

# Study reveals 'drastic changes' in daily routines during UK lockdowns

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Some spent an extra hour a day on chores and childcare during lockdowns, while others got an added daily hour of solo leisure time—and most of us reduced time spent on paid work by around half an hour a day.

This is according to a new study of "time-use diaries" kept by 766 UK citizens from across the social spectrum during three points in time: the last month of normality, the first [lockdown](#), and the last lockdown in March of this year.

Economists from the University of Cambridge and Queen Mary University of London collected data that charted time spent on activities during both typical work and nonwork days to map changes to the rhythm of life for millions.

The study, published today in the journal *PLOS ONE*, found marked differences between genders, particularly parents of young children, and that increases in odd working hours and downtime spent alone were detrimental to wellbeing.

"The lockdowns resulted in drastic changes to patterns of time use, disrupting routines and blurring the distinction between work and family life," said co-author Dr. Ines Lee from Cambridge's Faculty of Economics.

"We have hopefully seen the end of lockdowns, but our study holds lessons for hybrid working, as splitting time between home and office becomes more common."

"Employers should promote better work-life balance in the post-pandemic world. This could include limits on emails outside working hours, home-working schedules that suit parents, and options for younger workers left isolated by reduced in-person networking," said Lee.

The researchers looked at amounts of time each individual spent on activities in four broad categories: employment (excluding commutes); "housework" (from shopping to childcare); leisure (e.g. hobbies or home entertainment); subsistence (meals, sleeping, [personal care](#)).

While previous studies have focused on the initial lockdown, this is one of the first to examine the effects of repeated COVID-19 containment measures on our lives and routines.

For those employed before and during lockdowns\*, people with at least one [young child](#) spent an average of 43 fewer minutes a day on their paid job in the first lockdown, and 32 fewer minutes in the third, compared to pre-pandemic.

For those without young children it was an average decrease of 28 minutes and 22 minutes a day on paid work respectively.

Women with young children spent around an hour less on paid work a day than men and women without young children. This was mainly a reduction in time spent on actual work tasks rather than, for example, meetings.

During the first lockdown, the average time women spent on housework increased by 28 minutes a day, while for men the average time spent on subsistence activities (e.g. sleeping and eating) increased by 30 minutes. By 2021 these changes had evened out.

Life with small children during this year's lockdown meant an extra hour of housework a day over pre-pandemic levels. Mothers of young kids did 67 more minutes of housework a day than fathers. Only women saw an increase in cooking and cleaning (time spent on caring duties was spread across genders).

The study suggests that parents often forfeited leisure time. Living with young kids was associated with a drop in leisure activities of almost an hour a day in both lockdowns—and income levels made no difference to this loss of downtime.

For those without young kids, leisure time increased—but much of it was spent alone. By the third lockdown, people with no small children had around an extra hour of solitary leisure time a day over pre-pandemic levels.

However, in terms of quality—the self-reported "enjoyment" of given activities—this solo leisure time felt less pleasurable during the last lockdown than it had prior to the pandemic.

The third lockdown also saw around 20% of individuals spend more time working unusual hours (outside 0830-1730) compared to the pre-pandemic period, which reduced the reported enjoyment of their day overall.

Those earning £5k a month or more, worked almost two extra hours a day than people earning less than £1k a month by the last lockdown. High earners also spent less time on subsistence activities during both lockdowns.

Overall, the third lockdown felt a bit more miserable than the first, according to the research.

While there was little change in the enjoyment of various activities in the early days of COVID, with men even reporting slightly higher "quality" of time during lockdown one, by March of this year enjoyment of activities was around 5% lower than pre-pandemic levels across the board.

Dr. Eileen Tipoe, co-author from Queen Mary University of London, said: "It is no surprise that having to do more work outside of typical working hours meant that people were substantially unhappier during the third lockdown.

"And it was concerning to find that women, and especially those with young children, were disproportionately affected by lockdown—for example being less likely to be employed and the fact that only women spent more time cooking and cleaning."

\* Before COVID arrived, 86% of the sample was employed, but this fell to 63% in the first lockdown and 74% in the third. Mothers of [young children](#) were significantly less likely to be employed than fathers by the third lockdown.

**More information:** Changes in the quantity and quality of time use during the COVID-19 lockdowns in the UK: Who is the most affected? *PLOS ONE* (2021). [DOI: 10.1371/journal.pone.0258917](https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0258917)

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