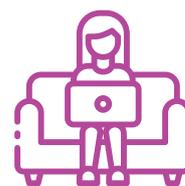


Stay home: affecting lives



Introduction

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit the UK in March 2020, the UK government announced measures to reduce inter-personal contact to control the spread of the coronavirus. This included, on 16th March 2020, advising everyone to work from home if possible.

By April 2020, almost half of UK workers (46%) were working from home at least some of the time.¹ Although a limited number of people returned to their workplaces during the following months, advice to work from home has continued into 2021.

Working from home generates challenges as well as opportunities for individuals. One drawback is that it reduces in-person interactions between colleagues² and risks blurring the lines between individuals' work and personal lives. This poses a particular risk for those living alone, who are unable to physically mix with others during the pandemic. This may impact individuals' mental wellbeing, with findings from the first months of the pandemic highlighting the detrimental effects of reduced social interactions on the mental wellbeing of people living on their own.³

Despite the circumstances that have led to this shift in working, many people have positive views of at least some aspects of working from home. Remote working arrangements have allowed many people to continue to work through the pandemic and to receive some or all of their usual income. The

ability to work from home therefore offers some protection from the economic hit felt by many who have been unable to work during the pandemic. Given that financial insecurity is known to be a strong predictor of poor mental health,⁴ this financial protection could contribute to lower levels of mental distress among this group.

As attention shifts towards designing post-pandemic workplaces shaped by over a year of social distancing regulations, more workers than ever have said they would like to be able to work from home at least some of the time.^{5,6} Employers appear to share this approach, with more planning to offer remote working options to their employees than before.⁷ However, occupational health professionals are warning that we need to be careful about the impact of working from home on individuals' physical and emotional wellbeing, particularly as people continue working remotely for longer periods of time.⁸ Therefore, workers, employers and institutions need to better understand the long-term implications on wellbeing of working from home when designing new ways of working.

This briefing therefore explores the evidence from Understanding Society, a nationally representative sample of adults in the UK, to investigate how the switch to working from home in 2020 impacted the mental health of the UK workforce and whether this differed for people who lived alone or with other people.



Key findings

- People who worked from home while living alone reported larger increases in mental distress than other workers at the start of the pandemic.
- Working from home was associated with larger increases in mental distress even as these working arrangements became the “new normal”; when controlling for people's demographic characteristics, financial circumstances and loneliness, changes in mental distress were significantly higher for those working at home, regardless of their living circumstances in May, July and November 2020.
- Financial difficulties were more common among those who could not work from home, whereas social isolation was felt more among people living alone, regardless of their work arrangement. This suggests there are different routes through which population mental health has been impacted during the pandemic and there is no single remedy to address these issues.

Data & methods

Understanding Society (the UK Household Longitudinal Study) is a large, nationally representative household panel study that interviews all members of randomly selected households. There have been nine different UKHLS waves since 2009. All participants from wave 8 or 9 of the main survey (conducted between 2017 and 2019) were invited to take part in the COVID-19 study about respondents' employment situation and their mental health throughout the pandemic, and their responses were then linked to the main Understanding Society survey. From

April 2020, a shorter web-survey was regularly fielded to collect information on participants' lives throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. In the second and sixth waves of this COVID-19 study (in May and November 2020), telephone interviews also collected information from households with no internet access. More details of the study can be found at understandingsociety.ac.uk.

In all pre- and mid-pandemic waves of Understanding Society, respondents were asked a series of questions to assess their mental health. Mental distress was measured using the General Health Questionnaire (GHQ) designed

to assess common psychiatric conditions. The GHQ consists of 12 items, each assessing the severity of a mental problem over the past few weeks using a 4-point scale (from 0 to 3). The analyses used the total GHQ score (ranging from 0 to 36), with higher scores indicating worse mental distress.

This analysis is based on the 8,675 people who were interviewed at wave 9 (pre-pandemic) and in May, July and November 2020.⁹ All respondents indicated whether they were currently employed or self-employed and completed the General Health Questionnaire.

Main results

The COVID-19 pandemic led to an unparalleled increase in the proportion of people across the UK working from home. Before the pandemic, about 1 in 20 members of the UK workforce worked from home but this increased to more than 1 in 3 after the UK went into lockdown. Similar patterns were seen amongst people who lived alone and who lived in multi-person households. Although this rate dipped slightly when more of the country opened up in late summer 2020, many more people continued to work at home throughout 2020 than had done so before the pandemic [Figure 1].

Home working and mental distress at the start of the pandemic

Figure 2 shows the average individual level changes in mental distress by living situation for those working at home and those working outside the home by comparing mental distress before the pandemic to levels observed in May, July and November 2020. There were no differences in mental distress prior to the pandemic between these groups. By May 2020, two months after the "stay at home" order was enacted at the start of the pandemic, there had been a marked increase in mental distress for all workers.

Fig 1. Increases in working from home among single person and multi-person households before and during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020

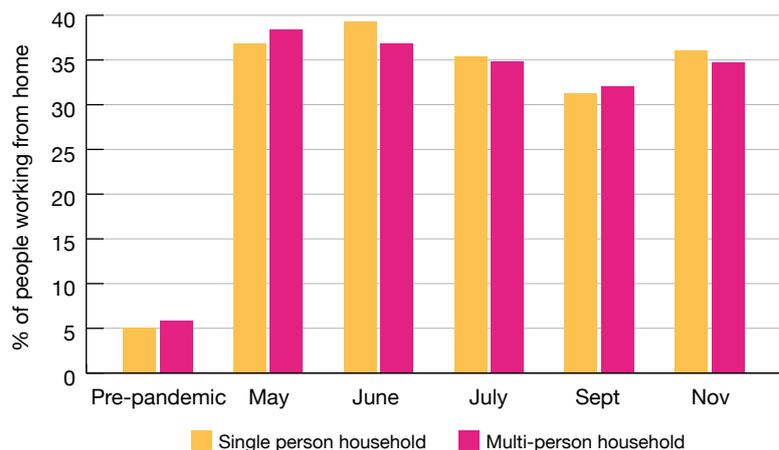
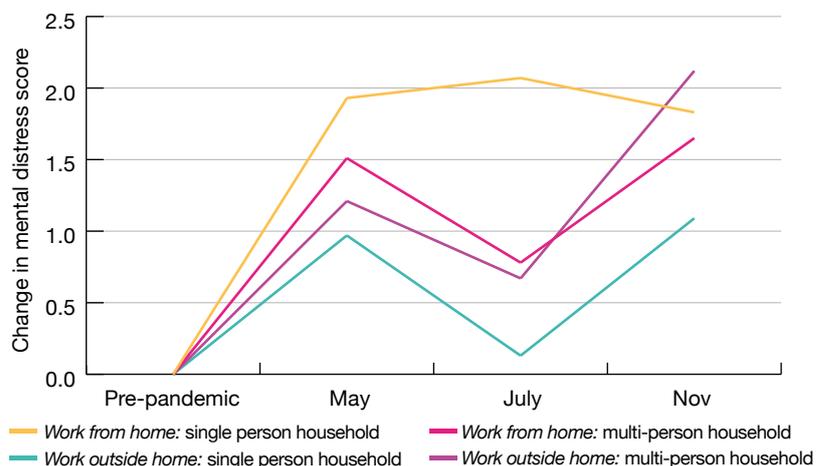


Fig 2. Changes in mental distress during the COVID-19 pandemic by work and housing situation



The largest increase in distress was seen among those who were living alone and working from home – these levels were persistently elevated through to November 2020. This contrasted with a decline in mental distress towards pre-pandemic levels by July 2020 for people in multi-person households working at home as well as all those working outside of the home. Levels of distress subsequently increased again among these groups in November, as stricter lockdown measures were introduced, to levels comparable to those seen for single people working at home.

Overall, the pandemic has had a more persistent impact on distress levels in single person households working from home. This contrasts sharply with fluctuating levels observed for people in multi-person households and those working outside of the home. These differences in distress may be related to levels of social isolation and loneliness, which were likely to be lower for people working from multi-person households or in workplaces who would come into regular contact with other people during the course of the day.

Are people working from home lonelier?

Before the pandemic, people living alone were significantly more likely to be lonely than people in multi-person households, regardless of whether they worked from home or attended a workplace. By May 2020, rates of loneliness had increased significantly among people living alone and working from home, with 63% of people in this group reporting loneliness, compared with 46% pre-pandemic. By November, loneliness among people living alone and working from home had returned to levels measured before the pandemic. For people living alone and attending a place of work, levels of loneliness fluctuated but were not significantly higher in November than they had been before the pandemic.

For people in multi-person households, loneliness increased steadily from pre-pandemic levels through to November 2020, but

less sharply than it did for people in single households. This suggests that single person households working from home were most affected by short-term increases in loneliness in the early stages of the pandemic, but by November people living in multi person households while working from home reported a bigger increase in loneliness than at any other point during the pandemic [Figure 3].

Did the switch to working from home protect people from financial difficulties?

Prior to the pandemic, financial difficulties did not vary significantly according to peoples' living and working arrangements. People working from home were as likely to have financial difficulties as people going into their workplaces, regardless of whether they lived with other people or on their own. Overall, around one in four workers said that they were struggling

financially or just getting by before the pandemic.

At the onset of the pandemic, people who were unable to work from home experienced an acute increase in financial difficulties. Within this group, those who were living on their own were the most severely affected, reporting a 27 percentage point increase in financial difficulties by May 2020, with a smaller but still significant increase of 14 percentage points for people who lived in multi-person households. These financial difficulties persisted throughout the pandemic for people unable to work from home.

Meanwhile, people who worked from home were relatively untouched by the financial impact of the pandemic. People working from home, either living on their own or with others, did not report any significant increases in financial difficulties between the onset of the stay at home order and November 2020 [Figure 4].

Fig 3. Proportion of people feeling lonely by household and work arrangements in pre-pandemic and in 2020

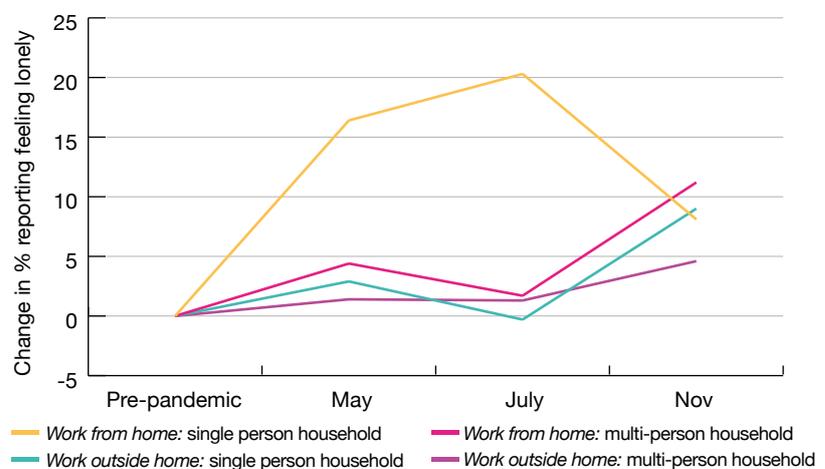
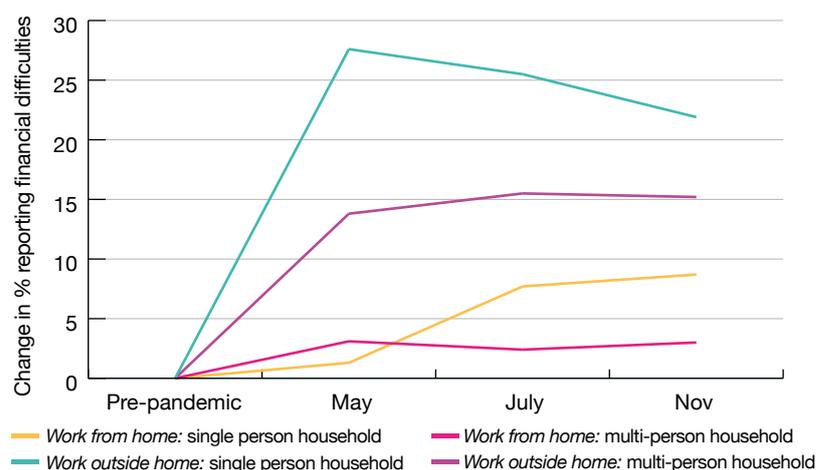


Fig 4. Proportion of people experiencing financial difficulties by household and work arrangements pre-pandemic and in 2020



Do financial difficulties and loneliness explain higher levels of mental distress among people working from home?

Although the number of people working at home during the pandemic dramatically increased during the pandemic, this was clearly not an option available to all workers. In particular, people with higher paying jobs and those in professional, administrative and technical occupations are more likely to be able to work from home, and benefit from the additional job security that this may provide.^{10 11} As financial difficulties play a significant role in explaining individuals' mental distress, we need to ensure that this is taken into account when investigating the relationship between working from home and mental distress.

Loneliness is also associated with higher levels of mental distress. Therefore, increases in mental distress amongst the most isolated group of workers (those working from home and living alone) could be driven by loneliness, rather than by their living situation and working environment.

However, even when we control for loneliness and financial distress, there is still a significant relationship between working from home and increased mental distress during the pandemic. While loneliness and financial difficulties play a significant role in mental distress – with loneliness having twice as much impact on mental distress as experiences of financial difficulties – they alone do not explain greater increases in mental distress for those working from home during the pandemic.

The greater increase in mental distress that we have seen among people who live alone and work from home might be explained by the individual characteristics of this group of respondents. Younger people have been particularly badly hit by the financial and social consequences of the pandemic, and about a quarter of respondents who said they worked from home and lived alone in May 2020 were under 30 years old. But even after taking into account demographics (age, gender, ethnicity) and other job and health related factors, working from home has continued to be associated with a larger increase in mental distress throughout the pandemic.¹²



Conclusions

This briefing highlights how working from home arrangements impact individuals' mental health, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic which has affected social interactions and financial circumstances. While this is likely, in part, due to the additional isolation felt by this group, it is not fully explained by feelings of loneliness.

Working from home arrangements impact workers' mental health above and beyond the impact of loneliness, financial circumstances and demographic characteristics. With social distancing policies and guidance to work from home likely to remain in place for some time,¹³ individuals, employers and the government should be aware of the impact this is likely to have on workers' mental health. While more people than ever now work from home and use technology to replace many aspects of work that had previously been done in person, this cannot fully replicate the working environment for everyone.

For those new to homeworking in particular, their work-life balance, and the social benefits of working alongside others, could be at risk through remote working.

Although there was no difference in mental distress for those working from home and those not working from home before the pandemic, the lack of new experiences and face-to-face interactions during the pandemic may be contributing to increased mental distress for home workers who would not class themselves as lonely. While homeworking may be suitable for some, including those who already chose this working pattern before the pandemic, it is not likely to be suitable for everyone who was compelled to work at home due to the lockdown. For those new to homeworking in particular, their work-life balance, and the social benefits of working alongside others, could be at risk through remote working.



Implications

If home-based working remains a common working situation even after the pandemic, the diverse experiences of people working from home need to be understood better. The social aspect of work is likely to be an important benefit for some workers, particularly those who experience greater isolation due to living alone. Issues including the home-working environment, an individual's ability to switch off from work at the end of the day and access to technology will also mediate how working at home impacts an individual's wellbeing. These social, practical and technological implications should be carefully considered before employers assume that working from home is equally desirable for everyone. Closer communication between occupational health professionals, employees and their managers may also help many people to successfully navigate this new way of working.

Acknowledgements

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