

Research shows home working didn't harm mental health at the start of the pandemic—but things changed later on

May 12 2023, by Jacques Wels



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One of the key changes to our daily lives brought about by the COVID pandemic was, for those able to do so, working from home. According to UK data, [almost 60% of people](#) were working fully or partially from home between April and June 2020.

And it's becoming increasingly apparent that for many people, home

working is here to stay. Between [September 2022 and January 2023](#), 16% of working adults in the UK reported working fully from home, and 28% working partially from home. This compares with roughly 5% working fully from home and 9% working partially from home [in 2018](#).

My colleagues and I wanted to understand how home working correlated with mental [health](#) and social well-being during the pandemic. In a recent study published in *PLOS Medicine*, we found that home working was not detrimental to mental health in the early stages of the pandemic, but was associated with negative effects later on.

We pooled results from seven UK longitudinal data sets—[Next Steps](#), the [British Cohort Study](#), the [National Child and Development Study](#), the [English Longitudinal Study of Ageing](#), [Generation Scotland](#), [Born in Bradford](#), and [Understanding Society](#)—to explore the relationship between home working and mental health at three different time points.

The first was during the first UK lockdown (April to June 2020), the second was when restrictions were eased (July to October 2020), and the third was during the second lockdown (November 2020 to March 2021). We analyzed data from more than 10,000 participants at each point, all aged between 16 and 66 and in employment.

As well as collecting data on working location, the [longitudinal studies](#) we included collect information on mental health and social well-being. Our study focused on variables including [psychological distress](#), [life satisfaction](#) and loneliness.

Changes over time

Our findings show the relationship between home working and mental health changed over the course of the pandemic. In both April-June and July-October 2020, we found no significant difference between those

working from home and those working at their employer's premises.

By contrast, between November 2020 and March 2021, working partially or fully from home was associated with higher levels of psychological distress and loneliness, compared with working at an employer's premises.

This shift may be partly because the characteristics of people working from home changed over time, but is also likely to be explained to a degree by context. For example, it's possible that during the first lockdown, working from home was novel for some people. The effects of home working on mental health might have been exacerbated by general lockdown fatigue during the second lockdown, explaining why we observed poorer mental health at the third time point.

The fact we saw no major effect when restrictions were eased (the second time point) suggests that home working might not be detrimental to workers' mental health now that we're moving towards a post-pandemic world. But we need more research to confirm this.

Some nuances

While we measured trends across the UK population, our findings weren't uniform across all groups.

For example, female workers were at higher risk of psychological distress and low life satisfaction compared with male workers, independently of whether they worked from home or not. This echoes [other research](#) which has shown women's mental health deteriorated disproportionately at the height of the pandemic.

We also looked at education status, distinguishing between those with and without a university degree. We found that those without a

degree—who were also less likely to work from home prior to the pandemic—had increased risk of low life satisfaction when working partially from home at the second time point and when working fully from home at the third time point.

Limitations and where to next

In our study, we accounted for a number of factors that could potentially influence these results, such as age, home ownership status, ethnicity, and pre-pandemic mental health.

We might expect that people who had previously worked from home may have been less directly affected by the pandemic shift to home working. However, no information on pre-pandemic home working was available for six of the seven studies. So, we had to estimate pre-pandemic home working propensities based on participant characteristics including age, gender and profession to control for this potential confounding factor.

Another limitation is that we had no information on how home working schemes were implemented by employers—for example, whether it was on a voluntary basis, and what scope there was for collective negotiation in making arrangements. Further research could look at how home working is implemented within companies, and the effect this might have on workers' mental health and well-being.

Nonetheless, our study offers insights into the effect of home working on [mental health](#) through different stages of the [pandemic](#). Notably, some people may be at greater risk—in particular, [female workers](#) and those without a higher education degree.

We need to continue to monitor the effects of home working practices on these groups. There should also be a focus on company-based home

working policies that seek to support employees—particularly those facing greater difficulties, and those who may not have worked remotely in the past.

More information: Jacques Wels et al, Home working and social and mental wellbeing at different stages of the COVID-19 pandemic in the UK: Evidence from 7 longitudinal population surveys, *PLOS Medicine* (2023). [DOI: 10.1371/journal.pmed.1004214](https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pmed.1004214)

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