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Did COVID-19 Fundamentally Reshape Telecommuting in California?

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Issue

Health concerns and government restrictions during the COVID-19 pandemic caused a sharp increase in telecommuting (i.e., doing paid work at home or possibly an alternate worksite). In addition to reducing vehicle miles traveled (VMT), decreasing energy use, and lowering emissions of air pollutants and greenhouse gases (GHG), telecommuting may offer numerous other co-benefits, including increasing the worker pool, decreasing time and costs associated with travel, improving work-life balance, and decreasing stress. It may also stimulate greater use of non-motorized and active modes of travel (e.g., walking, biking, taking transit).

However, telecommuting (especially during the pandemic) may also affect remote workers' opportunities for promotion and ties with colleagues, health, work-life balance for families with children (childcare and schools did not operate normally during the pandemic), and even work productivity. It may also increase commuting length because telecommuters tend to live in more suburban areas, usually associated with fewer transit options and a higher likelihood of car use.

While a large body of literature on telecommuting existed before COVID-19¹, we looked at how the frequency of telecommuting changed in California during the pandemic, and how it may evolve. Whereas most previous research

relied on non-random samples, our dataset was collected at the end of May 2021 by Ipsos, which randomly sampled Californian members of KnowledgePanel©, the largest probability-based online panel in the nation, so the results are generalizable to California's population.

Quantifying changes in telecommuting is important for updating sustainable community strategies created by Metropolitan Transportation Organizations and gauging telecommuting's likely contribution to meeting California's GHG reduction targets. Moreover, analyzing telecommuting frequency for different socio-economic groups and occupations should help policymakers understand the long-term impacts of the pandemic on different segments of the labor market.

Key Research Findings

The post-pandemic rise in telecommuting may be more modest than expected. Our results suggest that an additional 4.2% of California workers could engage in some level of telecommuting post-pandemic which is substantial but much less than reported by other studies performed during the pandemic using non-probability samples. Many firms (including tech firms such as Salesforce, Google, and Meta) want their employees back in the office partly over concerns about training opportunities for new hires, worries about work coordination, and apprehension about decreases in productivity.²

Socio-economic characteristics matter for explaining telecommuting.

Our results show some generational differences, but no gender and race effects. However, workers with more education started telecommuting more during the pandemic, a trend likely to continue post-pandemic. Although household income has no direct impact on telecommuting, it had significant indirect effects before and during the pandemic (higher income workers telecommuted less). Household size and the presence of children also matter, but their effect is complex.

Land use around residences does not matter much for telecommuting.

Although some residential land use variables are significant, their impact is small, and so is the magnitude of telecommuters self-selecting certain residential areas. In short, the decision to telecommute in California does not seem to depend much on where a worker resides.

The nature of an occupation plays a key role in explaining telecommuting.

During the pandemic education workers and other knowledge workers, such as engineers, architects, lawyers, and social scientists were more likely to work from home, whereas health care workers (e.g., nurses) did not. However, after the pandemic workers in healthcare, education, trades, transport, construction, installation / repair, and sales and services are expected to telecommute less since most of these jobs require their presence at the workplace.

Policy Considerations

Employers may consider offering a mix of in-person and remote work, which would allow workers to maintain or create ties with colleagues while reducing their commuting expenses. Although only around half of all jobs in California are suitable for telework, the state should continue its efforts to provide broadband access to all Californians, because, in addition to telework, fast access to the internet opens the door to telemedicine, cultural programs, education opportunities, and better online shopping. While providing monetary incentives for telecommuting can run counter to state and local tax breaks designed to attract well-paying jobs, many of these agreements, which were concluded well before COVID-19, do not consider that some of the workers at these sites could work remotely out-of-state, which would sharply limit the intended benefits of these tax breaks. These agreements should be revisited to reward firms that hire local telecommuters.

More Information

This policy brief is based on the paper “Will COVID-19 jump-start telecommuting? Evidence from California,” available at <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11116-023-10424-x>. For more information about the findings presented in this brief, please contact Jean-Daniel Saphores at saphores@uci.edu.

¹F Eildér, E. “Telework and daily travel: New evidence from Sweden.” *Journal of Transport Geography*, 86,102777. (2020) doi:10.1016/j.jtrangeo.2020.102777; Thier, J. “Bosses are fed up with remote work for 4 main reasons. Some of them are undeniable.” *Fortune.com*. (2023). <https://finance.yahoo.com/news/bosses-fed-remote-4-main-193500794.html>; Ecke, L., Magdolen, M., Chlond, B., and Vortisch, P. “How the COVID-19 pandemic changes daily commuting routines – Insights from the German Mobility Panel.” *Case Studies on Transport Policy*, 10, 2175–2182 (2022). <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cstp.2022.10.001>

²Their, “Bosses are fed up with remote work.”

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