

Gender differences in unpaid care work and psychological distress in the UK COVID-19 lockdown ^[1]

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Source: PLOS ONE

Format: Article

Publication Date: 4 Mar 2021

AVAILABILITY

Access online ^[2]

Excerpted from abstract

Objective

To describe how men and women divided childcare and housework demands during the height of the first Covid-19 lockdown in the UK, and whether these divisions were associated with worsening mental health during the pandemic.

Background

School closures and homeworking during the Covid-19 crisis have resulted in an immediate increase in unpaid care work, which draws new attention to gender inequality in divisions of unpaid care work.

Methods

Data come from the wave 9 (2017–19) of Understanding Society and the following April (n = 15,426) and May (n = 14,150) waves of Understanding Society Covid-19 study. Psychological distress was measured using the General Health Questionnaire (GHQ) at both before and during the lockdown, and unpaid care work was measured during the lockdown. Linear regression models were used.

Results

Women spent much more time on unpaid care work than men during lockdown, and it was more likely to be the mother than the father who reduced working hours or changed employment schedules due to increased time on childcare. Women who spent long hours on housework and childcare were more likely to report increased levels of psychological distress. Working parents who adapted their work patterns increased more psychological distress than those who did not. This association was much stronger if he or she was the only member in the household who adapted their work patterns, or if she was a lone mother. Fathers increased more psychological distress if they reduced work hours but she did not, compared to neither reducing work hours.

Conclusion

There are continued gender inequalities in divisions of unpaid care work. Juggling home working with homeschooling and childcare as well as extra housework is likely to lead to poor mental health for people with families, particularly for lone mothers.

Related link: COVID-19 has exacerbated gender inequities in housework, childcare and mental health ^[3]

Region: Europe ^[4]

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