



The Effect of the Great Lockdown on Homeworking in the United Kingdom

Darja Reuschke and Alan Felstead

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Background

Working at or from home was slowly, but steadily, increasing before the COVID-19 crisis (Felstead and Henseke, 2017). The Office for National Statistics (ONS) reported that of the 32.6 million in employment in 2019 an estimated 1.7 million people mainly worked at home (ONS, 2020a). This corresponds to approximately 5.2% of the workforce. However, more people worked occasionally rather than mainly or always from home. Measured in these terms, around 4.0 million or 12.3% of the workforce was estimated to have worked from home for at least some of the time in 2019 (ONS, 2020a). This suggests that before the lockdown homeworking was not 'normal' working practice for many workers. Nevertheless, the prevalence of homeworking differed substantially between employees and the self-employed with the self-employed accounting for almost two-thirds of homeworkers in the UK (ONS, 2014).

Research on homeworking before the Coronavirus outbreak also suggests that the ability to work from home is highly dependent on information and communication technologies (Burchell et al., 2020) and hence varies across sectors and occupations. Jobs in financial, professional and technical services are more likely to be done at home as communication with clients, for example, can be done virtually. In contrast, low-skilled and high service-intensive work is more reliant on face-to-face contact and is therefore less likely to be carried out remotely (Felstead and Henseke, 2017).

With the outbreak of COVID-19 and the subsequent lockdown, concerns have been raised about the mental well-being implications of homeworking, especially those who have had little experience of working in this way. This briefing note focusses on the effect of the Coronavirus lockdown in the UK on the extent and intensity of homeworking, and its relationship with mental well-being. Furthermore, we use new survey data that allow us to identify 'new' homeworkers and 'established' homeworkers and compare their levels of mental well-being.

Data

The findings presented in this briefing note are based on the UK Household Longitudinal Study (UKHLS, also known as 'Understanding Society'). The UKHLS started in 2009/10 when 40,000 households were first interviewed. All members of the same household, provided they are 16 and over, are re-interviewed on an annual basis. All of those who were interviewed in at least one of the last two waves of the UKHLS (2017-18 or 2018-19) and were aged 16 years and older in April 2020 were invited to take part in an additional COVID-19 Study. This was developed in order to provide a better understanding of the social and economic impact of the Coronavirus outbreak in the UK (Institute for Social and Economic Research, 2020).

The new COVID-19 Study is carried out monthly. We use the first round of the survey which consists of interviews carried out between the 24th April and the 30th April 2020 and therefore covers the first month of the lockdown (Institute for Social and Economic Research, 2020). All interviews were conducted online. This was a period where people had to stay at home and were only allowed to leave their home for essential trips or if they could not work at home. The COVID-19 questionnaire captured whether people worked at home: always, often, sometimes or never in the four weeks before they were interviewed (i.e. during the lockdown). Moreover, people were asked about how often they worked at home in January and February 2020 using the same response scale. These two questions allow comparisons to be made between those who worked at home before and during the lockdown ('established' homeworkers) with those who did not work at home immediately before the lockdown but were doing so in April 2020 (we refer to these as 'new' homeworkers).

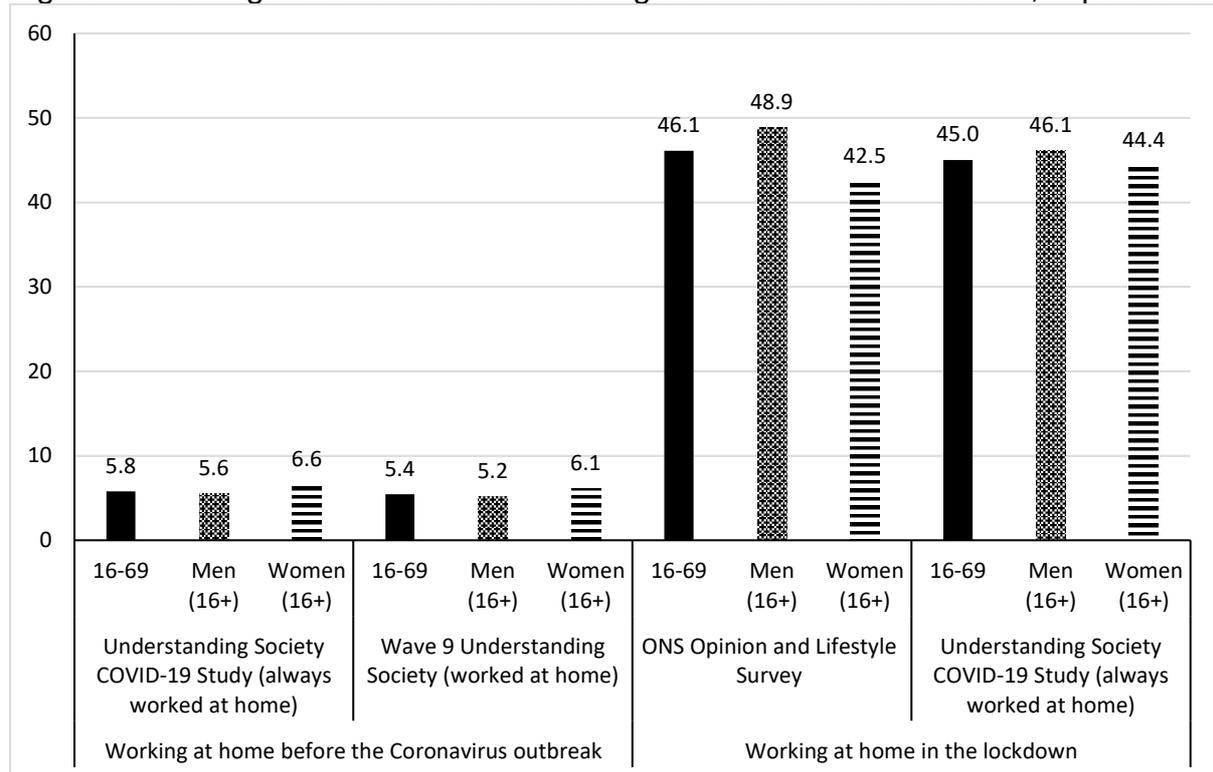
Of the 17,452 people 16 years and older who took part in the UKHLS COVID-19 Study, 10,104 people supplied information on whether they worked at home or not in April and, if so, to what extent. However, at the time of the interview some respondents were either furloughed or did not work any hours at all. For this briefing note, then, we focus on the 6,837 workers who were aged 16-69, worked at least one hour a week, were not furloughed and provided information on their homeworking status in April 2020. Of these 6,833 provided information on the extent to which they worked at home both before and during the lockdown, thereby allowing us to identify 'new' and 'established' homeworkers.

The extent of homeworking before and during the lockdown

Figure 1 compares the prevalence of homeworking before the lockdown with its prevalence at the start of the lockdown. For the pre-lockdown figures, we compare those who carried out all of their work at home in January/February 2020 according to the UKHLS COVID-19 Study with who mainly worked at home in the wave 9 interview of the UKHLS (in 2017-18). For the lockdown figures, we report the proportion of workers between 16-69 of age in the UKHLS COVID-19 Study who reported that they exclusively worked at home. The ONS Opinion and Lifestyle Survey (ONS, 2020b) is used as a comparison. It ran between 27 March to 6 April 2020 and asked: "In the past seven days, have you worked from home because of the Coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak?"

The extent of homeworking in the UKHLS COVID-19 Study is very similar to the ONS figure, although the gender difference is more pronounced in the latter. Together these figures suggest that just under half of the workforce (excluding furloughed workers or workers who still had a job but did not work) worked at home at the beginning of the lockdown with a slightly higher proportion of men than women doing so. This gender difference supports earlier homeworking research showing that more men than women were able to work at home if they chose, but they were least likely to take up the opportunity (Felstead et al., 2002). As a result, before the lockdown homeworking was slightly more prevalent amongst women than men.

Figure 1. Working at home before and during the Coronavirus lockdown, in per cent



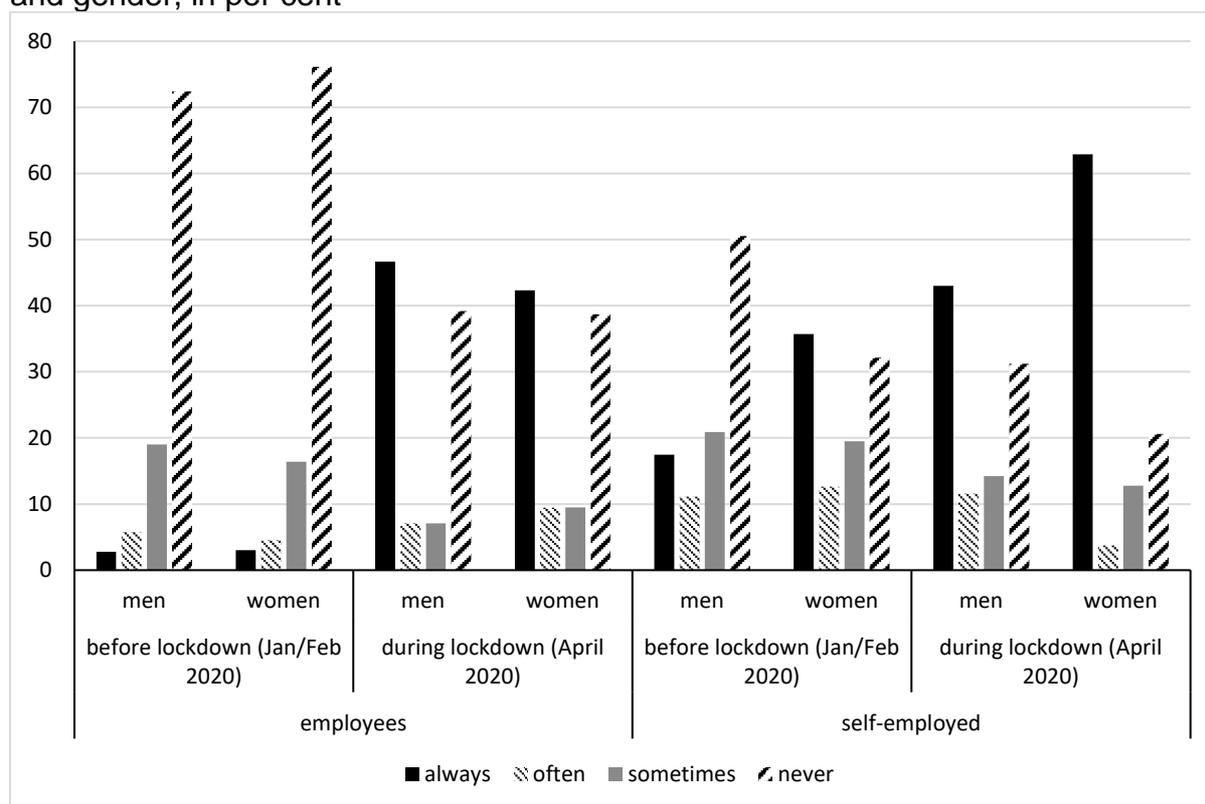
Note: Weighted data. For comparison, figures from the COVID-19 Study of the Understanding Society are reported for those who were in work during the lockdown and reported to have worked always from home. Data before the outbreak refer to January/February 2020. The question on homeworking during the outbreak referred to the past four weeks which fell for all respondents entirely into the lockdown period. The ONS Opinion Lifestyle survey asked those who worked whether they worked from home in the past seven days because of the Coronavirus outbreak. From Wave 9 of the annual interview of the Understanding Society those are selected who worked 'at home'.

The intensity of homeworking during and before the lockdown

Figure 2 shows that the increase in homeworking has been most dramatic for employees. Homeworking amongst the self-employed was more common before the Coronavirus pandemic, although even here its prevalence has increased substantially.

Amongst employees, homeworking was a minority sport before the lockdown. Only around 3% of male and female employees always worked at home immediately before the lockdown compared to a much higher proportion of the self-employed. Furthermore, when employees worked from home, they did so on a sometimes basis, suggesting that before the lockdown they frequently commuted to their employer's premises and/or other locations.

Figure 2. Working at home before and during the lockdown by employment status and gender, in per cent



Note: Weighted data. 16-69-year olds who were working both in Jan/Feb 2020 and in April 2020. For April 2020, we include only those who worked at least one hour in the reference week. Employment status is self-reported. We exclude a small minority who reported that they had two or more jobs with a different employment status.

During the lockdown, the proportion of those who always worked at home increased strongest amongst male employees, albeit from a very low base. Consequently, by April 2020 male employees who worked exclusively at home had overtaken the proportion of male self-employed who reported working all of their time at home (47% versus 43%). This is an unprecedented turn around in fortunes and one that has never been seen since data on homeworking were first collected by the Office for National Statistics in 1981 (ONS, 2014; Felstead, 2012). The increase in female employees always working at home was similarly rapid – up from 3% to 42%. Homeworking among the self-employed also rose, but from a higher base. For example, the proportion of self-employed women always working at home leapt from 36% before the lockdown to 63% by the end of April 2020.

Among both employees and the self-employed, men and women reduced the amount of time they ‘sometimes’ worked at home. This is mainly due, particularly among employees, to the movement of all work into the home. For example, 73% of employees who worked sometimes from home before the lockdown (in January/February 2020) worked always at home at the beginning of the lockdown. However, not all of those who worked from home during the lockdown did so all of the time with levels of working often or sometimes at home remaining relatively high.

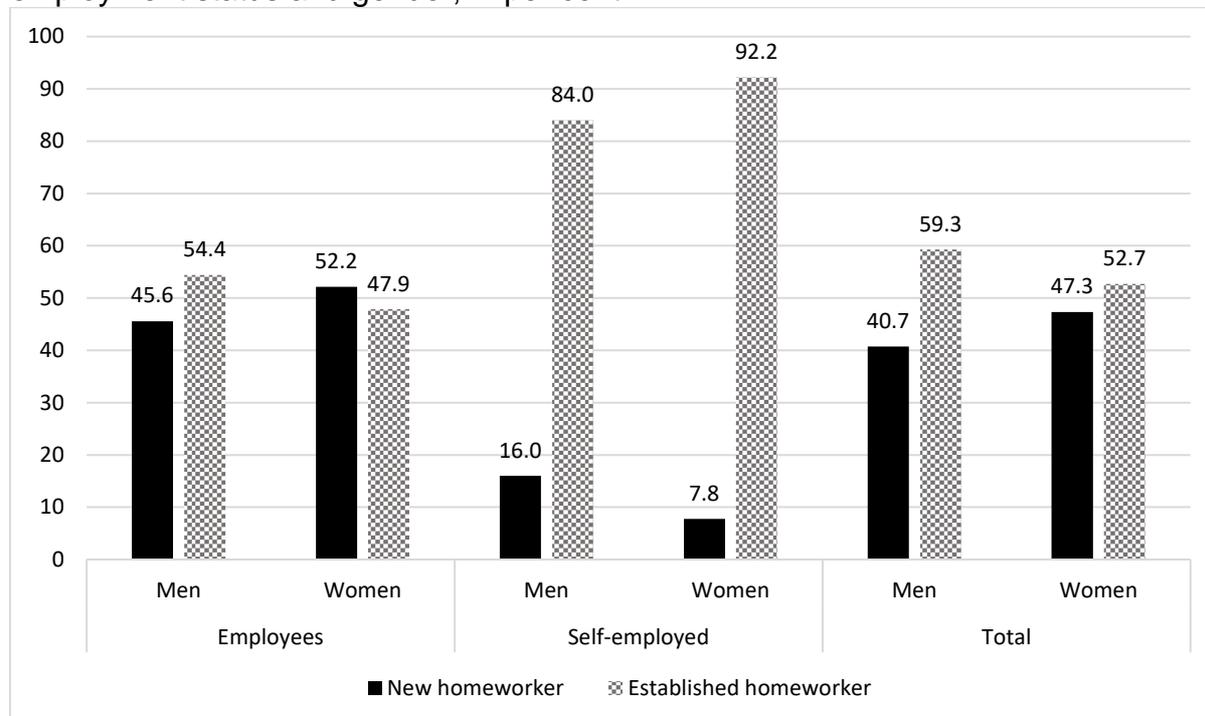
However, it should be noted that many workers did not work at home at all during the lockdown. This applies to 39% of employees and 27% of the self-employed.

The ‘new’ homeworking phenomenon

Almost half (45%) of the workforce exclusively worked at home in the first month of the lockdown – an unprecedented increase in homeworking compared to an estimated 5% of workers who worked mainly at home in 2019 (ONS, 2020a). Furthermore, just below two-thirds of workers (63%) worked from home at least some of the time during the lockdown compared to an estimated 12.3% in 2019 (ONS, 2020a). This suggests that a substantial proportion of those who worked at home during the lockdown had not worked at home before. We therefore take a closer look at these ‘new’ homeworkers.

We identify ‘new’ homeworkers in the UKHLS COVID-19 Study as those who worked always, often or sometimes at home in April 2020 but did not do so in January or February 2020. This does not mean that these workers had no homeworking experience before the Coronavirus outbreak in the UK. However, these workers experienced a sudden change in where they worked either side of the lockdown. In contrast, we define ‘established’ homeworkers as those who had always, often or sometimes worked from home both in January/February and in April 2020.

Figure 3. Homeworkers in April 2020 by new and established homeworkers, employment status and gender, in per cent



Note: Weighted data. 16-69-year olds who were working both in Jan/Feb 2020 and in April 2020. For April 2020, we include only those who worked at least one hour in the reference week and were not furloughed. Employment status is self-reported. We exclude a small minority who reported that they had two or more jobs with a different employment status.

Figure 3 shows the distribution of new and established homeworkers by employment status and gender. The data show that 44% of those who worked at home for at least some of the time during the lockdown (always, often or sometimes) were new to this way of working.

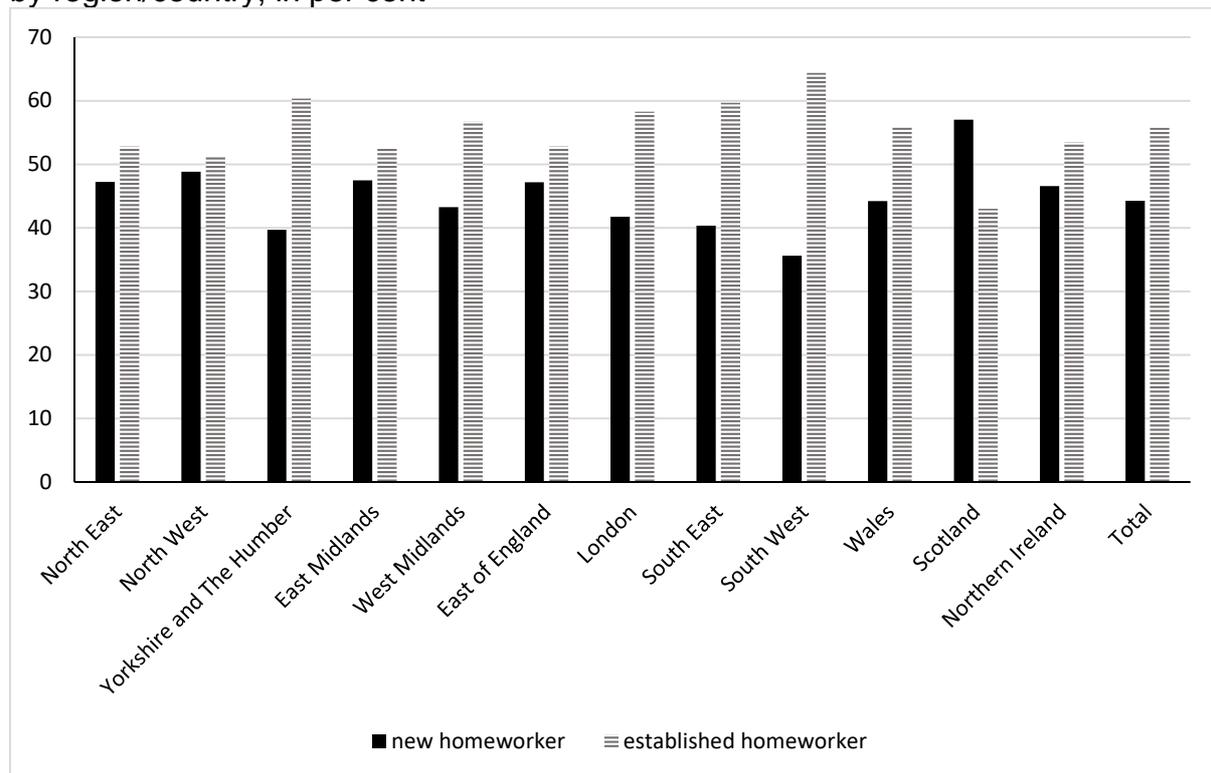
Female workers were more likely to be new to homeworking than their male counterparts (47% vs. 41%), and new homeworkers were mostly employees. Over half of female homeworking employees (52%) were new to working at home. This proportion is slightly lower amongst male employees as more of them worked some of the time at home before the lockdown began (cf. Figure 2). The self-employed already had high homeworking rates even before the Coronavirus pandemic began. This explains why only a small proportion of them were new to homeworking during the lockdown. The proportion of new homeworkers is particularly low amongst the female self-employed.

Before the Coronavirus pandemic, the prevalence of homeworking varied across regions/countries in the UK. Workers living in the South East were the most likely to work from home. London and the South West had also higher homeworking rates than the national average, while homeworking in Northern Ireland, Scotland or the North East was less prevalent (ONS 2020a). This is likely to be related to regional industrial structures with industries most suitable for homeworking (financial and professional services) having higher concentrations in Greater London and the South East of England. We would therefore expect spatial variation in the proportion of new homeworkers amongst the homeworking population during the lockdown. Figure 4 confirms this prediction.

We find lower proportions of new homeworkers in the South West, South East and London. However, we also find a relatively low proportion of new homeworkers compared to established homeworkers in Yorkshire and the Humber. This could be related to employment in administrative services, public administration and education which are taken together higher than the national average. The highest proportion of new homeworkers is in Scotland. Again, this is likely to be explained by its industrial composition and, in particular, its below average rates of employment in professional, scientific and technical services, information and communication, administrative services and education, sectors where homeworking has historically been strong¹.

¹ Data on Yorkshire and the Humber and Scotland refer to March 2020 and are taken from Nomis: <https://www.nomisweb.co.uk/reports/lmp/gor/2013265923/report.aspx> (accessed on 1st July 2020).

Figure 4. Proportion of new homeworkers amongst homeworkers during the lockdown by region/country, in per cent



Note: Weighted data. 16-69-year olds who were working both in Jan/Feb 2020 and in April 2020. For April 2020, we include only those who worked at least one hour in the reference week and were not furloughed.

Subjective well-being of new and established homeworkers

Previous work on remote working has found that homeworking may both relieve and increase stress for the individual worker (Menezes and Kelliher, 2011). Mental health and the experience of distress can be investigated for new and established homeworkers in the Understanding Society COVID-19 Study using the General Health Questionnaire (GHQ-12). The GHQ-12 is a well-established measure of subjective well-being, and the advantage for our purposes is that it is a relatively broad measure of people’s mental health status and how it differs from its usual level. The response scales are comparative, referring to situations that are, for example, better than usual, same as usual, less than usual or much less than usual. These four response scales are used for 12 situational questions. The responses given are usually summed up into the so-called GHQ-12 score which has values from zero (the least distressed or most happy) to 36 (the most distressed) (Cox, B.D et al. 1987). Scores near 36 are rare and would indicate clinical level of depression. Healthy individuals usually score between 10-13 on this scale (Gardner and Oswald, 2007, 51). The mean in our COVID-19 sample of workers aged 16-69 (excluding those who were furloughed or worked zero hours) is 12.3 with a range of 0-36.

Banks and Xu (2020) used the same survey data together with annual interviews of the Understanding Society. They found that mental well-being as measured by the GHQ-12 score fell substantially during the lockdown. However, we find that the growth

of homeworking does not seem to be associated with this fall. We find few differences in our sample between new homeworkers and established homeworkers in their overall GHQ-12 scores (Table 1). Employees who were new to homeworking reported slightly higher scores (i.e. lower subjective well-being) than established homeworkers. However, this difference is not statistically significant when analysed by gender. Even in the aggregate, the mental well-being of the self-employed varied little according to previous experience of homeworking.

Table 1. GHQ-12 Likert score of new and established homeworkers, total and by employment status and gender

	New homeworkers	Established homeworkers	t-test: t value (p value)
Employees	12.75	12.23	2.788 (p=0.003)
Self-employed	11.98	12.34	-0.433 (p=0.332)
All workers	12.71	12.23	2.710 (p= 0.003)
Men			
Employees	11.38	11.14	0.941 (p=0.173)
Self-employed	11.21	11.55	-0.347 (p=0.364)
Women			
Employees	13.53	13.14	1.503 (p=0.066)
Self-employed	13.38	13.11	0.183 (p=0.427)

Note: Understanding Society COVID-19 Study. 16-69-year olds who were working both in Jan/Feb 2020 and in April 2020. For April 2020, we include only those who worked at least one hour in the reference week and were not furloughed.

Employment status is self-reported. In the breakdown by employment status, we exclude a small minority who reported that they had two or more jobs with a different employment status.

There are some differences, though, when single dimensions of subjective well-being from the GHQ are examined. These differences are greater among men, but we find little variation among women.

Some of the subjective well-being dimensions for male homeworkers varied according to their prior experience of working at home. For example, new homeworking men were more likely to report than established male homeworkers that they felt they played a less or much less useful role than they had in the past (20% versus 15%) and were able to concentrate less or much less than usual (32% versus 26%). Moreover, a higher proportion of male workers who were new to working at home reported that they were enjoying day-to-day activities much less than usual compared to men who had previous homeworking experience (13% versus 9%).

On the other hand, we also find some evidence that among men, new homeworkers did slightly better than established homeworkers. For example, proportionately more male new homeworkers reported that they had no problems in overcoming difficulties (42% versus 38%). Moreover, a slightly higher proportion of new male homeworkers felt that they could concentrate much better than usual compared to established homeworking men (11% versus 8%).

In general, women reported lower mental well-being than men – and the pandemic has further widened the gap between men’s and women’s mental well-being (Banks

and Xu, 2020). This gap is reflected in our data (Table 1). There is little variation, however, in how women reported their mental health status by whether they were new or established homeworkers. That said, we find two domains where there were differences. New homeworking women reported more often than women with experiences of homeworking that they felt unhappier and more depressed than usual (40% versus 32%) and less confident (28% versus 22%).

We did not find much variation in the descriptive analysis between new homeworkers and established homeworkers in five out of twelve dimensions: loss of sleep, feeling under constant strain, ability to face problems, believe themselves to be worthless and general happiness. This supports the finding that the compound score of mental health (GHQ-12) did not vary between new homeworkers and established homeworkers during the first month of the lockdown. Differences in the mental well-being of new and established homeworkers were few and far between. However, there are some indications working at home may have negative effects, especially among new homeworkers who find it more difficult to concentrate, are more prone to depression and are less likely to enjoy carrying out day-to-day activities.

Conclusion

This brief has provided evidence of the steep increase in homeworking during the first month of lockdown in the UK. The sudden change in the level of homeworking was most striking amongst employees. Working always at home was rare amongst employees before the Coronavirus pandemic. Yet, one month into the 'Great Lockdown', 44% employees were exclusively working at home. However, moving all work into the home was less of a dramatic change for the self-employed, especially for the female self-employed, who more often than employees were used to work always at home even before the pandemic even started. However, homeworking rocketed among employees during the first month of the lockdown.

Industries with a longer history of remote working – for example, financial and professional services – tend to have a higher concentration in the South East and Greater London. As a result, the prevalence of homeworking varied spatially across UK regions/countries before the lockdown. Consequently, as shown in this brief, the growth of homeworking has varied across the UK with substantially higher proportions of new homeworkers in regions/countries with previously relatively low rates of homeworking (e.g. Scotland).

Across the population mental well-being fell during the lockdown. However, the sudden movement of work into to home appears to have contributed little to the fall in subjective well-being, especially among women who have experienced the greatest falls in well-being (Banks and Xu, 2020). Although homeworkers with experience of homeworking before the lockdown may have more resources (e.g., space and equipment) to work at home, this appears to have done little to alleviate the downward pressure on mental well-being felt across the population.

The data analysed in this report, however, only covers the first month of lockdown. While the mental well-being of new homeworkers is on aggregate much the same as those with more experience of homeworking, this situation may change the longer people have to live and work in the same space as other household members and

cope with the pressures of home schooling and childcare. It will therefore be important to monitor changes in the mental well-being of homeworkers – using the surveys such as the Understanding Society COVID-19 Study – and track what effect increased levels of homeworking is having on workers' productivity.

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