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Population & Societies

How the COVID-19 epidemic changed working conditions in France

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The COVID-19 pandemic lockdown forced many people in France to stop working and others to change their working arrangements. With widespread teleworking, these disruptions affected occupational categories unequally. The effects on home life for men, women, and children differed across social categories, as Anne Lambert and her colleagues explain, drawing on data from the Coconel survey.

In France, the COVID-19 pandemic has triggered the worst labour market crisis since the Second World War. Inequality in employment is compounded by inequality in working conditions brought to light and amplified by the pandemic. While most people in higher-level occupations could work remotely, practically all the manual and clerical workers who carried on working—half stopped altogether—did so in their habitual workplace. This massive shift towards teleworking has been damaging for intrafamily relations, however, as revealed by the Coconel survey, whose findings shed light on the new landscape of work and employment 2 months after the start of lockdown (see Box).

Employment: forced inactivity among women and the working classes

Of the economically active population in employment on 1 March 2020, 30% were not working 2 months later, and 70% were still working, of whom 41% from home and 59% outside the home. Who were the first to experience the economic impact of the pandemic? Under what conditions did people carry on working, by gender and occupational category?

Box. The Coconel survey (Logement et Conditions de vie)

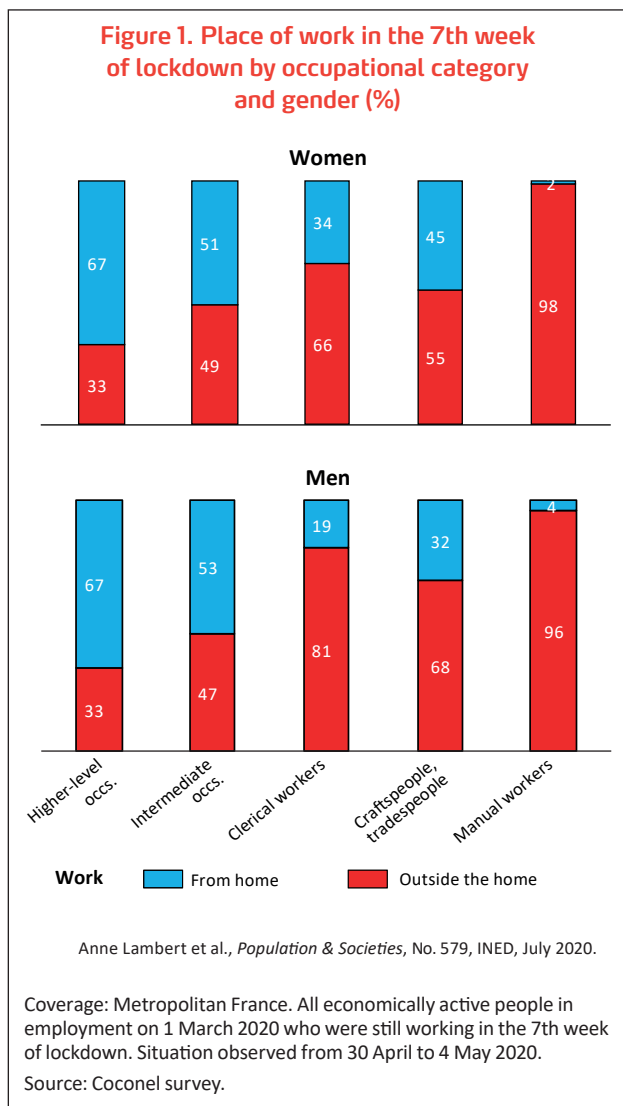
This survey on housing and living conditions was conducted by INED in partnership with the Coconel consortium (VITROME IHU Méditerranée Infection, CIC Cochin-Pasteur, EHESP, ORS Paca), ANR, IRD, and IFOP. A sample of 2,003 people representative of adults living in metropolitan France was created using the quota sampling method (age, gender, education, occupation, and category of municipality). The online survey was conducted between 30 April and 4 May 2020. The questions concerned the situation before and during lockdown and covered a range of topics: housing and living conditions, employment and working conditions, children and home schooling, neighbourliness, and feelings of isolation.

Be it in terms of employment or working conditions, the higher-level occupations appear to have been less affected by the crisis than all the other social categories: 86% were still working in the 7th week of lockdown (at the time of the survey), of whom two-thirds from home. While most people in intermediate occupations (80%) were still working, they were more often doing so from outside home (48%). Manual and clerical workers were more adversely affected by the crisis: in early May 2020, 42% and 43%, respectively, were not

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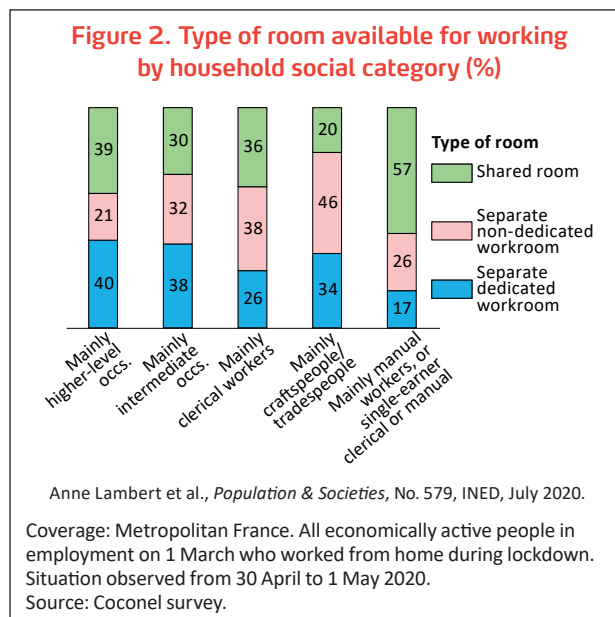
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working.⁽¹⁾ Moreover, practically all those who carried on working did so in the workplace, where the risk of infection was greater. This was the case for 73% of clerical workers and 97% of manual workers who were still working 2 months after the start of lockdown. It was mainly people in higher-level occupations, whose working methods have been transformed by new digital technologies, who were able to work remotely and adapt their work schedules accordingly [1]. Certain types of job contracts appear to protect against the risk of not working. Almost three-quarters of people in stable jobs (permanent contract on 1 March 2020 or tenured civil servants) carried on working versus only half of those on temporary contracts or internships. A high level of education, closely correlated with type of occupation, also provides protection

(1) The Coconel survey does not give the reasons for stopping work. These may include contract non-renewal, lay-off, redundancy, short-time working, or special leave of absence. According to the Acemo COVID survey conducted by DARES from 1 to 12 May 2020, among non-agricultural private-sector companies with 10 or more employees, 45% of medium-sized and large companies opted for a system of short-time working. Workforce reductions have remained limited but were increasing in May 2020 (13% of employees).



against work interruption, even more so in times of recession than of growth [2]: 80% of graduates in employment on 1 March 2020 were still working 2 months later versus just 60% of people with a lower secondary qualification.

Looking at occupations in more detail, we can identify the heterogeneous group of 'lockdown workers'. The occupations that remained most active⁽²⁾ were intermediate civil service occupations, police officers and military personnel, and higher-level civil service occupations and corporate executives. Conversely, the occupations whose activity was reduced most drastically⁽³⁾ were skilled and unskilled craft workers, sales workers, personal service workers, and drivers. Women were more severely affected than men. Among those in employment on 1 March 2020, only two-thirds were still working 2 months later versus three-quarters of men. And among women who carried on working, the proportion who worked from home was similar to that of men (Figure 1), but their conditions were different. Teleworking reveals more deep-rooted inequalities in living conditions that play out in the home and the private sphere.

New forms of teleworking and inequality

During the pandemic, teleworking was often presented in public debate as a solution that protected workers from the risk of infection and that benefited the higher-level occupations above all. Teleworking conditions varied, however, according to place of residence, household social status, and gender. It was in the Paris conurbation, where the active population is more qualified than

(2) An estimated 10% or less of those in work at the start of lockdown were laid off.

(3) An estimated 50% or more of those in work at the start of lockdown were laid off.

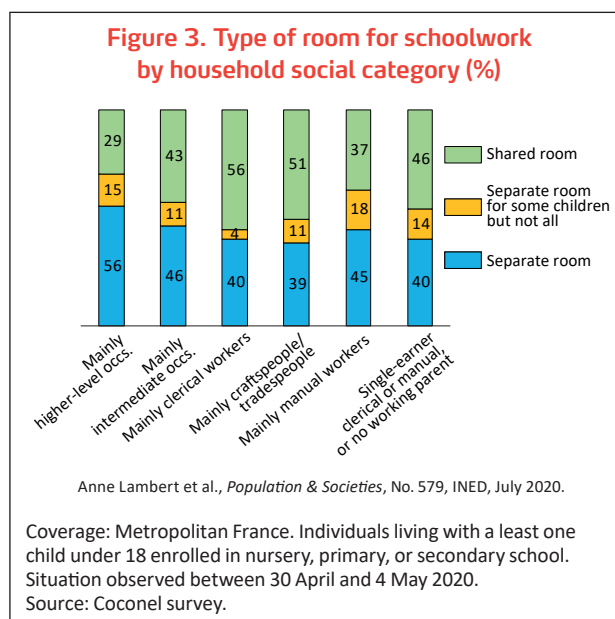
elsewhere, that the highest proportion worked from home (58% vs. 41% in France as a whole). However, those who remained at home throughout the lockdown had smaller dwellings with less living space than the national average (9 m² less per person). Likewise, their workspace was more limited. In the Paris conurbation, 40% of teleworkers worked in a room shared with other people (living room, kitchen, etc.) versus 34% on average in metropolitan France.

The existence of a separate workspace in the dwelling also depends on the household's social status. Finding an adequate space is easier in households with mainly higher-level and intermediate occupations (i.e. one partner in a higher-level occupation, the other in an intermediate, clerical, or manual occupation) than in households comprised mainly of manual or clerical workers (Figure 2).⁽⁴⁾

Women, who more often have children in the home (48% of teleworking women lived with one or more children during lockdown vs. 37% of men), less often had a room to themselves. On average, a quarter of women worked in a separate room versus 41% of men. In most cases, women had to share their workspace with their children and other household members. The gender gap is highest for the higher-level occupations. Of the women in this category, 29% had a separate workroom versus 47% of the men. In the intermediate occupations, also concerned by teleworking, the gender gaps are smaller, with 25% of women versus 37% of men having a separate workroom. The situation of the self-employed is singular in this respect. Mainly self-employed households (comprising craftspeople and tradespeople alone or with a partner who is self-employed, a clerical or manual worker, or inactive), a majority of whom occupy houses in rural areas, more often have a separate workspace in their dwelling because many already worked from home before the pandemic.

Did children have a separate room for schoolwork?

For households with children, domestic life was reorganized to take account of new work-related and schooling needs linked to the closure of schools and the restriction of movements. Where in the home did children do their schoolwork? Did they have a separate room? There are large differences between social groups in this respect (Figure 3). They reflect disparities between households in living standards and housing conditions, but also educational norms that differ across social groups with respect to the age at which a separate room is



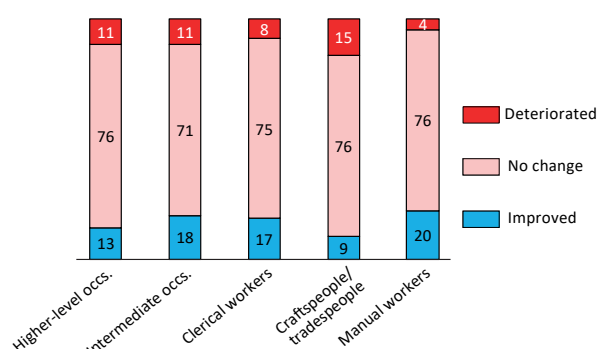
considered justified and necessary for a child's education. More households provided a separate room for their children in the Paris conurbation, despite smaller dwelling sizes than the French average. Six in 10 households provided a separate room for the children versus 4 in 10 in suburban and rural households. The Paris conurbation has the highest proportion of people in higher-level occupations for whom the children's academic success is a key aspect of social reproduction. Their educational strategies are made all the more visible by the fact that teleworking women in higher-level occupations less often had a separate workroom for themselves.

Work, telework, and well-being: a social reordering?

By closing households in on themselves, the COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting lockdown affected intrafamily relationships. While most respondents did not observe any change, 10% of those in lockdown with children reported that their parent-child relations had become more difficult. This was the case for 15% of those who teleworked during the 7th week of lockdown. This deterioration may be linked to an overload of professional and domestic responsibilities during the pandemic. Exposure to these new family tensions varied across social categories according to the type of occupation, with some groups having fewer coping resources available to them. Despite less favourable housing conditions than people in higher-level occupations, it is among manual and clerical workers, particularly those who stopped working during lockdown, that relations with children more often improved (Figure 4). For working-class parents who more often work night shifts and non-standard hours, the lockdown may have given them more time to be with their children [3, 4].

(4) The household occupational classifications (PCS Ménage) form part of the revised classification of occupational categories defined by a CNIS working group chaired by Thomas Amossé and Joanie Cayouette-Remblière (see: <https://www.cnis.fr/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Rénovation-de-la-PCS-2018-2019-rapport-validé-par-le-Bureau-25-oct-2019.pdf>).

Figure 4. Changes in parent–child relations during lockdown by occupational category (%)



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Coverage: Metropolitan France, all economically active households with children.
Source: Coconel survey.

Conversely, people in higher-level occupations more often reported a deterioration, and less often an improvement, in their parent–child relations (Figure 4). The high prevalence of teleworking in this category may have exacerbated tensions in family relationships [5]. The additional domestic workload linked to the new forms of teleworking, on top of home-schooling responsibilities, seems to have produced a reordering of well-being across different population categories. The effects of stopping work and school may vary from one family to another, however. While parents had more free time to spend with their children and improve relations over the short term, the drop in household income that often resulted from being off work may have negatively affected parent–child relationships over the longer term and increased the household’s sense of isolation. Craftspeople and tradespeople, the occupational category most affected by income loss, more often reported a deterioration in family relations and less often an improvement. Moreover, 43% of those whose household income decreased after the start of the pandemic reported feeling isolated, compared with 38% on average among the active population as a whole. Yet those whose income had fallen did not report feeling more isolated than the others before the pandemic.

Unemployment increased sharply in France in the 2 months following the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, affecting above all the least qualified workers in unstable

jobs, as is historically the case in every major recession. A large proportion of people in higher-level occupations adopted new modes of continuous teleworking during the pandemic, often in homes that are poorly suited for working remotely. But it is women who were most hard-hit by the crisis. After 50 years of progress in narrowing gender inequalities, the pandemic and the ensuing economic crisis have widened the gap once again [6]. All in all, the COVID-19 pandemic has simultaneously revealed and accentuated the strong labour divide in French society. The indicators of employment and working conditions, be it employment rate, place of work, exposure to health risks, or teleworking conditions, all signal a deteriorating situation and a widening of the social divide and the gender gap.

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Abstract

The French labour market has been severely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and the recession that ensued: 30% of people in employment on 1 March 2020 were not working 2 months later. But the pandemic has also modified working conditions, disrupted life in the home, and widened gender inequalities—with the risk that such changes will translate into long-term structural effects. People in higher-level occupations more often remained in work and, unlike other social categories, many could work remotely during lockdown. The impact of the pandemic and ensuing economic crisis have been especially detrimental for women. More women than men have lost their jobs, and their working conditions are less favourable. While the conditions of teleworking are varied, it is more often associated with a deterioration of parent–child relations.

Keywords

work, teleworking, lockdown, household, children, intrafamily relationships, isolation, COVID-19 pandemic, Coconel survey, France