

Furlough 'stemmed the tide' of poor mental health during UK lockdown, study suggests

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Furloughing workers, as well as reducing worker hours, has helped to stem the tide of mental health problems expected to result from the coronavirus crisis, according to a team of sociologists led by the University of Cambridge.

A new study suggests that UK workers who were furloughed or moved from full- to part-time hours during April and May had around the same risk for poor [mental health](#) as those who kept working full-time.

However, people who lost all paid work were twice as likely to fall into an "at risk" category for poor mental health, compared to those furloughed or still working any number of hours.

In fact, data from May suggests that well over half of those who lost all work during the COVID-19 crisis are at risk of mental health problems.

Researchers led by the Cambridge-based Employment Dosage Project say the UK government must encourage employers to "cut hours not people" as furlough schemes wrap up, or face significantly worse levels of mental health across the population as unemployment soars.

They argue that the UK should emulate 'short-time working' schemes used by many European nations. These schemes reduce and share out working hours to keep far more people in some kind of employment during a crisis.

"Holding on to some paid work is vital to wellbeing during the pandemic," said Prof Brendan Burchell from Cambridge's Department of Sociology. "We can see that both short working hours and furlough job retention schemes have helped protect against the deterioration of mental health."

"Labour market interventions such as short-time working are more affordable than furloughing, and much less likely to cause lasting damage to the UK's mental health than the all-or-nothing job shedding currently taking place," Burchell said.

"As well as the individual misery caused, the costs of poor mental health to the UK's productivity and health service are vast, and cannot be afforded at this critical time. We urge the Chancellor to tell employers to cut hours not people."

The latest research involved academics from the universities of Cambridge, Salford, Leeds and Manchester, and is now online as a working paper from Cambridge's Centre for Business Research.

The team analysed data from the Understanding Society COVID-19 Study, looking at the relation between changes in employment status and work hours, furlough scheme involvement, and the likelihood of mental health problems as measured by a 12-item questionnaire. High risk of mental health was defined (as is conventional) by scoring positively on four or more symptoms on the GHQ-12 scale of mental health.

The study questions covered symptoms of depression and anxiety, such as sleeping problems, and used a point-based scale that enabled researchers to create a "score" for the risk of suffering with mental health problems. A sample of 7,149 people from across the UK featured in the research.

The researchers used statistical models to take into account factors such as household income, allowing them to see just the effects of employment and work on mental health during lockdown, regardless of wealth or status.

Using the latest data covering May 2020, the team found that 28% of those who remained in fulltime employment returned scores suggesting they might be at risk of poor mental health. Equally, 27% of those on furlough returned "at risk" scores, and 30% of those whose hours had been reduced from full to part time.

But for those who lost their jobs during the coronavirus crisis some 58% returned scores suggesting they were in the "at risk" category for mental health problems. The May data has now been added to the working paper along with an initial analysis of data from April, which showed a similar effect.

"The furlough schemes are largely aimed at the financial fallout of the pandemic, but they also appear to have stemmed the tide of mental health problems many experts are anticipating," said Burchell.

Loss of earnings only explains a small part of the large mental health deficit associated with unemployment, say the researchers. They argue that "incidental" aspects of employment—social connection, structure, shared goals, and so on—are just as important for wellbeing.

Last year, the Employment Dosage Project published a study showing that just one day of paid work a week is all people need to get a major boost to their mental health (with little psychological benefit to working further hours).

"The lesson for government strategy is clear," added Burchell. "Keep everyone in some paid work where possible, with population health as

the priority. Even one day a week will keep more of us psychologically healthier in these volatile times."

More information: Cut Hours, Not People: No Work, Furlough, Short Hours and Mental Health During the Covid-19 Pandemic in the UK.

www.cbr.cam.ac.uk/fileadmin/user_upload/papers/wp521.pdf

Provided by University of Cambridge

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