USDAW

Campaigning For Equality

Mental Health

Still Struggling – The mental health of low paid workers during the Covid Crisis

Survey Results

Foreword

It's good to talk

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The vast majority of Usdaw members are classed as 'key workers', occupying job roles and working in industries critical to the Government's response to the Coronavirus crisis. Very few of these jobs can be done from home.

The crisis has clearly demonstrated the nation's dependence on women and men working in food chain industries and shown that some of the most important jobs in society are done by those who are paid the least.

It is well documented that although mental health problems can affect anyone at any time, they aren't distributed equally across all groups in society. Evidence is increasing that the COVID-19 pandemic has affected the mental health of sections of the population differently, depending on their circumstances.

A study by the Mental Health Foundation into the impact of the pandemic on mental health finds that it has widened mental health inequalities, with the groups that had the poorest mental health pre-crisis also having had the largest deterioration in mental health during lockdowns.

As they conclude "we are all in the same storm but we aren't all in the same boat."

Anxiety about exposure to the virus and social distancing in workplaces, increased customer abuse, isolation from friends and family, home schooling and juggling work with care, stress and worry about the future, about job security and family income – Usdaw members are facing these pressures on a daily basis.

Our focus as the UK's fifth largest trade union remains the same now as it was before the outbreak of Coronavirus; to identify how work affects our members' mental health and ensure members get the right support when it does.

This report outlines the impact of the pandemic on the mental health of Usdaw members and gives a voice to their experience of working in critical sectors of the economy throughout the Coronavirus crisis.

Paddy Lillis

Paddy Lillis
General Secretary

Summary of main findings

Almost three quarters (74.2%) of survey respondents feel anxious about going into work. This rises to eight out of ten of members aged between 16 and 24, with young women reporting the highest levels of anxiety.

By far the biggest factor contributing to members' anxiety is a fear of contracting the virus, with seven out of ten of all respondents identifying this as cause.

But for young workers this is less of a concern than customer abuse and harassment. One in every two young members report customer abuse and harassment is causing them to feel anxious about going into work.

Men are less likely than women to be anxious about customer abuse; four out of ten men cite this a source of anxiety compared to six out of ten women.

Men are twice as likely to report that they are worried about money than women.

Almost one in two respondents (44.7%) say that they feel unsafe or very unsafe at work right now.

Eight out of ten respondents say that the coronavirus pandemic has negatively affected their mental health. More women than men report feeling this way.

Young members are far less likely to talk to anyone about their concerns compared to respondents of all ages.

Methodology

The survey was circulated to all Usdaw members by email although paper copies were available for circulation in the workplace on request.

Over 4,000 members responded to the survey.

Over two-thirds of respondents were women and three-quarters work in the retail sector, two-thirds of these in food retail.

Levels of anxiety

It will come as no surprise that survey respondents reported very high levels of anxiety about going to work during the pandemic. Usdaw National Officers, full-time officials and of course Usdaw reps have worked tirelessly with employers to ensure workplaces are as safe and COVID-secure as they possibly can be. Despite this, given the fact that the vast majority of Usdaw members are working in public facing roles, concerns over exposure to the virus and customer abuse are causing high levels of anxiety.

Only one-fifth of members of all ages say that they don't feel anxious about going into work at the moment compared to almost three-quarters that do. Women and young women in particular are more likely to feel anxious than men. This might be due to the fact that the majority of women who responded to the survey work in food retail (over two-thirds compared to less than half of men) and are therefore more likely to be in roles that bring them into direct contact with members of the public.

"I feel that customers are forgetting to social distance – you stay back to try and social distance and they get right in your space, sometimes they touch us to get our attention."

"Most customers don't wear masks any longer and don't care that they aren't and I've received more personal abuse during this period than during all the months before."

Whilst less than one in ten respondents of all ages expressed anxiety over working hours, amongst young members this rose to more than one in four. Young workers are more than three times as likely to be worried about money than those of all ages.

"The past few years I've had financial troubles, but knowing there's a supposed recession round the corner when I'm already struggling has really made the stress and worry a lot worse."

"It's tough at work. Some days when I see the rota I don't even want to go in. The situation has stayed the same for months now, lack of empathy from customers and lack of social distancing from us. To the customers it's like we don't even exist."

The concerns of young workers differ slightly. For members aged 24 and below the biggest cause for concern was customer abuse and harassment, with 1 in 2 members saying this was making them feel anxious. Over half of young women (55.8%) and more than a third of young men (39.8%) said that customer abuse is making them feel anxious.

"General rudeness has increased during the pandemic. The way people view and treat retail workers is an issue generally that needs to be fixed. The pandemic has really highlighted it – constant conflict and bad manners from customers made me really stressed."

Mood

Not surprisingly, almost half of all respondents say that they feel more 'up and down' now than they did before the start of the pandemic, with four out of ten saying that they feel lower than usual. This rises to one in two amongst young members reflecting the findings of other studies, including a recent study by the Mental Health Foundation that shows that the longer the pandemic and restrictions continue, the harder it is for younger people in particular to cope.

"Been up and down at work not feeling great but keep going."

It got to the point I felt as though I couldnt cope and had to take a weeks' emergency annual leave. Upon my return my manager proceeded to put me on a 12 hour shift, therefore I had to make a doctor's appointment for a sickness paper as upon my arrival back to work, I was anxious and nervous about returning to the mayhem.

Men are almost twice as likely as women to say that they feel about the same now as they did before the crisis.

Raising concerns

The good news is that of those members that responded to the survey the overwhelming majority (eight out of ten) have talked about their concerns with someone and more often than not several people, including their Usdaw rep.

Women were slightly more likely to talk about what is worrying them than men and also more likely to say talking about their concerns with someone helped.

However, the survey data paints a different picture in relation to young workers. Young workers are much less likely to have spoken to someone about how they are feeling or to have asked for help:

1. A failure to consistently challenge 'bad' customer behaviour including a failure to wear face coverings, maintain social distancing and respect shopworkers.

2. A failure to check in on a regular 'one-to-one' basis with members of staff.

"They should introduce check-ins, access to one-to-one meetings, enforce an open-door policy – make it a chance to ask personally how are you?"

"I just feel like I don't have time to actually care about my mental health, didn't have holidays since last year. Was a lot of pressure and no time to care about myself."

3. Shortages of staff on the shop floor.

"When we are understaffed we are left to just deal with it. We should have three members of staff on shift but we barely have two. I've been made to do far more hours than usual which I've said I don't want to do."

The experience of younger workers

The survey found significant differences between the experiences of younger and older workers when it comes to managing mental health at work.

It is often assumed that younger workers are more carefree and have less to worry about than older colleagues but Usdaw's survey shows this is far from the case.

As we have said already, members between the ages of 16-24 are more likely to feel worried about going into work during the Coronavirus crisis than older workers and to report that the crisis has negatively affected their mental health. Younger workers are also much less likely to have spoken to someone about how they are feeling or to have asked for help and whilst the Coronavirus crisis has tested everyone's mental wellbeing, our study shows that there are some very specific challenges facing young people, particularly those working in retail where insecure and precarious forms of work organisation prevail.

Young workers are much more likely to feel anxious at work over working hours than older workers – more than one in four young members identified this as a cause for anxiety compared to just over 6% of older workers for whom fear of contracting the virus was the number one concern.

We know that younger workers are more likely to be working at weekends and late at night and to be employed on so called 'flexi-contracts', which usually involve short notice and unpredictable changes to working hours and shifts.

A TUC study from 2018 showed that workers in casual employment were far more likely to have no regular pattern of work compared to workers in permanent and fixed-term posts, were more likely to work only in the evenings and to be less likely to work during the day.

The same study showed that unstable and insecure forms of working had an impact on workers wellbeing. Workers without regular hours of work were more likely to experience anxiety and low employment security was associated with higher levels of anxiety as well as depression.

Again, there is a widespread assumption that young workers are only going out to work to earn enough money for socialising and that they are happy to work late nights and to chop and change their hours of work with very little notice. But one in three young workers in sectors like retail and social care are parents and are often at the sharp end of changes in the way work is organised.

Young people are being hardest hit by the COVID economic crisis and this is, not surprisingly, reflected in the high rates of anxiety and depression amongst young members revealed by the Usdaw survey.

The fact that so many young workers are feeling worried right now is not simply a reflection of the fact that we are all experiencing heightened levels of stress and anxiety – it is more than that.

It reflects the fact that young people are heavily concentrated in the private sector and in particular in those sectors where jobs are at greatest risk because of the pandemic. The retail sector is the third largest employer of young people behind hospitality and recreation and the fact that so many jobs have been lost in the sector since the beginning of the crisis has therefore, had a disproportionate impact on them. This is particularly true for young women and for BAME and disabled young workers.

Given this, it is not surprising that young workers are also far more likely to say that financial worries are currently making them feel anxious. Almost a quarter of young workers said that worrying about money was making them feel anxious compared to only 6.5% of survey respondents of all ages. Young workers very often have similar outgoings and financial commitments as older workers but this is rarely reflected in rates of pay or levels of social security support and so it is particularly worrying that young members are least likely to speak to someone about how they are feeling or to ask their union rep, their manager, a friend or family member for help. This is worrying not just because speaking to someone about how you are feeling can help – as the national mental health charity 'Time to Talk' say, a small conversation about mental health can make a big difference.

The fact that only a quarter of young people (compared to almost two-thirds of older members) spoke to a family member or friend about how they were feeling or that young members were half as likely to speak to their GP than older members, means that many will be missing out on the support and help that their trade union can provide.

The study confirms that young workers are also much more reluctant to raise their concerns with their manager than older workers – less than a fifth of young workers raised their concerns at work with a manger compared to almost half of survey respondents of all ages. Young women are the least likely to ask their manager for help.

All too often workers face being disciplined at work for lateness or poor performance when in reality, they are struggling with an undisclosed mental health problem that is causing them difficulties at work.

One factor in the reluctance of young workers to seek support with a mental health problem at work may be that working on a temporary and / or low hours contract, with very few guaranteed hours each week, leaves workers feeling afraid to reveal that they may be experiencing difficulties at work because of their mental health, as this might undermine their ability to gain more hours or secure a more permanent contract.

This is a reasonable assumption given what we know about both the stigma attached to anxiety and depression and the fact that other studies show that young workers are more likely to worry about their job security if their manager perceives them to be unreliable.

Recommendations

Reasonable adjustments

Members with mental health problems very often have to wait too long for reasonable adjustments to be put in place, putting them at a huge disadvantage in being able to do their job effectively.

This can cause additional stress and anxiety, place pressure on colleagues and lead to capability and performance issues.

Where our members change roles or their line manager changes, they are often forced to re-explain and frequently re-negotiate their reasonable adjustments.

The Government needs to do more to ensure that reasonable adjustments are put in place in a timely fashion.

We need better enforcement of the right to reasonable adjustments which could be achieved by providing more detailed practical examples of timely implementation within the Equality and Human Rights Commission's statutory code of practice on employment.[1]

Access to Work

This is the Government's flagship programme that funds adjustments for disabled workers including those with mental health problems. The Government should ensure all employers are made aware of Access to Work so that all disabled workers (and employers) have the opportunity of benefiting from it and fund it appropriately so all eligible people can access their full entitlement.

Disability pay gap reporting

Workers with mental health problems face significant barriers to getting and keeping jobs. This results in an employment gap of around 30% but this report shows that disabled people face double discrimination. Not only are they less likely to have a paid job but when they do, disabled people earn substantially less than their non-disabled peers. Public policy needs to be used to drive change on the disability pay gap too. Introducing mandatory pay gap reporting, alongside mandatory action plans and moving away from ineffective voluntary approaches needs to be an immediate priority.

Disability leave

Need for absence relating to disability to be disregarded when it comes to making employment decisions.

[1] www.scope.org.uk/scope/media/files/campaigns/disability-price-tag-report-2019.pdf

Stock photography, posed by models.

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