

PANDEMIC Research News

COVID-19, well-being and our working lives.

Covid-19 has changed our lives in many ways. We here concentrate on the way in which we work, and analyse the relationship between working from home and well-being. We have five measures of the latter: life satisfaction, the feeling of having a worthwhile life, loneliness, anxiety, and depression.

This summary comes from COME-HERE (COVID-19, Mental Health, REsilience and Self-regulation) data, designed to examine life in five European Union countries, France, Germany, Italy, Spain and Sweden during the COVID-19 pandemic.

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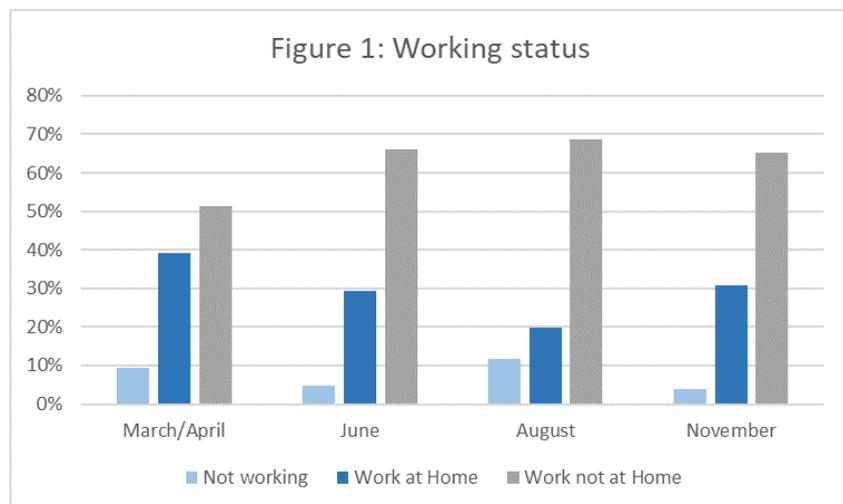
Question

In each of the following months, where did you mostly work?

- At home
- Not at home
- I was not working

One of the most striking impacts of the pandemic has been on where we work. Among EU countries, the percentage working from home was 5% in 2019, but rose to over one-third in July 2020. The figure in COME-HERE data is comparable, with **39% of workers working from home in March/April 2020**. This figure **fell in the August wave** with the relaxation of restrictive measures, but then **rose again in November to 31%** during the second Covid-19 wave (see Figure 1). Restrictions (including homeworking) and pandemic spread are obviously related.

To identify the well-being effect of working from home it is thus essential to control for the stringency of the lockdown and social-distancing policies that have been implemented to reduce the spread of the virus.



In general, those who work have higher well-being than those who do not. But the place of work matters too: those who work from home report lower well-being in all five dimensions (life satisfaction, a worthwhile life, loneliness, depression, and anxiety) than do people who work away from home: see Figure 2 (where all well-being scores are converted to 0-10 scales).

Policy stringency is also associated with lower well-being.

Questions

Overall, in the past week, how satisfied have you been with your life on a scale from 0 (not at all) to 10 (completely)?

In the past week, to what extent have you felt the things you are doing in your life are worthwhile on a scale from 0 (not at all) to 10 (completely)?

Loneliness is measured by the reduced 8-item version of the UCLA Loneliness Scale. The items are, over the last two weeks, a) How often do you feel that you lack companionship? b) How often do you feel that there is no one you can turn to? c) How often do you feel outgoing and friendly? d) How often do you feel left out? e) How often do you feel isolated from others? f) How often do you feel you can find companionship when you want it? g) How often do you feel shy? h) How often do you feel that people are around you but not with you? Each of these eight questions is answered on a one-to-four scale of Never, Rarely, Sometimes, and Often. The sum of these answers produces a figure between 8 and 32, which we invert so that higher scores refer to greater well-being (less loneliness).

Depression is measured via the 9-item Patient Health Questionnaire. Respondents state how often over the last two weeks they have been bothered by the following problems: a) Little interest or pleasure in doing things. b) Feeling down, depressed, or hopeless. c) Trouble falling or staying asleep or sleeping too much. d) Feeling tired or having little energy. e) Poor appetite or overeating. f) Feeling bad about yourself — or that you are a failure or have let yourself or your family down. g) Trouble concentrating on things, such as reading the newspaper or watching television. h) Moving or speaking so slowly that other people could have noticed? Or the opposite — being so fidgety or restless that you have been moving around a lot more than usual i) Thoughts that you would be better off dead or of hurting yourself in some way. The replies are on a 0-3 scale: Not at all, Several days, More than half of the days, and Nearly every day. The sum of the answers produces a scale from 0 to 27, which we reverse so that higher scores refer to greater well-being.

Anxiety is measured via the Generalized Anxiety Disorder 7-item scale that contains seven questions regarding the incidence of problems over the last two weeks: a) Feeling nervous, anxious, or on edge. b) Not being able to stop or control worrying. c) Worrying too much about different things. d) Trouble relaxing. e) Being so restless that it's hard to sit still. f) Becoming easily annoyed or irritable. g) Feeling afraid as if something awful might happen. The replies are on a 0-3 scale: Not at all, Several days, More than half of the days, and Nearly every day. The sum of the answers produces a scale from 0 to 21, which we reverse so that higher scores refer to greater well-being.

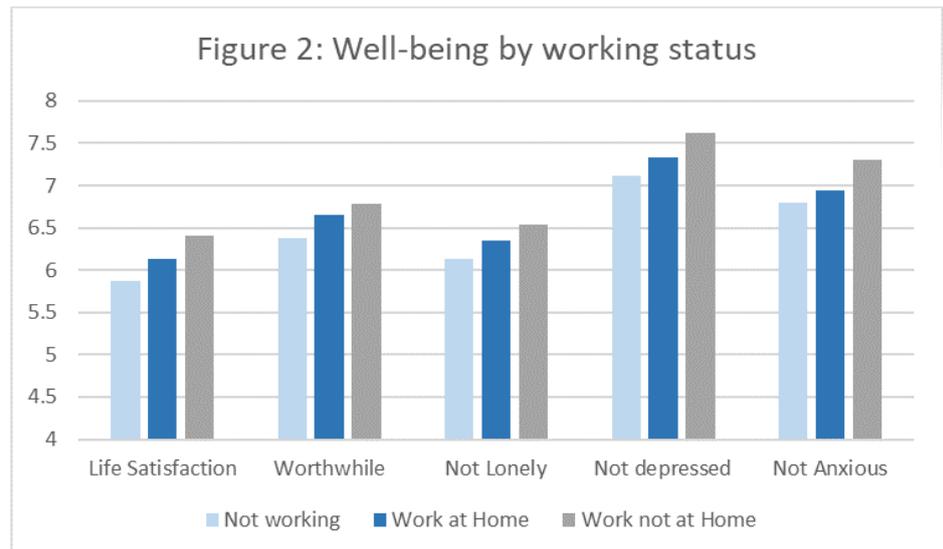
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One advantage of the COME-HERE data is that it follows the same individuals over time. So what happens to the well-being of the same individual as she switches her place of work?

The results here are different. There is little evidence of a large drop in well-being upon switching to working at home (nor of a large rise in well-being upon going back to the office), with even a suggestion that **working from home reduces anxiety**.

Policy stringency continues to reduce well-being in panel analysis.



Why does the comparison of different individuals produce different results than following the same individual over time? A first point is that COME-HERE data collection started after the pandemic took hold, and those with the lowest well-being may have been already working from home in April, and have continued to do so since. We will not then see these people switching from working at home to working away from home, so that they are absent from the panel analysis. Second, people who switched during 2020 will have been working from home for only a relatively short amount of time. Short periods of working at home may be much more beneficial than longer periods, as fatigue sets in.

Not all workers are equally affected. As for a number of domains, the pandemic has affected inequality. Older workers and those with younger children do worse when they work from home, while those in more spacious accommodation do better.

Covid-19 has changed our daily lives. We find that **more stringent restrictions have a cost in terms of well-being**. And conditional on policy stringency, **working from home matters for individuals' well-being, with unequal effects across population groups**.

With only eight months of data, the four COME-HERE waves have necessarily only identified fairly short-run effects of individuals' pandemic experiences. The waves to come over 2021 will help us understand how Covid-19 has affected well-being over the medium-run, including in terms of where we work.