

CHE Research Summary 2

Working during COVID-19: the impact on people with mental health disabilities

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The COVID-19 pandemic imposed major changes to the way we lived and worked as the UK entered lockdown. While lockdowns affected everybody, this research shows how they had a bigger impact on people with chronic health conditions and disabilities.

People with certain pre-existing chronic health conditions were at particular risk of serious illness or death if infected with COVID-19. Additionally, the wider effects of the pandemic, for example increased isolation and uncertainty had a significant impact on well-being, particularly for people who already had some common mental health (MH) disorders. The lockdown measures introduced in March 2020 led to many businesses (e.g. non-essential retail, accommodation and catering services) having to stop trading altogether, while others (e.g. passenger transport and childcare) had to scale down their operations substantially. Most businesses also had to put in place protective measures and reasonable adjustments to enable people to continue to work.

Using data from the Labour Force Survey we compare what happened to the employment experiences of those with and without disabilities in the UK through this period of severe economic disruption, with a focus on MH disability. We show how

labour market disability gaps (e.g. the difference in employment rates for people with and without disabilities) changed from before the pandemic through successive lockdowns until late 2021.

Before the pandemic, the rate of employment for people with MH disabilities was lower than for those without MH disabilities, but the gap between the two had reduced over time. Our results show that COVID-19 temporarily interrupted the narrowing of this gap. Workers with a disability (and especially those with a MH disability) were more likely to report being away from their usual place of work (reflecting furlough) than workers without a disability before the pandemic, and this gap widened substantially after the first lockdown. Similarly, workers with disabilities were more likely to report working reduced hours for COVID-related reasons. Investigation of the underlying causes of these differences revealed that people with MH conditions were concentrated in jobs, occupations and sectors that were particularly badly affected by COVID-19. The main explanations for this were being in part-time work and working in caring, leisure and other service occupations (more likely for those with MH conditions) and being in managerial and professional occupations (where they are less likely to work).

The main effects of the pandemic on work appear to have been temporary for people with disabilities. However, the employment gap that existed before COVID-19 remains, with those with MH conditions faring the worst. While temporary absence from work may have helped to protect vulnerable workers from the worst health effects of COVID-19, it can weaken attachment to the labour market and increase the chances that people do not return to work in the longer run. This also affects finances as absences were often accompanied by reduced pay (especially for workers with MH conditions). The concentration of workers with MH disabilities into sectors particularly sensitive to consumer demand and part-time work implies that they will always be vulnerable to economic downturns. Policies should aim to provide appropriate training for workers with MH disabilities to ensure they are ready to take advantage of opportunities to work in a restructured post-pandemic, post-Brexit economy.

This research was funded by the Health Foundation under their Social and Economic Value of Health programme, Award No 751630.

The published version of this research can be found [here](#).

Written evidence based on early findings from this work presented to the House of Commons Work and Pensions Select Committee on the disability employment gap can be found [here](#).

April 2023