

The COVID-19 Pandemic and the Changing Nature of Work

Lose Your Job, Show Up to Work, or Telecommute?

[Philip Armour](#), [Katherine Grace Carman](#), [Kathleen J. Mullen](#), [Shanthi Nataraj](#)

RESEARCH

Published Jun 18, 2020



Doug Hassebroek eats breakfast while on a video conference call at his home in Brooklyn, April 24, 2020

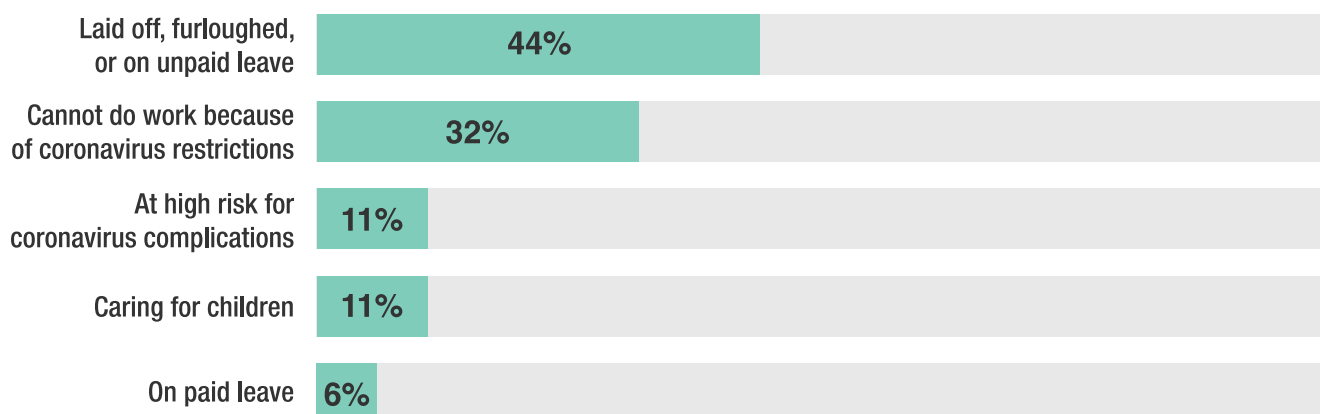
Photo by Caitlin Ochs/Reuters

Stay-at-home orders save lives,^[1] but the extent to which they threaten livelihoods depends on the nature of one's work. How much has the ability to work from home mitigated the economic effects of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic? In the first week of May 2020, RAND researchers conducted a survey of more than 2,000 individuals in the nationally representative RAND American Life Panel (ALP) to find out how their lives changed as a result of the pandemic. We focus on the 1,277 individuals who were working for pay or profit in February 2020.^[2]

Why Aren't Workers Working? Mostly Because They Have Been Laid Off or Because Restrictions Interfere with Their Work

Between February and May 2020, one in six workers lost their jobs. Being laid off, furloughed, or put on unpaid leave accounts for 44 percent of these job losses, followed by not being able to do work because of coronavirus restrictions (32 percent) (see Figure 1).^[3] The next most important factors were not working because of being at risk for coronavirus complications and not working because of caring for children (each approximately 11 percent).

Figure 1. Reasons Given by Nonemployed Workers for Not Working in May 2020



SOURCE: Authors' calculations based on 197 responses from those no longer working in the ALP survey conducted May 1–6, 2020. Responses are weighted using sampling weights as described in Carman and Nataraj, 2020.

NOTE: The exact wording of the question was "What are your reasons for not working in the same job?" Respondents could select more than one response. Only responses selected by ten or more respondents are shown.

The Ability to Telecommute Protected Against Job Loss

The flip side to one in six workers losing their jobs is that five in six were still working in their same job despite widespread stay-at-home restrictions.

Workers whose jobs allowed flexibility in working from home in February had substantially better employment outcomes in May. Of those whose jobs allowed telecommuting in February, only 6 percent had lost their jobs by May, while among those who could not telecommute in February, 25 percent had lost their jobs by May.

Which Jobs Allow Telecommuting?

Although the ability to telecommute protected against job loss, not all jobs are conducive to telecommuting. At one end of the spectrum are jobs that, even amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, allow no telecommuting; these types of jobs are more prevalent in certain occupations, such as protective services, production, construction, food preparation, transportation, building and grounds maintenance, installation, and health care (Table 1).

At the other end of the spectrum are jobs that allow for exclusive telecommuting (i.e., never having to leave home to do work); these types of jobs are more prevalent in legal, computer, scientific, architecture and engineering, and business and finance occupations. In keeping with the switch to remote learning, those providing educational instruction also were predominantly telecommuting.

A fair number of jobs occupy a middle ground, allowing workers to work from home but also requiring them to leave home occasionally (at least once per week) to do their work. These jobs are most prevalent in life, physical, and social sciences; management; and office and administrative support occupations.

Table 1. Telecommuting Arrangements Vary Widely by Occupation

Occupation	Percentage of Workers in Each Telecommuting Category in May 2020		
	No Telecommuting	Some Telecommuting	Exclusive Telecommuting
Protective service occupations	96	2	2
Production occupations	96	1	3
Construction and extraction occupations	94	3	3
Food preparation and serving related occupations	92	8	0
Transportation and material moving occupations	90	7	3
Building and grounds cleaning and maintenance occupations	87	0	13
Installation, maintenance, and repair occupations	81	17	2
Health care practitioners and technical occupations	73	8	19
Personal care and service occupations	69	5	26
Sales and related occupations	58	10	33
Community and social service occupations	51	26	24

**Percentage of Workers in Each Telecommuting Category in
May 2020**

Occupation	No Telecommuting	Some Telecommuting	Exclusive Telecommuting
Health care support occupations	50	7	43
Management occupations	37	36	27
Office and administrative support occupations	30	28	42
Arts, design, entertainment, sports, and media occupations	21	11	68
Life, physical, and social science occupations	12	41	46
Business and financial operations occupations	12	11	77
Educational instruction and library occupations	11	18	72
Architecture and engineering occupations	6	9	84
Computer and mathematical occupations	6	11	83
Legal occupations	3	26	71
Overall	46	14	40

SOURCE: Authors' calculations based on 1,049 responses from the ALP survey conducted May 1–6, 2020.

NOTE: The exact wording of the question to determine telecommuting status was "In the past seven days, on how many days were you required to leave your home to do your MAIN job?" *Exclusive telecommuting* was defined as never being required to leave home to do a main job. *Some telecommuting* was defined as having to leave home to do a main job at least once, but also working from home at least once. *No telecommuting* was defined as not being able to telecommute or not working from home at all. Occupations are based on information from the ALP's household information survey fielded in February 2020. The sample is limited to workers reporting that they were working at the same main job as in February 2020. The farming, fishing, and forestry occupation is excluded because fewer than ten respondents reported working in this occupation. Some rows do not sum to 100 percent because of rounding.

Will Telecommuting Expand Even Further in the Age of COVID-19?

Experts agree that we have a long road ahead—a vaccine that can enable a return to the pre-pandemic "normal" is many months away.^[4] In the meantime, how employers will adapt to the changing conditions depends on an open question: Do current working conditions reflect the intrinsic nature of work for certain occupations, or can certain working conditions, such as telecommuting, be expanded to accommodate the changing needs of the workforce? Our research team will conduct ongoing surveys of ALP respondents to track their evolving employment statuses and working conditions in the coming months.

Notes

[1] RAND Corporation, *The Health and Economic Impacts of COVID-19 Interventions: State Policy Evaluation Tool*, Santa Monica, Calif., TL-A173-1, 2020. As of June 5, 2020:

<https://www.rand.org/pubs/tools/TLA173-1/tool.html>

[2] A technical description of the survey, which includes details about the ALP, the objectives of the survey, and information about the fielding of the survey, is available in Katherine Grace Carman and Shanthi Nataraj, *2020 American Life Panel Survey on Impacts of COVID-19: Technical Documentation*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-A308-1, 2020. As of June 15, 2020:

https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR308-1.html. Additional information on the

technical aspects of the ALP is provided in Michael Pollard and Matthew Baird, *The RAND American Life Panel: Technical Description*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-1651, 2017. As of June 4, 2020: https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1651.html

[3] Although respondents could select more than one reason for not working, only 4 percent selected both (1) being laid off, furloughed, or put on temporary unpaid leave and (2) being unable to do their work because of restrictions; 72 percent of respondents selected one of the top two reasons.

[4] U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, "Trump Administration Announces Framework and Leadership for 'Operation Warp Speed,'" press release, May 15, 2020. As of June 5, 2020: <https://www.hhs.gov/about/news/2020/05/15/trump-administration-announces-framework-and-leadership-for-operation-warp-speed.html>;

Asher Mullard, "COVID-19 Vaccine Development Pipeline Gears Up," *The Lancet*, Vol. 395, No. 10239, June 6, 2020, pp. 1751-1752.

Topics

Document Details

Copyright: RAND Corporation

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7249/RR-A308-4>

Availability: Web-Only

Document Number: RR-A308-4

Year: 2020

RESEARCH CONDUCTED BY

RAND Education and Labor

This report describes a subset of results from a May 2020 survey fielded through the ALP to assess the wide-ranging effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on individuals and households. A technical description of the survey, which includes details about the ALP, the objectives of the survey, and information about the fielding of the survey, are presented in Katherine Grace Carman and Shanthi Nataraj, [*2020 American Life Panel Survey on Impacts of COVID-19: Technical Documentation*](#), Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-A308-1, 2020.

Funding for this research was provided by [gifts from RAND supporters](#) and income from operations. The research was conducted by [RAND Education and Labor](#), a division of the RAND Corporation that conducts research on early childhood through postsecondary education programs, workforce development, and programs and policies affecting workers, entrepreneurship, and financial literacy and decisionmaking. Questions about this report should be directed to Philip Armour at parmour@rand.org, and questions about RAND Education and Labor should be directed to educationandlabor@rand.org.

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P.O. Box 2138
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