

Work, Stress and COVID-19 in Northern Ireland

Rosellen Roche, Erin Early, Joel Manzi and Paula Devine

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic was both an historic and unprecedented time that led to a global health and economic crisis. Work patterns and employment practices were, and continue to be, changed by the pandemic and its associated lockdowns. The World Economic Forum (WEF) reported that the pandemic caused 114 million people to lose their jobs in 2020 alone (WEF, 2021). While the WEF notes that millions have returned to employment, work-life balance is now a key topic as employers and employees practice hybrid workplace models.

As elsewhere, people in Northern Ireland (NI) have experienced significant changes and challenges to their emotional, social and working lives since the first lockdown began in March 2020. There were 5,020 confirmed redundancies in 2020, compared to 3,200 in the previous year (NISRA, 2023). The Northern Ireland Wellbeing Dashboard confirmed that for those aged 16 years and over, not only were life satisfaction scores at their lowest in 2020-2021, anxiety levels were at their highest since 2014 (NISRA, 2022). For those remaining in

work, challenges and changes to work and personal life were at the forefront of daily living throughout the pandemic.

The 2021 *Northern Ireland Life and Times (NILT) Survey* asked a sample of 1,397 adults aged 18 years or over living in NI about their experiences of work, health and social challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic. This Research Update explores these areas according to respondents' gender, occupational status, and essential worker status. Fieldwork took place between October and December 2021.

Work patterns and responsibilities

Changes to employment status and work patterns were a major consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic. The 2021 NILT survey asked respondents if they were in paid employment at any point since the start of the first COVID-19 lockdown in March 2020. Two thirds (66%) of respondents said that they were, including 64 per cent of males and 68 per cent of females. More than 80 per

cent of those aged between 25 and 54 years were in paid employment during that time, compared to 64 per cent of those aged 18 to 24 years or 55 to 64 years, and 17 per cent of those aged 65 years or over.

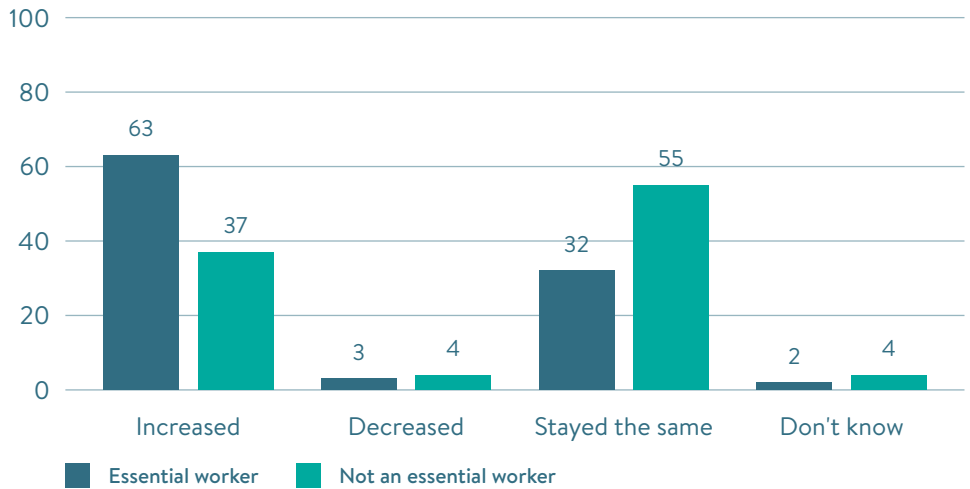
Those respondents in paid work were asked about changes in their working patterns since the start of the lockdown in March 2020. One in five of those in paid work reported no change to their working patterns, either working from home or in a workplace. However, the changes experienced by other respondents included wearing Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) at their workplace (35%), working from home when required (33%), furlough (14%), losing their job (3%) or being placed on temporary unpaid leave for a time (1%).

Respondents in paid work were asked if they were considered to be an essential worker at any time by the government during the pandemic. Just over one half (55%) said that they were, and this represents over one third (36%) of all respondents. The most commonly

reported occupations were civil servant, teacher, nurse, social worker, doctor, classroom assistant, cleaner, and delivery driver.

Employment responsibilities were affected by the pandemic. Among those who were essential workers, 63 per cent reported that their job responsibilities increased compared to 32 per cent who reported their responsibilities stayed the same. Of those respondents who were not essential workers during the pandemic, just over half (55%) stated their job responsibilities stayed the same compared to 37 per cent that experienced an increase in responsibilities (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Changes in job responsibilities, by essential worker status (%)



Working from home

Respondents who reported that they had worked from home at some point since March 2020 were asked about their experiences of working from home. For many, there were benefits to this: 64 per cent found it nice to avoid travelling to work, 56 per cent felt that it was easier to manage their work/life balance, and 45 per cent liked that they did not have to take time off for deliveries or organising repairs. There was little sense that there were too many online meetings (21% thought this), or that online meetings are less productive than meeting face-to-face (16%). However, around one half of respondents working from home (52%) missed the social aspects of work.

Lockdowns led to school closures which altered family routines and

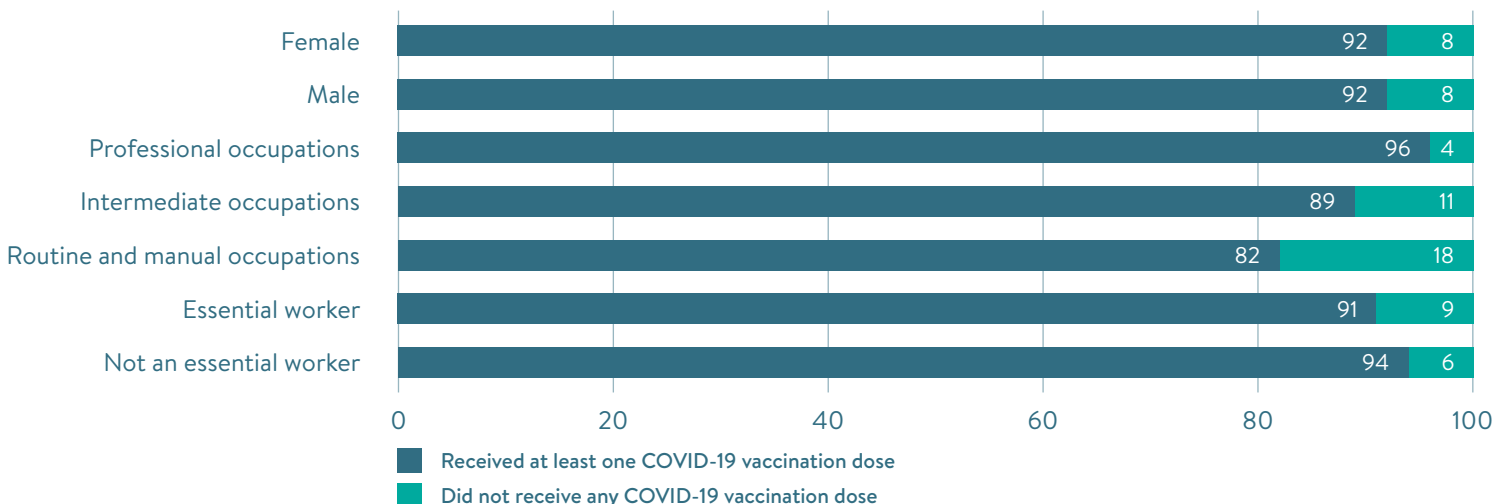
responsibilities, particularly for parents with school-aged children. Among those in employment working from home, 22 per cent said that they found it difficult to balance family/caring responsibilities and work. The proportion of female respondents identifying this issue was twice that of males: 30 per cent and 15 per cent respectively.

Vaccinations and health

The rollout of COVID-19 vaccinations in Northern Ireland began in December 2020 for the most vulnerable populations such as care home residents, and front-line health and social care workers. By the end of September 2021, an estimated 93 per cent of the adult population had been vaccinated at least once (Department of Health, 2021).

At the time of the NILT survey (October to December 2021), approximately three quarters of respondents (73%) reported that they had not had COVID-19, while 21 per cent had either tested positive for COVID-19, or had experienced symptoms but did not get tested. The majority of respondents (91%) received at least one dose of the vaccination. Figure 2 illustrates that the proportion of males and females, and essential/non-essential workers who received a vaccination was similar. However, there was some variation according to the socio-economic status of respondents. A higher proportion of respondents in higher managerial, administrative, and professional occupations received the vaccination (96%) compared to those in routine and manual occupations (82%).

Figure 2: COVID-19 vaccination status, by demographic characteristics (%)

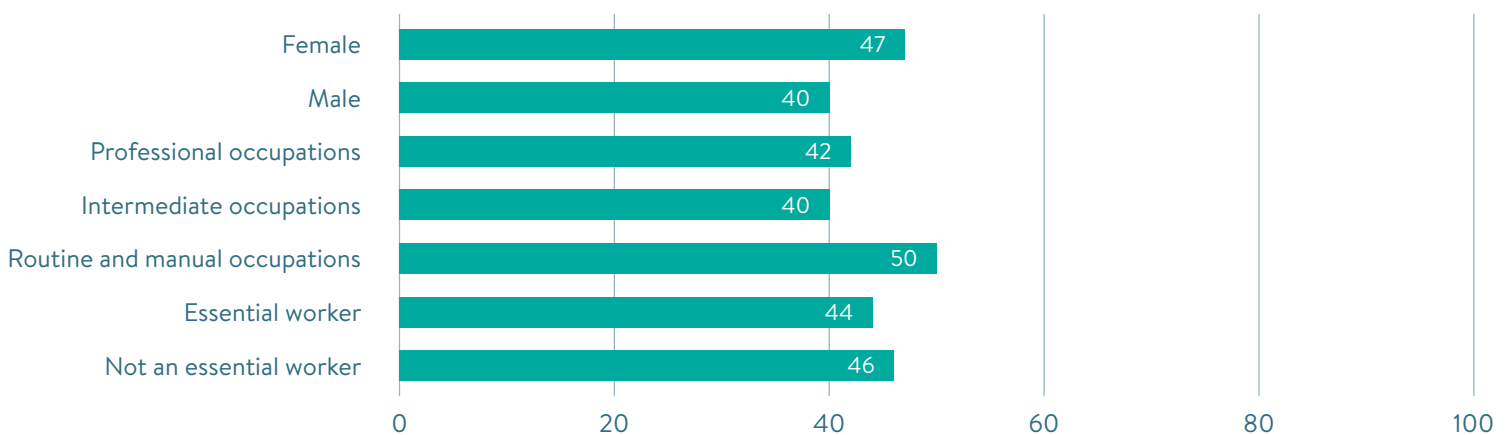


The pandemic led to national lockdowns that advised individuals to isolate from workplaces and publicly-shared services and spaces to reduce the spread of COVID-19. During this time, 43 per cent of NILT respondents reported that their physical health was worse during lockdowns compared to 16 per cent who reported better physical health during that time.

Figure 3 focuses on those respondents reporting negative changes in their health during lockdown. A higher proportion of females reported that their physical health got worse during lockdowns than males (47% compared to 40%). Those in routine/manual occupations were more likely than those in professional occupations to report that their physical health had got worse

during lockdowns (50% compared to 42%). Nearly half of respondents (46%) who were not essential workers felt that their physical health had become worse over lockdowns, and this was similar for those who were essential workers (44%).

Figure 3: Self-reported poorer physical health during lockdowns (%)



Mental health and stress

Changes to employment status, work patterns and caring responsibilities were experienced simultaneously during the pandemic, which affected the mental health and stresses experienced by individuals. Around one half of NILT respondents (51%) felt that their mental and emotional health got worse during the lockdowns, 37 per cent felt that it was the same as before, and 9 per cent thought that it had got better during this time. Those in paid employment were more likely to report that their mental and emotional health had got worse (54%) compared to those not in paid employment (45%). However, there was little variation between those considered as essential workers (53%) and those not considered as essential workers (56%).

Prior to the pandemic, 60 per cent of respondents who were in employment and attended their workplace found their place of work stressful, and this was higher among essential workers (64%) than among non-essential workers (55%). Among those continuing to attend their workplace during the pandemic, essential workers reported greater stress working

in their workplace than non-essential workers (77% compared to 57%). In addition, among those respondents who began to work from home during the pandemic, a higher proportion found it less stressful compared to their usual workplace (49% compared to 23% who found it more stressful).

Discussion

The NILT data provides a unique snapshot of life at the end of 2021, a year which was dominated by COVID-19. At the time of writing in early 2023, lockdowns (hopefully) have been relegated to history, and we start to come to terms with the fact that coronavirus is endemic, and that our lives will continue to adjust. However, the pandemic and our experience with lockdowns continue to affect our attitudes and behaviours in relation to our life and work. For example, working from home or hybrid approaches to work have become more of a norm, and many are happy with this change. The NILT data show that some respondents who were told to work from home during the height of the pandemic found working from home to be less stressful and easier to balance their

private and work lives. Contrastingly and importantly, those in essential jobs – under particular strain during the period of panic and lockdown in Northern Ireland – continued at their workplace and reported more stress at work than before the pandemic.

Multiple studies have shown a marked increase in stress amongst the essential workers, especially those in the health and social caring professions. Similar to the data collected in NILT, the NHS (National Health Service) Staff Survey 2020 reported that nearly 44 per cent of personnel reported being ill because of workplace stress (O’Dowd, 2021). While many other professions found the changes to the workplace welcome, those who were still required to go into the workplace, especially those with increased demands such as healthcare, noted a disconnect between their experience and those of their non-essential professional peers. As others were able to spend more time from home, achieve a better work-life balance, and spend more time with their household members, essential workers did not experience these same improvements in

their work routines and personal lives. In this disconnect, these essential workers reported more stress and dissatisfaction in the workplace that was not seen within the general population.

Public initiatives, such as the #ResearchVsCovid campaign, celebrate those who developed vital testing, treatments, vaccines and care across the United Kingdom and expresses

gratitude to those in the very sector that was put under so much strain during the periods of lockdown and serious illness. Government financial and other support is vital for sectors and workers affected by the pandemic. For example, the COVID Recovery Programme Employment and Skills Initiative, funded by the Department for Communities, provides grants for new or enhanced roles within specific sectors

Private and governmental sector employers can use what was a harrowing time to learn and grow opportunities that have stemmed from the recent crisis. Working with employees to find good solutions to strained work systems, stressful work environments and seeking the necessary support for those who experienced such stress is imperative.

Key Points:

- The survey fieldwork took place between October and December 2021.
- Two thirds of NILT respondents were in paid employment during lockdown, of which 55% were essential workers.
- 63% of essential workers said their job responsibilities had increased, compared to 37% of those not considered as essential.
- The benefits of working from home included the lack of travelling, and managing work/life balance.
- Half of respondents working from home missed the social aspects of work.
- 30% of females and 15% of males working from home found it difficult to balance family/caring responsibilities and work.
- 43% of respondents said that their physical health was worse during lockdowns.
- 51% thought that their mental and emotional health got worse during lockdowns.
- 77% of essential workers who continued at their workplace reported increased stress, compared with 57% of non-essential workers.

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Authors

Rosellen Roche is a physician and Professor of Social Epidemiology, Community and Disaster Medicine in the Department of Primary Care at the medical college at Ohio University in the USA. She has had over 20 years of ongoing research in the areas of stress, conflict and the community in Northern Ireland.

Erin Early is a Lecturer in Sociology at the School of Social Sciences, Education and Social Work, Queen's University Belfast. Her research interests are centred around social inequalities, particularly within education, health and the family.

Joel Manzi is a resident physician in the Department of Family and Community Medicine at the University of Alabama Medical System in the USA with an interest in public health and crisis medicine.

Paula Devine is Co-Director of ARK, and Director of the Northern Ireland Life and Times survey. She is based in the School of Social Sciences, Education and Social Work, Queen's University Belfast.

The Northern Ireland Life and Times (NILT) survey is carried out annually and documents public opinion on a wide range of social issues. In 2021, 1,397 people aged 18 years or over took part. NILT is a joint project of the two Northern Ireland universities and provides an independent source of information on what the public thinks. For more information, visit the survey website at www.ark.ac.uk/nilt



In collaboration with Queen's University Belfast and Ulster University

School of Applied Social and Policy Sciences
Ulster University
York Street, Belfast, BT15 1ED

Tel: 028 95 363611 Email: info@ark.ac.uk

School of Social Sciences, Education and Social Work
Queen's University Belfast
Belfast BT7 1NN

Tel: 028 9097 3034 E-mail: info@ark.ac.uk