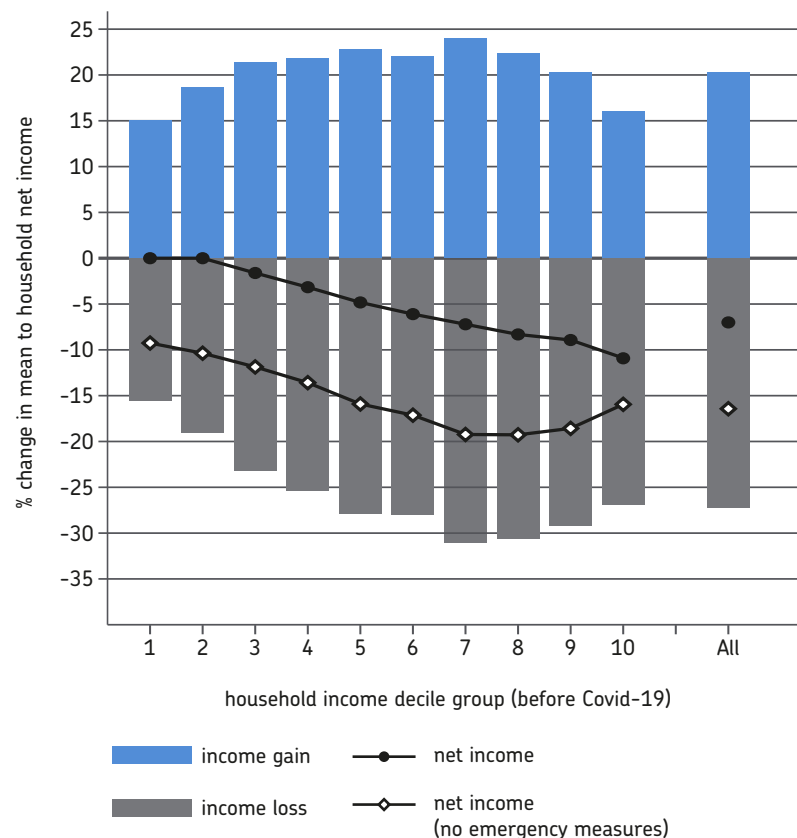
We showed that the CJRS protected household incomes across the entire distribution and provided the main insurance mechanism during the crisis. COVID-related benefit increases also helped mitigate income losses.

We also showed that, going into the crisis, the 2020 pre-COVID tax-benefit policies would have been less effective than 2011 tax-benefit policies in protecting incomes. This is because a near-decade of austerity cuts to state benefits has eroded the UK welfare state's ability to provide social insurance.

Finally, we assessed the distributional impact of the pandemic under a different policy scenario: a budget-neutral Universal Basic Income (UBI) of £1,744 per year per adult instead of the emergency measures. A UBI is unconditional – that is, independent of the person's circumstances. We found that a UBI would have supported the incomes of different vulnerable groups, but would have provided less protection than the emergency measures did to those hit hardest.

Emergency measures strengthened the UK safety net, but were temporary, and did not undo the impact of austerity

Impact of the crisis and policy response to COVID-19 on mean net income by decile of pre-crisis income



CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The COVID-19 pandemic caused a substantial shock to household net incomes. We estimated that household net income fell by 6.9% on average – but without the emergency measures, it would have fallen by an average of 16.2%.

In particular, the CJRS for furloughed workers played a major role in protecting household incomes, supporting households across the entire income distribution. The SEISS grant also provided small income gains – and tax-benefit policies provided important income protection for families. The £20 per week Universal Credit ‘uplift’ was targeted at the poorest 10% of individuals, contributing to a net income gain of 2.8% on average. The unemployment benefit Jobseeker’s Allowance also helped – as did automatic reductions in income tax and national insurance contributions (mostly for households in the middle and at the top of the distribution).

The emergency measures strengthened the UK safety net, but they were temporary, and did not undo the impact of austerity measures over the years. In the absence of a full economic recovery, many households are being left unprotected.



CITATION:

Iva Tasseva, Mike Brewer, Did the UK policy response to COVID-19 protect household incomes? *The Journal of Economic Inequality*, August 2021:
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10888-021-09491-w>

Has furlough increased financial distress?

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Governments across the world introduced furlough schemes to mitigate the economic damage of the COVID pandemic. In the UK, the government paid 80% of furloughed workers' gross monthly wages up to a limit of £2,500 per month.

The policy prevented mass unemployment, but any reduction in income can mean substantial financial difficulties for individuals – so it is crucial that furlough schemes are effective. Our paper was the first to establish whether furlough helped to prevent household financial distress during the pandemic.

THE DATA

We used eight waves of the Understanding Society COVID-19 Survey, which took place between April 2020 and April 2021. This allowed us to cover almost the whole period the furlough scheme was in place.

We excluded retirees, and people who are self-employed or unemployed, to leave only employees in the sample, and we captured financial distress using two measures. First: was the household late on housing (either rent or mortgage) payments? Second: were they late on bill payments? The first tends to be a household's largest single monthly expense, and bills are a sizeable part of average expenditure, too. Falling behind on either is therefore a sign of financial distress.

We took into account an individual's age, net monthly pay, whether they have a degree, and whether they work in a managerial, intermediate, or routine job. We also controlled for ethnicity, gender, and the number of adults and children living in the household, the pre-COVID-19 amount of non-mortgage debt, and the region in which they live.



The data also told us whether an individual had cut spending or spent their savings relative to pre-pandemic levels, whether they rent or own their home, and if they were deferring mortgage payments. We also used the government's coronavirus database to examine the infection rate in each region.

Importantly, we used propensity score matching to be sure we were comparing furloughed people with non-furloughed people who were very similar to them – allowing us to be more sure of causality than we would otherwise have been.

FINDINGS

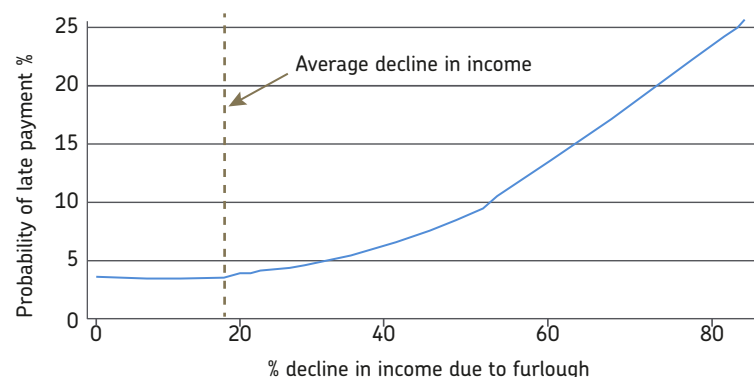
We found an increase of 2.13 percentage points in the probability of someone on furlough being late on their housing payments. In absolute terms, this was a small effect, but it made them 85% more likely than a non-furloughed person to be facing this particular measure of financial distress.

There was a 4.17 percentage point rise in the likelihood of someone on furlough being behind on household bills – a 31% increase compared to someone not on furlough.

We also found significant associations between being late on housing payments and pay, education, and ethnicity. People without a university degree were more likely to be behind on housing payments, and those from minority ethnicity backgrounds more likely to experience financial distress than their white counterparts.

Furlough also increased the probability of a household cutting its spending by 19.7 percentage points – a substantial rise – and this persists after furlough ends. In other words, even when someone returned to work, their expenditure did not rise back to former levels. Furlough also made people more likely to spend their savings in order to get by, which suggests that the policy will have increased wealth inequality.

Financial distress and furlough-induced income falls



Furlough was a distressing experience for some, but the overall effect on financial distress was small

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Furlough correlates with a higher probability of financial distress because the cut to workers' income prevents them from meeting their financial obligations – so we also studied how the probability of late housing or bill payments relates to the fall in wages. What was interesting about our finding here was that, for falls in income between 0% and 20%, the curve was essentially flat. In other words, the probability of financial distress did not vary with the change in income between those two points – suggesting that increasing government support from 80% to 90% would have made little difference.

Reducing government support below 20%, though, sees the probability of late housing payments increase rapidly. With a 40% decline in income, the likelihood of being late on housing payments is 6.5%, but with an 80% income decline, this figure goes up to almost 25%.

This suggests that the furlough scheme was well designed. Financial distress increased for some households, but the effect was small, and the scheme also minimised the burden on public finances.



CITATION:

Christoph Görtz, Danny McGowan, Mallory Yeromonahos, Furlough and Household Financial Distress during the COVID-19 Pandemic, CESifo Working Paper No. 9285, September 2021: <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3914975>



Working class women bear the work burden of COVID

Tracey Warren | University of Nottingham
Clare Lyonette | University of Warwick
with the UK Women's Budget Group

There were class and gender inequalities in the UK before COVID-19, but the pandemic has further exposed the economic and social burdens that working class women in particular face.

Our team at the Nottingham University Business School and the Institute for Employment Research at Warwick worked with the UK Women's Budget Group, with funding from the Economic and Social Research Council, using pre-pandemic data and data gathered between April 2020 and March 2021. We found that working class women are heavily affected by the job loss, work instability, financial hardship and insecurity that COVID has created. Working class men and women were the groups most likely to be furloughed – and working class women are doing most of the extra physical and emotional work resulting from the pandemic.

THE DATA

The project looked at employed people aged 18–65, and assessed their class status using the National Statistics Socio-economic Classification. This defines a working class worker as someone in a routine job (such as cleaners, waiting staff, bus drivers, or bar staff) or a semi-routine one (including care-workers, retail assistants, and hospital porters). There were around 3,700 employed women and 3,600 men in the COVID survey sample in April 2020.

Working class women have borne the brunt of the economic impact of the pandemic and are the bulk of the workforce behind the services that kept us going



FINDINGS

In the first lockdown, beginning in March 2020, there was obviously a big increase in the number of people who were employed but not working any hours (31% of women, and 29% of men – up from 1% and 0% respectively in Jan/Feb). This was linked to the furlough scheme – working class workers were disproportionately more likely to be furloughed than managerial and professional workers.

By November 2020, 34% of working class women (and 46% of similar men) had been furloughed – compared to 16% of women in managerial and professional jobs (and 18% of similar men).

The data also shows that being a keyworker is highest among working class women – 58% of all women in semi-routine and routine jobs were keyworkers in June 2020. Not only that, but female keyworkers were disproportionately working in frontline roles which involve face-to-face interaction, giving them greater exposure to health risks. These jobs include health and social care (40% of female keyworkers, 17% of male), and education and childcare (25% of female keyworkers, 9% of male).

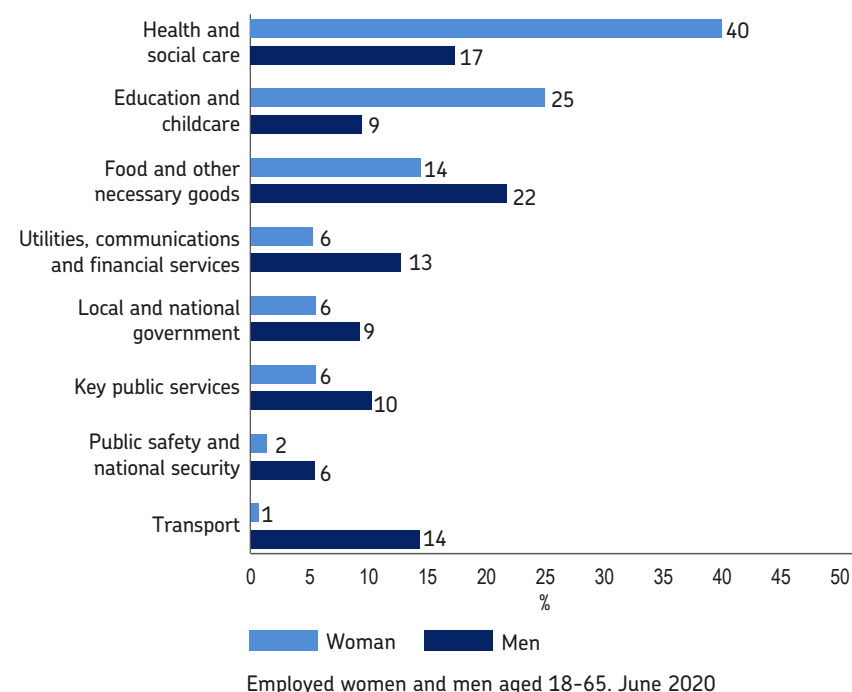
The number of women workers who worked fully from home rose from 6% before the pandemic to 33% in April 2020 – but only 10% of working class women were always working from home at that peak time, compared to 48% of women in managerial/professional positions.

With more people at home, we might expect to see a more equal sharing of housework and childcare between women and men, but we found that these figures were remarkably resistant to change. Before COVID, more employed women than men in couples mostly did the routine housework, and this increased during COVID rather than narrowed for all tasks except grocery shopping. In June 2020, 70% of employed women in couples were mostly doing the washing/

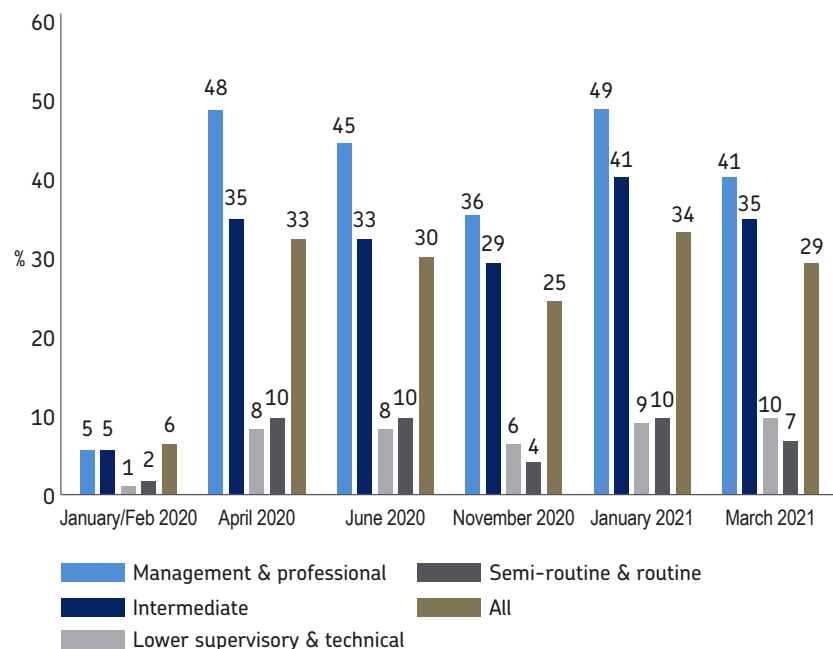
ironing and 61% the cleaning. Women also reported having the main responsibility for childcare with numbers increasing from 47% before the pandemic to 54% in June 2020. Over a quarter of employed women (26%) said they were doing 21 hours or more a week of childcare and/or home-schooling (compared to 10% of men).

We also know that working class women had by far the lowest wages of all workers, and reported some of the lowest levels of life satisfaction by January 2021. Women also reported higher levels of psychological distress than men.

Which sectors did keyworkers work in?



Which women were always working at home, by class?



Notes: Employed women aged 18-65

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Working class women have borne the brunt of the economic impact of the pandemic. They are the majority of those working in the sectors most likely to have been affected by closures and restrictions – and the ones who could least afford to lose their jobs, hours and income. Working class women are also the bulk of the workforce behind the services that kept us going through the crisis.

Policy recommendations to help this group could include:

- increasing and extending Statutory Sick Pay so that people with symptoms or awaiting results are not forced to work
- reducing insecurity for low-paid workers by extending employment rights and investing in enforcement
- investing in the early years and social care sectors to avoid closures which affect mothers' employment, particularly those in low-paid jobs.
- supporting sectors such as retail, hospitality, leisure and tourism – important employers of working class women and young people



CITATION:

Carrying the work burden of COVID-19: Working class women in the UK, Tracey Warren, Clare Lyonette and the UK Women's Budget Group, Nottingham University Business School, July 2021: <https://www.nottingham.ac.uk/business/who-we-are/case-studies/featured-research-case-studies/covid-19-working-women/index.aspx>

Did furlough make people healthier?

Jane Maddock | University College London
George Ploubidis | University College London
Bozena Wielgoszewska | University College London
Michael Green | University of Glasgow
Giorgio Di Gessa | University College London
Sam Parsons | University College London

The UK's furlough scheme was introduced at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic to protect the jobs and incomes of those who were unable to work during lockdowns.

Initially, the government paid 80% of the wages of people who couldn't work, or whose employers could no longer afford to pay them, up to a monthly limit of £2,500. It appears to have worked on an economic level, but also radically changed the way a substantial number of people lived during the pandemic.

We wanted to understand whether changes in people's employment status were related to changes in their health behaviours – diet, physical activity and sleep.

THE DATA

A team of researchers from UCL and the Universities of Bristol, Edinburgh and Glasgow used data from eight studies, including Understanding Society, the Millennium Cohort Study, the 1970 British Cohort Study, and the English Longitudinal Study of Ageing to analyse more than 27,000 people.

Depending on the employment status both before and during the initial months of the COVID-19 pandemic, we sorted the survey participants into different categories capturing changes in their work. We were particularly interested in those who went from work to furlough ('furloughed') and those unemployed both before and during the pandemic, and we wanted to compare their unhealthy behaviours to those of people who kept working 'stable employed'.



Around six in ten people in the sample were employed both before the pandemic and during its initial stages. The number furloughed varied between studies, from 8% in Generation Scotland to 25% in Next Steps (formerly the Longitudinal Study of Young People in England).

We investigated the risk of:

- unhealthy eating – having less than two portions of fruit and veg a day
- infrequent exercise – less than 30 minutes, less than three days a week
- atypical sleep – outside the typical range of six to nine hours a night.

FINDINGS

On the face of it, fruit and vegetable consumption during the early stages of the pandemic was lower among those who were furloughed and among the stable unemployed, compared to people in stable employment. However, once we take into account important characteristics such as age, education, and health behaviours before COVID, we no longer see significant differences, suggesting that the initial differences observed reflected differences in dietary habits established before the pandemic.

People who were furloughed were slightly more likely to be physically active than people in stable employment. This association remained after we adjusted for their characteristics and previous behaviours.

We also found that people who had been furloughed or were ‘stable unemployed’ were more likely than those in stable employment to have atypical sleep during the pandemic.

This was true particularly for younger people (16–29) not in stable employment, even after adjusting for pre-pandemic characteristics.

Continuing with furlough could mitigate the detrimental effects of the economic downturn and prevent a worsening of inequalities

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Our analysis shows that being on furlough does not appear to have harmed health behaviours. Given that being unemployed or losing a job tend to have detrimental health effects, our findings suggests that these potentially harmful effects can be mitigated by subsidised employment policies.

CITATION:

Bożena Wielgoszewska, Jane Maddock, Michael J. Green, Giorgio Di Gessa, Sam Parsons, Gareth J Griffith, Jazz Croft, Anna J. Stevenson, Charlotte Booth, Richard J. Silverwood, David Bann, Praveetha Patalay, Alun D. Hughes, Nishi Chaturvedi, Laura D Howe, Emla Fitzsimons, Srinivasa Vittal Katikireddi, George B. Ploubidis, The UK Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme and changes in diet, physical activity and sleep during the COVID-19 pandemic: Evidence from eight longitudinal studies, medRxiv (preprint), June 2021: <https://doi.org/10.1101/2021.06.08.21258531>

Did furlough protect mental health?

Neil Smith | National Centre for Social Research
Isabel Taylor | National Centre for Social Research
Valerija Kolbas | National Centre for Social Research

By the end of May 2020, more than a million employers had claimed funds from the UK government's Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme, and 8.7 million people had been furloughed to protect jobs where people might otherwise have lost them as businesses closed or reduced their operations.

A team at the National Centre for Social Research wanted to explore the effects of the pandemic behind these headline figures, and used Understanding Society's COVID-19 Survey to examine the relationship between people's job and financial security and their mental wellbeing.

THE DATA

In Wave 1 of the Understanding Society COVID-19 survey which ran in April 2020, over 10,000 respondents told us about their mental health and employment situation (more than 8,700 in COVID Wave 2, May 2020). We also used data from Waves 8 and 9 of the annual Understanding Society survey so we could compare responses from 2016-19, before the pandemic, with what happened during it.

In both surveys, the General Health Questionnaire (GHQ-12) was used to assess participants' mental health, and respondents were also asked how likely they were to lose their job in the next 12 months (before COVID) or three months (during the pandemic). The COVID survey also asked how likely they were to have difficulty paying their bills in the next three months. We recorded anyone who said this was lower than 50% as being financially secure.



FINDINGS

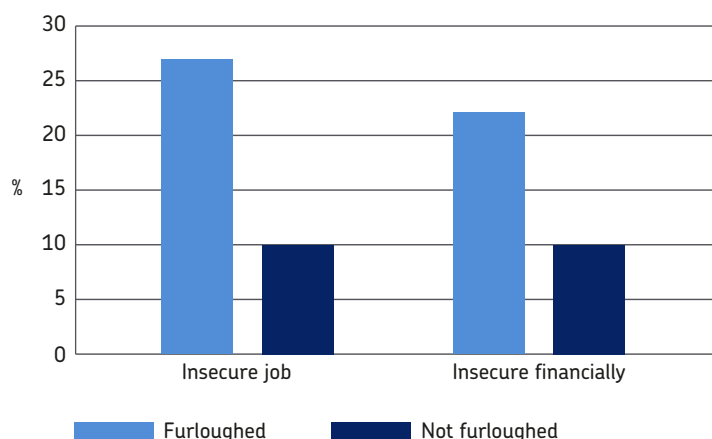
Before the pandemic, levels of job insecurity were very similar among those who went on to be furloughed (5.2%) compared to those who stayed in work (5.5%). In May 2020, two months after lockdown, people who were furloughed had much higher feelings of economic insecurity than those who kept working. They were almost three times as likely to feel insecure in their jobs (27% vs 10%), and twice as likely to feel financially insecure (22% vs 11%).

There were also increases in mental distress, although this was not influenced by people's working arrangements. Before the pandemic, levels of mental distress were similar for people who were later furloughed and for those who continued to work. Although mental distress increased significantly in the first month of the pandemic, and fell slightly by May 2020, it rose and fell equally among both types of worker.

However, furlough did appear to protect people to some extent depending on their economic vulnerability. Furloughed workers in insecure and secure jobs, and those with high levels of financial security, reported considerably smaller increases in mental distress than their non-furloughed counterparts. But this benefit of furlough was not felt by people who felt financially insecure – the increase in mental distress felt by furloughed workers (3.2 points) was very similar to that felt by those who weren't furloughed (3.3 points).

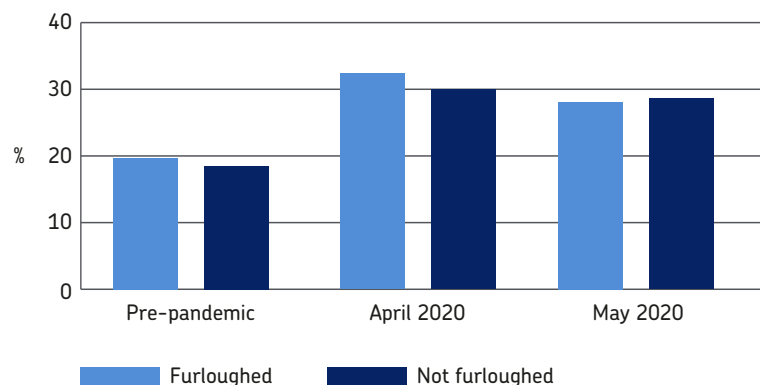
The effects of furlough were especially protective for those facing long-term economic vulnerability. Workers who were in long-term insecure jobs before and during the pandemic reported no significant increase in mental distress, unlike their non-furloughed counterparts who experienced considerable increases.

Differences in job security and financial security by furlough status (May 2020)



Future financial support packages ought to recognise the health consequences of their implementation

Proportion of people with significant levels of mental distress before and during the pandemic



CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Overall, the research is further evidence that economic wellbeing is closely related to mental wellbeing. Furlough cushioned people against the initial economic shocks of the pandemic, moderating the effect of job insecurity on mental distress – but it did not overcome the pressures that come with a precarious financial position. Low pay on furlough is still low pay, and carries the same stresses and consequent risks to mental health as when in work.

For the future, we suggest that financial support packages should recognise the health consequences of their implementation, alongside their economic impacts, and that initiatives to promote saving could support people's health and financial wellbeing. The Money and Pensions Advice Service, for example, aims to get two million more struggling or 'squeezed' people saving, thus protecting the less well-off from economic downturns.



CITATION:

Exploring the relationship between economic security, furlough and mental distress, Neil Smith, Isabel Taylor, Valerija Kolbas, National Centre for Social Research, November 2020: <https://www.natcen.ac.uk/our-research/research/monitoring-socioeconomic-and-mental-health-trajectories-through-the-covid-19-pandemic/>

Children in the pandemic

School closures hit children's mental health hard

38



Does home-schooling exacerbate inequalities?

41



Does growing inequality in the job market mean more disadvantage for children?

44



Commentary

THE IMPACT OF COVID ON INEQUALITY FOR CHILDREN – WHAT NOW?

Sam Butters and Gina Cicerone | co-CEOs Fair Education Alliance

Even before the pandemic, progress had already stalled in tackling inequalities in our education system. This has been exacerbated by the effects of COVID. Data from 2020 and 2021 show an amplification of inequality at all stages of education.

At primary school, disadvantaged students were the most impacted by lost learning through lockdown and are less likely to meet age-related expectations than their peers in literacy and numeracy. At GCSE, in 2021 the gap between wealthier and poorer students increased, with more advantaged students gaining a higher percentage of the top grades.

Beyond attainment, there has been a negative effect on the personal wellbeing of disadvantaged students, exacerbating previous inequalities. Disadvantaged students have also been shown to have lower levels of scores against 'essential skills'. All of this relates to their progression after school – disadvantaged students continue to be less likely to have a sustained destination (employment, further education or training) than their wealthier peers and continue to be less likely to get a university place.

An inclusive, well-rounded and high-quality education that provides every child the opportunity to thrive, regardless of their background, is critical for our society. This is not only because of the moral responsibility we have to our children and young people, but because, without access to a great education, there is a considerable social and economic future cost to the nation – from crime to unemployment to community cohesion – loss to business, to the economy and to wellbeing, as well as a waste of talent.

SO, WHAT NOW?

It is not due to lack of will that inequality prevails. There are hundreds of organisations and thousands of individuals committed to making things fairer. The challenge is that the root causes are not simple, and no single individual, organisation or even government can address this alone.

The Alliance's recommendations for a fairer education system involves significant shifts; the creation of an inclusive education system which:

- develops wellbeing and skills alongside academic attainment
- engages parents and communities of all backgrounds
- supports young people with post-16 opportunities
- supports teachers and leaders in the most disadvantaged areas to thrive.

This needs to be delivered in partnership between business, charities and the education and youth sectors alongside policy and resource commitment from government.

Inequality for children, heightened by the pandemic, is a burning platform we cannot ignore. Fairness for children and a great start in life through education is possible. Collective cross-sector action will make the difference – we will always achieve more together than we can alone.

The Fair Education Alliance represents around 250 organisations – businesses, charities, education and youth institutions – who work together to make education fairer.

School closures hit children's mental health hard

Birgitta Rabe | University of Essex

After the school closures of spring and summer 2020, children's emotional and behavioural problems increased significantly – suggesting that the closures in early 2021 will have caused further damage. The difficulties were greater for the children who were not prioritised to return to school for seven weeks before the 2020 summer holiday.

A team at the Universities of Essex, Surrey and Birmingham, funded by the Nuffield Foundation, observed children's mental health over a three-year period. They used data from Understanding Society's main survey and the COVID-19 Survey to compare periods before and during the pandemic. Our analysis shows that school closures affected children's mental health significantly. We found a slight improvement in wellbeing once schools reopened in September, but not to pre-pandemic levels, and the gap between those who missed out on more time in school during the summer term compared to those who missed less remained stubbornly wide.



THE DATA

In Understanding Society's COVID-19 Study, people with children aged 5-11 answered questions from the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) – a commonly used tool for exploring children's behaviour, which covers conduct problems, emotional symptoms, hyperactivity, peer relationships, and prosocial behaviour. It asks, for example, about tantrums and obedience, fidgeting, confidence, number of friends, and sharing, and creates an overall 'total difficulties' score.

In the main survey, people with children aged 5 and 8 answer the SDQ. We combined data from before and after the pandemic, including the July COVID survey which was carried out in around the first week of the 2020 summer holidays. Our final sample was of around 1,900 children who were observed that summer and, on average, two years earlier.

Children are likely to need extra support for their mental health and wellbeing for some time



FINDINGS

Mothers reported an increase in children's behavioural and emotional difficulties during the pandemic. The rise was equivalent to a child newly exhibiting a particular negative behaviour or experiencing a new emotional difficulty some of the time – or around 14% above the average pre-pandemic level of difficulties.

Comparing the difficulties experienced by children in year groups who were and were not prioritised to return school in the summer term of 2020, we found that negative behaviours increased more among those who were not. The gap is equivalent to around 27% of the average pre-pandemic level of difficulties, or to a child newly exhibiting a particular negative behaviour (or experiencing a particular emotional difficulty) very often. The differences are driven by a rise in conduct problems and hyperactivity.

We do not have completely comparable evidence on the impact of school closures on learning loss, but the available evidence suggests that these effects are at least as big.

Tracking children over time shows that the return to school in September did not undo all of this damage. Looking across all children in the study, we found wellbeing to be higher in September 2020 than July 2020, but still much lower than pre-pandemic levels. The gap in wellbeing between children who were and were not prioritised to return to school during the summer term had not closed, however. This suggests that any corresponding deterioration in wellbeing as a result of the school closures in early 2021 is likely to persist.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

These effects tell us about the difference in children's wellbeing that comes from differences in the likelihood of being prioritised to return to school. Assuming the negative effects are concentrated among children who did not attend at all suggests that the impact of missing six weeks of school could be roughly equivalent to children newly exhibiting three to four serious negative behaviours or emotional difficulties.

Taken together, our results suggest that the effects of school closures on children's wellbeing are large, and that they may take some time to mend. Going back to school in itself does not appear to be sufficient for children to 'bounce back'. Children are likely to need extra support for their mental health and wellbeing for some time, and this justifies the focus that many schools have been placing on pupil wellbeing.

There has been a lot of focus on children's learning losses during the pandemic, with Government committing over £3 billion to help children catch up on what they have missed. Given the strong links between children's mental health and educational attainment, focusing on mental health will be an important part of this catch-up.



CITATION:

Jo Blanden, Claire Crawford, Laura Fumagalli and Birgitta Rabe, School closures and children's emotional and behavioural difficulties, Institute for Social and Economic Research, March 2021: https://www.iser.essex.ac.uk/files/projects/school-closures/SDQnote2021_final.pdf

Does home-schooling exacerbate inequalities?

Nic Pensiero, Tony Kelly and Christian Bokhove | University of Southampton

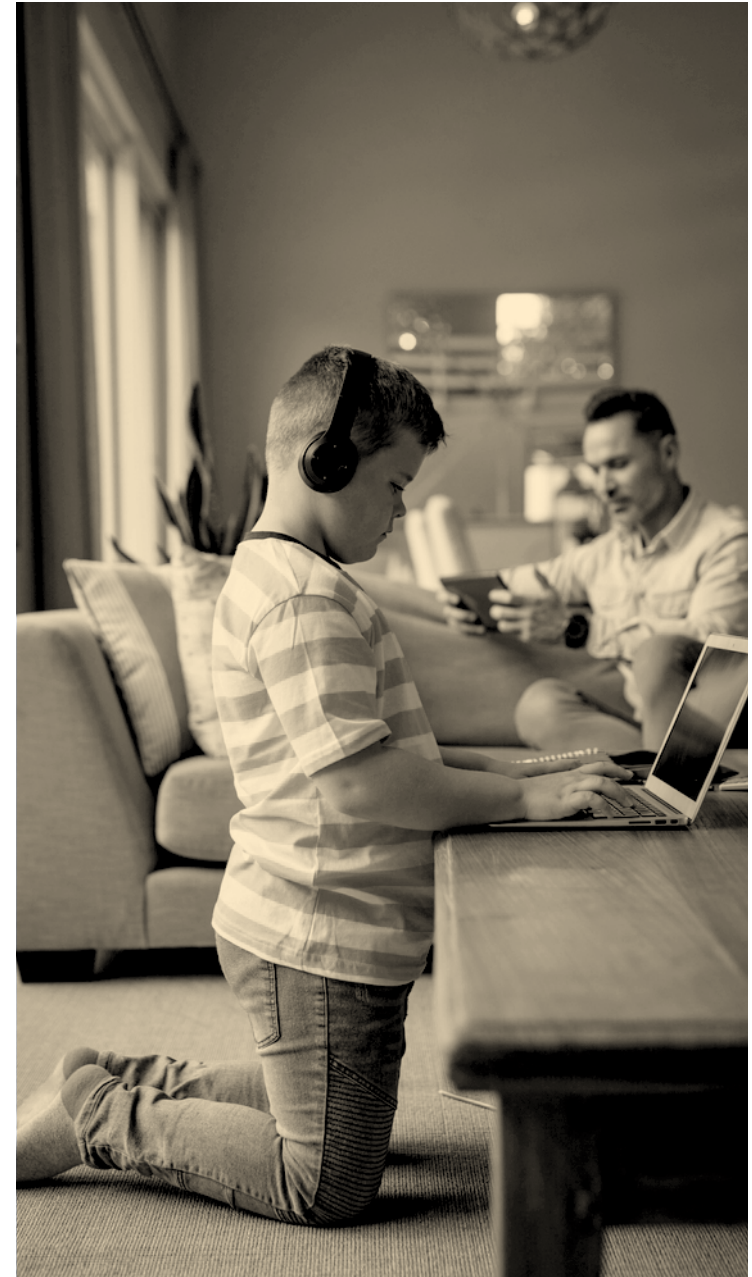
Closing schools during lockdowns and moving to home and online schooling has exacerbated inequalities because of a gap in the volume of schoolwork children have done and parents' different levels of ability to help.

The amount of schoolwork provided improved in the second schools closure (January to February 2021) compared to the first (March to June 2020), and the gap between the most advantaged and disadvantaged children reduced, but inequalities between socio-economic groups remained.

THE DATA

We used the April 2020 and January 2021 waves of Understanding Society's COVID-19 Survey, which included a module on home-schooling, and Waves 8-10 of the annual survey to find out about parents' occupation. We divided occupation into 'service class' (higher managers and professionals), 'intermediate class' (including lower managerial, administrative and professional roles) and 'routine class' occupations (including sales, service and clerical roles). Parents were also asked to report their working patterns during lockdown, and we used this to see who was working from home, occasionally or regularly, and who was furloughed or unemployed.

The COVID survey asked how many hours children spent doing school work at home each day, how much time the adult answering spent actively helping each day, how many offline lessons (such as worksheets, assignments, watching videos) the school provided, and how many online lessons (live or real-time).



We looked at whether the family had two parents or one – which would affect the amount of time they had to help with schoolwork – and the child’s age, gender, and ethnic background, and whether they had an older sibling, owned a computer, used a shared computer, or didn’t have one. We ended up with a sample of 2,330 primary school children and 3,000 secondary school children.

FINDINGS

School closures exacerbated existing socioeconomic inequalities, particularly when we looked at parents’ occupations, but the effect was amplified when we considered other indicators of disadvantage such as access to computers.

Children in the most advantaged families (where both parents work regularly from home, the main parent has a professional/managerial role, and the child has their own computer) spent an average of 30 minutes more per day on primary school work and 1.2 hours on secondary than more disadvantaged children (the main parent is not in a service class job, the child has to share a computer with other family members, and either parent does not regularly work from home). In other words, there were marked socio-economic differences in the amount of education the children lost.

In the second lockdown, the number of offline and online lessons per day increased, more computers were available, and families were better prepared. This led to a larger volume of schoolwork being done, from 2.3 hours per day to 3.3 hours by primary children, and from 2.6 hours a day to 4.0 hours for secondary.

The gaps which there had been between the more advantaged and disadvantaged had reduced by January 2021. In particular, primary school children of single parents who worked from home were able to reduce the schoolwork gap, but generally, inequalities between socio-economic groups in the uptake of schoolwork remained stable between the two school closure periods.

In an earlier paper, using just the early COVID data, we calculated that it could take six months for secondary school children from the most advantaged families to catch up with where they would be had schools stayed open. For those from the most disadvantaged families, it could take a year.




CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

If at all possible, schools should stay open in any future waves of COVID, to prevent inequalities getting any worse. If they are forced to close again, inequalities can be lessened with better access to technology, and tutoring for children whose parents cannot work from home and be around to help.

The government's catch-up funding and tutoring programme are a good response, but the initial £80 per pupil allocated amounts to six extra days of school, and is unlikely to be enough to close the attainment gap. Catch-up tutoring will need to last several weeks.

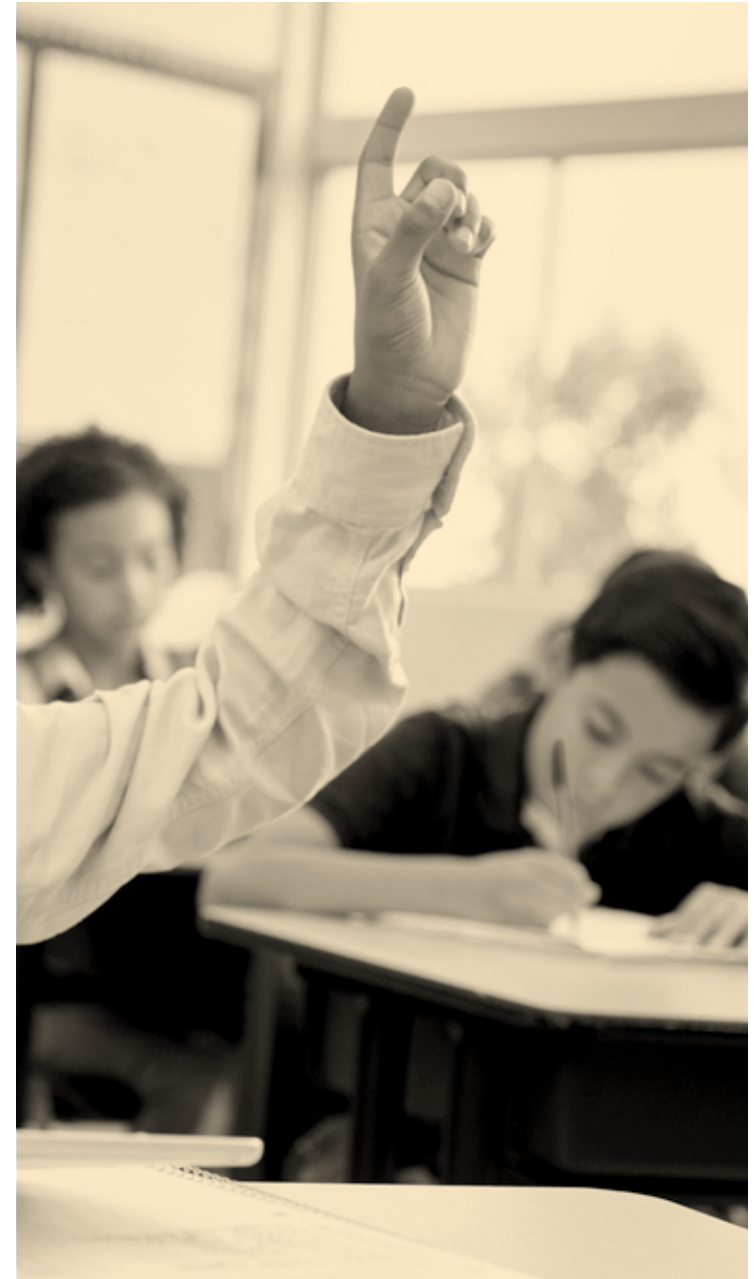
Schools, not government, are in the best position to know who needs help the most, and should get the funding they need to target the most disadvantaged children. To do otherwise is to risk piling disadvantage upon disadvantage, from which it would be very difficult to recover in future school years.



The government's £80 per pupil catch-up funding is unlikely to be enough to close the attainment gap

CITATION:

Nic Pensiero, Tony Kelly and Christian Bokhove, Learning inequalities during the COVID-19 pandemic, A longitudinal analysis using the UK Understanding Society 2020 and 2021 data, University of Southampton, July 2021:
<http://dx.doi.org/10.5258/SOTON/P0118>



Does growing inequality in the job market mean more disadvantage for children?

Claudia Hupkau | CUNEF Universidad and London School of Economics
Jenifer Ruiz-Valenzuela | Universitat de Barcelona and LSE

Parents in precarious work before the pandemic were more likely to face a cut in pay or to lose their job altogether during the COVID crisis, with potential knock-on effects for their children's learning.

A cut in earnings or unemployment affected the amount of time parents spent with their children, and the money they could spend to support their learning, leading to growing inequality.

THE DATA

We used data from Understanding Society's regular annual surveys and its COVID-19 Survey. In the latter, participants answer a set of questions on current and pre-pandemic (January or February 2020) household finances and employment, and children in the household aged 4-18.

We studied children aged 4-18 where at least one parent took part in both the first COVID-19 survey and Wave 9 of the main survey, and whose parents were employed in January or February 2020, giving us a sample of 2,895 children. They were just over 11 years old on average, and 12% were eligible to receive free school meals in January 2020. About 3% were still attending school in April 2020, because they belong to a vulnerable group or their parents are key workers. 8% got extra resources which needed to be paid for, such as online tutoring and educational apps, and parents helped them, on average, for just under three hours a day.



Three per cent had at least one parent who had lost their job by April 2020, and about 23% had a parent on furlough. Almost half had at least one parent who had reduced working hours in April compared to January – the average reduction being just over 11 hours a week. About a third had at least one parent who had lost earnings, and 9% saw a parent's earnings drop to zero.

Fathers were more likely to have lost their job in April 2020, but mothers were more likely to be on furlough or have reduced their hours. Fathers were also more likely to see their earnings fall: 35%, compared to 28% of mothers. Fathers' average drop in earnings was nearly £85 a week, compared to £27 for mothers.

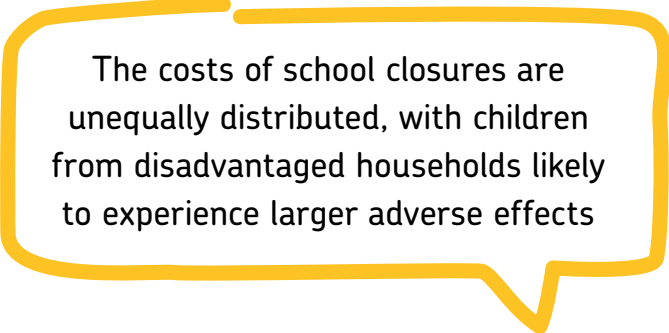
FINDINGS

We found that parents with a lower level of education, those on precarious job contracts without a fixed salary or guaranteed hours, and those working in locked-down industries such as non-essential retail and hospitality, were more likely to have seen their wages fall. These shocks had an immediate intergenerational impact.

Children whose fathers' earnings dropped to zero by April 2020 were about 7.5% less likely to have benefitted from extra, paid-for educational resources than similar children whose fathers' earnings did not fall. If their earnings dropped to zero, though, fathers gave their children an extra half an hour of help with schoolwork per day. This could offset the negative impact of lower learning resources, but we can't be sure how it will affect children's medium-term

learning, because parents who lose their earnings also experience a significant mental health deterioration.

By May 2020, fathers whose earnings had dropped to zero were less likely to talk about important issues with their children, but also significantly less likely to quarrel with them. We didn't find any relationship between mothers' labour market shocks and the time they devoted to helping with schoolwork or paying for learning resources – which fits with existing evidence that many fathers were pushed into being the main providers of childcare during the pandemic, while mothers already spent more time with their children.



The costs of school closures are unequally distributed, with children from disadvantaged households likely to experience larger adverse effects

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The results have important implications when it comes to evaluating the economic costs of lockdowns. School closures have the potential for long-term costs for students, because any loss of learning could have a negative impact on the lifelong income they can expect.

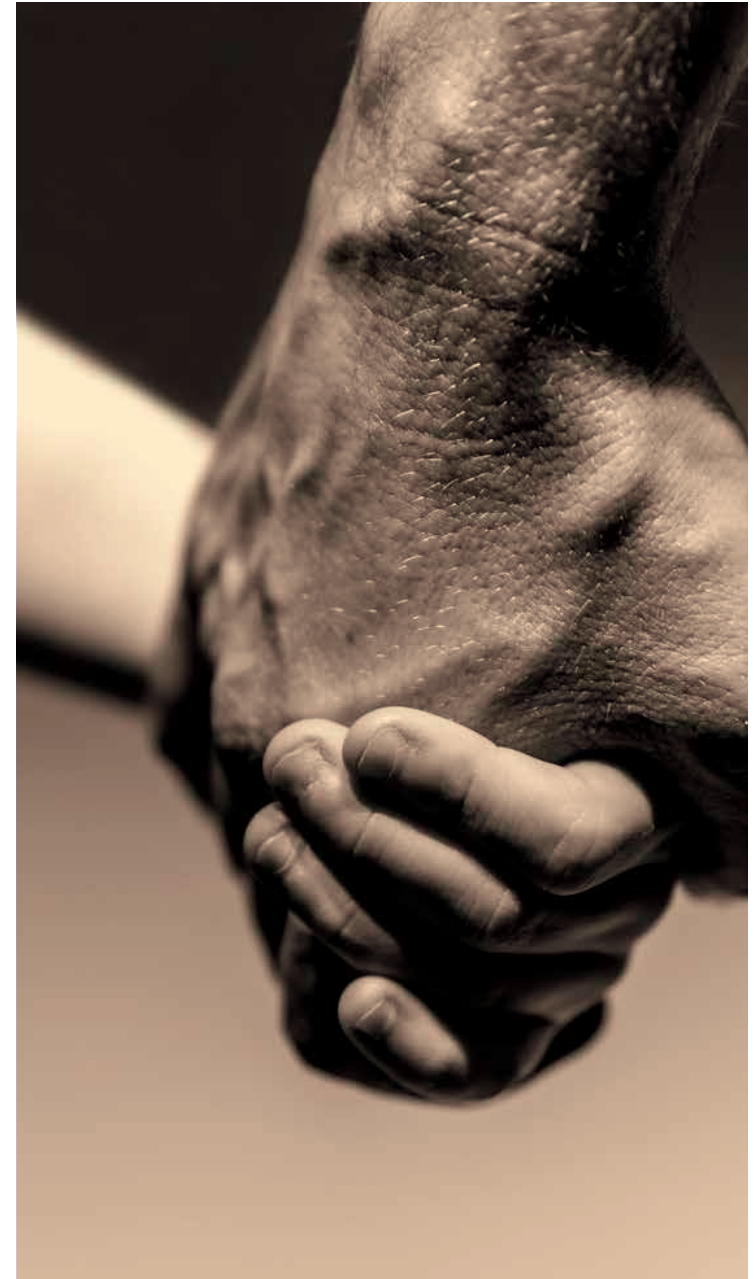
Our findings add to the mounting evidence that COVID has had an unequal impact on the employment prospects and earnings of different groups in society. The costs of school closures are also unequally distributed, with children from already disadvantaged households likely to experience larger adverse effects of home schooling. These sources of inequality are interacting, widening already existing socio-economic gaps in child outcomes, raising the prospect of long-term scarring for some children – including lower access to higher education when they leave school, and lower levels of employment and earnings later.

All this contributes to the expected rise in inequality brought about by the crisis, which should be kept in mind when school closures are considered again as a policy response to any future waves of COVID-19, and potentially in subsequent pandemics.



CITATION:

Claudia Hupkau, Ingo Isphording, Stephen Machin, Jenifer Ruiz-Valenzuela, Labour market shocks during the COVID-19 pandemic: inequalities and child outcomes, IZA Discussion Paper No. 14000, December 2020: <https://www.iza.org/publications/dp/14000/labour-market-shocks-during-the-covid-19-pandemic-inequalities-and-child-outcomes>



Work with us

Understanding Society provides a rich data and evidence resource for shaping policy and practice. We can help your organisation or industry make the most of our longitudinal data and the growing evidence base. We can look at the feasibility of linking up data, connect you with academic experts or help you think about policy and social innovation.

Our data covers many dimensions of people's daily lives, so they can shed light on areas of life which may surprise you. The Bank of England's Monetary Policy Committee, for example, used our data in its quarterly interest rate report, suggesting that productivity could increase when people work from home.

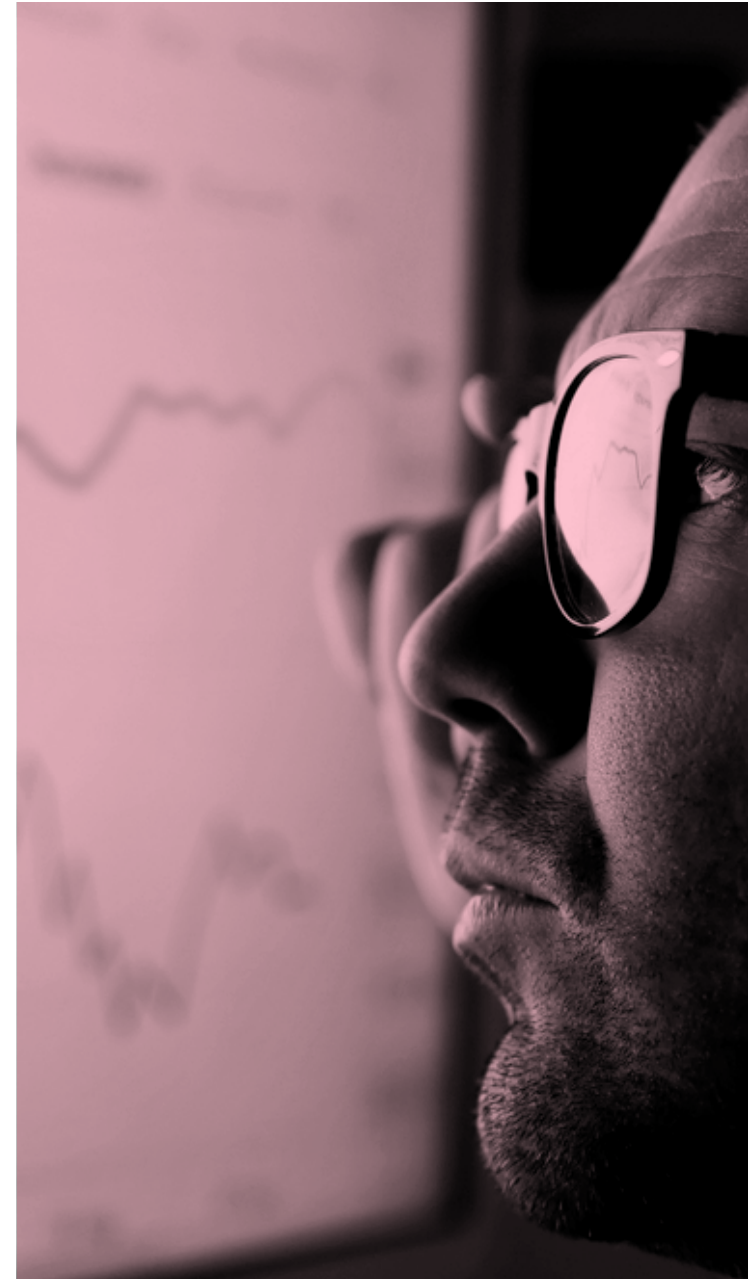
The Office for Health Improvement and Disparities is using our data as a source for its COVID-19 mental health and wellbeing monitoring. Ofgem has used research based on our data in its consultation on the energy tariff cap – and we've worked with regional and local authorities in the West Midlands to understand what prompts people to walk or cycle instead of taking short car journeys.

EVENTS, ROUNDTABLES AND 'DATA DIVES'

We bring together people with common interests but often different knowledge and experiences to discuss social issues, through panel discussions, roundtables and conferences.

In response to COP 26, we organised a three-day climate change data dive with 40 speakers, and participants from across academia, government departments and charities to examine attitudes and behaviours, 'green jobs', transport, and political and community engagement.

Households are the highest contributor to greenhouse gas emissions compared to other major sectors in the UK and if we are all to play a bigger role in tackling the climate crisis in our daily lives, more research, policy thinking and action is needed to help us make the transition.



We can't simply hope for technology to reduce greenhouse gases.

A three-day event, albeit over two weeks, may seem a short time to examine big research and policy questions robustly, but there are benefits to this approach.

It can help:

- learn about the opportunities for research and analysis
- build knowledge and connections across sectors and disciplines
- road test research methods and policy ideas in a 'safe' environment.

OUR TOPICS

Climate change is just one area of many in which Understanding Society can help.

Our study covers:

- biomarkers, genetics and epigenetics
- COVID-19
- education
- employment
- ethnicity and immigration
- family and households, including pregnancy and early childhood development
- health and wellbeing
- money and finances
- politics and social attitudes
- transport and the environment

And we have a youth questionnaire documenting the experiences of 10-15-year-olds across the UK.

To discuss potential ideas for collaboration and working in partnership, please [contact us today](#).



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The Institute for Social and Economic Research is a leading centre for the production and analysis of longitudinal studies, awarded a Queen's Anniversary Prize for world-leading social science research. ISER is based at the University of Essex, a 'dual intensive' university gold rated for teaching excellence (TEF2017) and top 20 for research excellence (REF2014).

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