

COVID-19 Longitudinal Health and Wellbeing National Core Study

Research Theme	Society and Health
Report Title	Employment status disruption, mental health and health behaviours during the COVID19 pandemic: Evidence from eight population based UK longitudinal surveys



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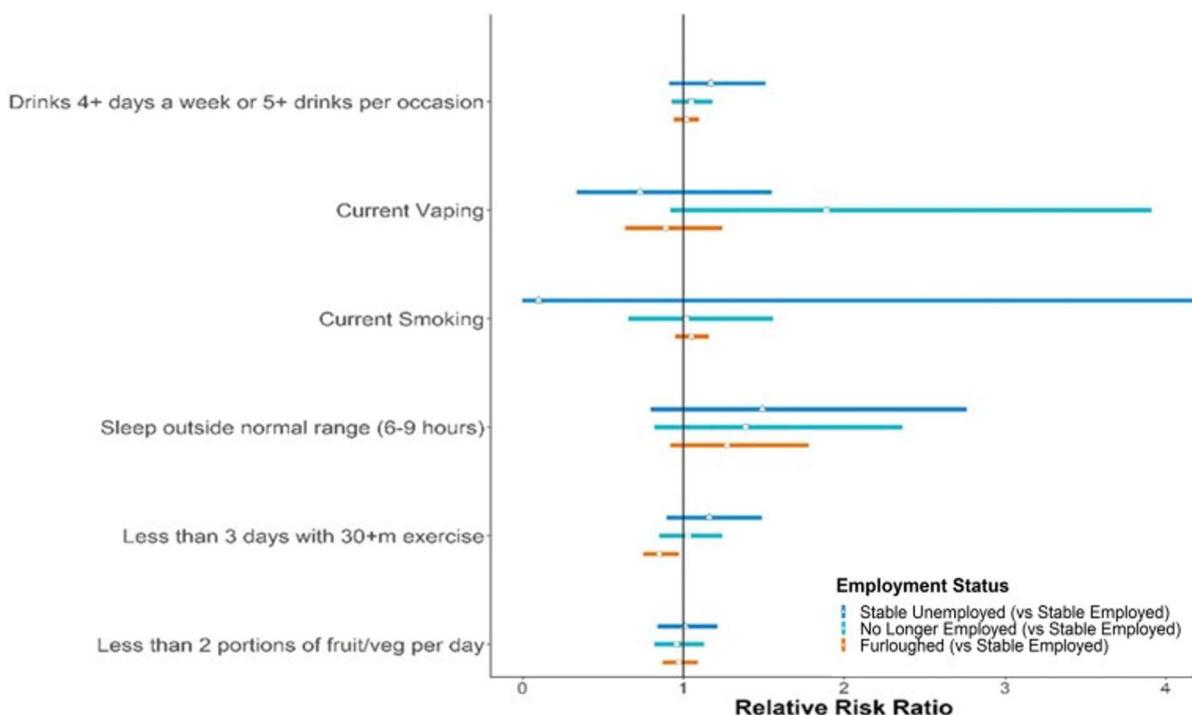
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The UK Government launched the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme (CJRS) in March 2020, providing employees unable to work due to the pandemic 80% of pay (capped at £2,500 per month), widely referred to as ‘furlough’. By March 2021, 11.4 million employees (approximately 34% of the working age population) had been furloughed. We investigate the potential impact of employment status disruptions on health behaviours and mental health with a focus on furlough.

Key findings

In Figure 1 we show changes in health behaviours for different employment status groups, compared to people in stable employment (with estimates over 1 indicating greater risk and below 1 lower risk). Our analysis accounts for pre-pandemic health behaviour, age, sex, ethnicity, education, UK nation of residence, household composition, pre-pandemic measures of mental health and self-rated health. The range of statistical uncertainty (95% confidence intervals) is indicated by the horizontal bars.

Figure 1. Employment status disruption and health behaviour during the pandemic

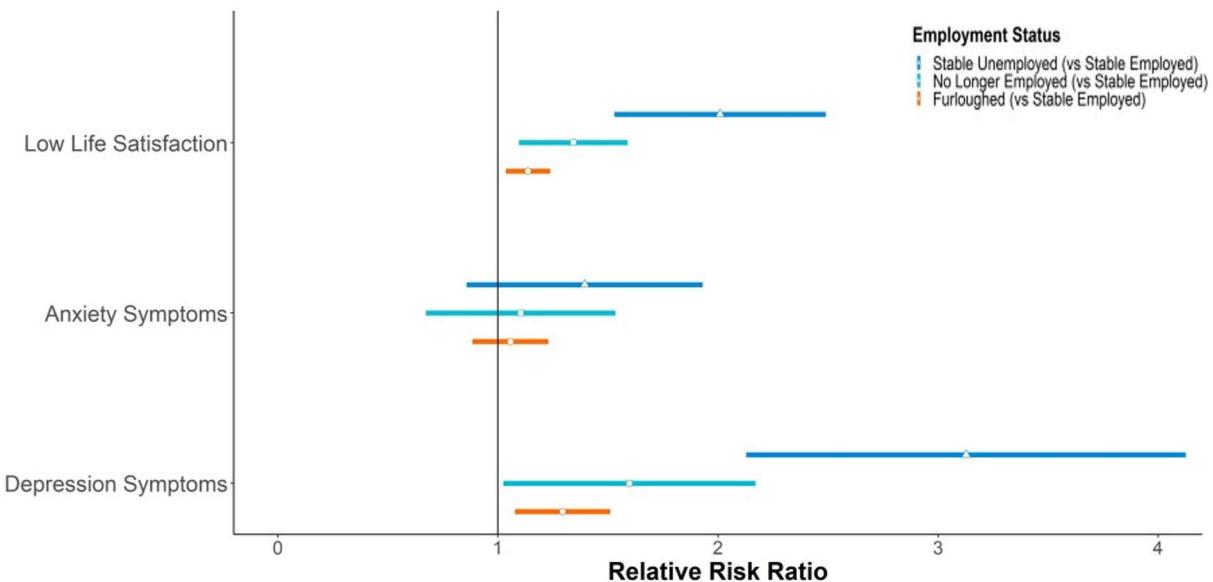


Compared to those in stable employment before and during the pandemic we found that those furloughed did not exhibit more unhealthy behaviours as they had similar levels of alcohol use, vaping, smoking, dietary habits and had less risk of low physical activity. There is suggestive evidence that they may have engaged in more atypical sleep (low confidence). The “stable unemployed” group were more likely to engage in all unhealthy behaviours, but this was due to patterns established pre-pandemic (results not shown).

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In Figure 2 we show change in mental health for different employment status groups, again compared to those in stable employment. We account for differences in pre-pandemic mental health status, age, sex, education, early life social class and pre-pandemic self-rated health.

Figure 2. Employment status disruption and mental health during the pandemic



Compared to those in stable employment before and during the pandemic, those furloughed reported similar anxiety levels during the pandemic, but more depression symptoms and were more likely to report low life satisfaction. However, when compared to those compared to those that had become unemployed during the pandemic, furloughed people had less depression symptoms and were less likely to report low life satisfaction.

Policy implications

The furlough scheme appears to have a protective effect. Continuation of the scheme and related supportive measures against the economic impact of non-pharmaceutical interventions has the potential to mitigate the indirect consequences of the pandemic on population health.

Planned work

- 1) What is the short- and medium-term impact of employment disruption (hours worked, working from home, job satisfaction) on social, economic and health outcomes?
- 2) What is the impact of COVID-19 illness and Long COVID on employment and finances? Which factors shape vulnerability and resilience?
- 3) How have trends in significant life events (starting tertiary education, entry into the labour market, housing transitions, partnership formation, having children and retirement) changed during the pandemic and what are their longer-term consequences?

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- 4) What is the short- and medium-term impact of shielding on social, economic and health outcomes?