Key workers are lowest paid with poorer job qualities, study finds
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A study led by Dr. Matt Barnes, Senior Lecturer from the Department of Sociology, suggests that key worker jobs including check-out operators, care workers, food operatives and security guards receive lower pay and experience lower job quality than the average worker.


The data comes from the Labour Force Survey (LFS), a government funded quarterly representative survey used to measure employment, unemployment and economic inactivity in the UK to inform social, economic and employment policy.

For the study, Dr. Barnes compared salaries alongside individual job quality indicators of each key worker profession. Indicators included whether they are permanent members of staff, on zero hour contracts, work weekends or anti-social hours, part of a trade union, how often they fall ill at work and whether they have been offered any training in the previous three months.

Many of the key worker jobs which were chosen for the research are jobs which would require face-to-face interaction with other people during the pandemic.

Each key worker job was then compared against the average job quality indicators of all employees.

"Our research shows that the jobs which have been identified as having the highest value during the pandemic are often the lowest paid with higher negative job quality indicators," said Dr. Barnes.

"Check-out operators, care workers, food operatives, security guards, and bus drivers are just some of the occupations that earn below the average employee, some well below, and also experience a number of negative working conditions, particularly regarding anti-social work hours."

Women and BAME people over-represented in roles with higher negative job quality indicators

Looking individually at certain key worker professions, Dr. Barnes research supports the argument that women and people from ethnic minority backgrounds are over represented in jobs with higher negative job quality indicators.

Out of those surveyed, 84 percent of care workers and home carers were women while 49 percent of them worked weekends and 61 percent regularly working evenings or nights.

According to the research 85 percent of primary school teachers, 98 percent of nursery assistants and 71 percent of retail cashiers were also women.

Focusing on security guards, 31 percent of those
surveyed were from ethnic minority backgrounds and two thirds regularly worked evenings or nights.

The majority of the key workers sampled said that they have no membership with trade unions or dedicated staff associations.

Dr. Barnes said: "This research highlights that pay is only one part of the discussion on how we improve key worker jobs. There are many factors revealed by the negative job quality indicators that could change too, or play a role in discussions of how key workers are rewarded for the work they do.

"A lot of the key worker jobs have elements that make them worse than average, however some of them are far worse, and those roles tend to be the more female dominated spaces of work with higher numbers of people from ethnic minority backgrounds.

"Usually there are trade offs with work, for example in the way that higher paid jobs are often more stressful, however with these key worker jobs our research highlights that low pay and negative job quality indicators sit together—plus these workers are being asked to do their job in a pandemic.

"These findings add to the current focus on the work and health conditions of key workers, and contribute to a broader policy debate about revaluing the role of key workers in society moving forward from the pandemic."

More information: The job quality of key worker employees: Analysis of the Labour Force Survey. openaccess.city.ac.uk/id/eprint/24254/

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