

Anxious Britain: How worried are we in 2022?

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Introduction

Since the start of the COVID-19 outbreak, Britain has faced unprecedented challenges relating to the health of individuals and their families. The measures introduced to try to mitigate the threat to people's health also led to huge disruption to people's working life (both in and outside of the home), the suspension of in-person schooling, and restrictions on socialising, as much of the country was shut down for significant periods over the last two years. Over this period, there have been [increases in mental distress](#) and [financial struggles](#) for many people across Britain, but the impact of the pandemic has hit different people in different ways.

As the ONS has reported, [more COVID-related deaths were recorded amongst men than women](#). However, women appear to have been harder hit by many of the knock-on effects of the pandemic. Women experienced a more severe impact on their [working hours](#) (including [unpaid work](#)) and were [more likely to work in sectors particularly badly hit by the pandemic](#) than men. Furthermore, [working mothers were at a particularly high risk of having left or lost their job or of being furloughed during the pandemic](#). Women also experienced worse wellbeing outcomes, [they were more likely than men to experience loneliness, anxiety and depression throughout the pandemic](#).

As the roll-out of vaccines and the development of more effective treatments against the virus have helped to reduce the number of people dying of COVID-19 across Britain, the country has started to

adapt to a "new normal". But the legacy of the COVID-19 pandemic, along with new challenges like the cost of living crisis, may continue to cause uncertainty and distress across Britain in 2022. Given experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic, this may affect men and women – and the issues they worry about – in different ways.

This briefing paper therefore investigates levels of worry across adults in Britain before and after the

start of the COVID-19 pandemic, and whether these differ between men and women. It uses data collected by the NatCen Panel, a representative sample of adults across Britain, to compare people's reported levels of worry about their personal, working and social lives. Data collected at three time points – in January 2018, January 2019 and January 2022 – are the focus of this analysis.

Key Findings

- Overall levels of worry across Britain were relatively stable in January 2018, January 2019 and January 2022. Although there were no differences in the levels of general worry between men and women in January 2018 and January 2019, a gap had appeared in January 2022. In this most recently collected data, one in five women reported being extremely worried about most of the areas they were asked about, compared to only one in 10 men.
- In January 2022, women were much more likely than men to be extremely worried about the health and wellbeing both of their children and of their parents. Although men and women reported similar levels of worry about their parents' health and wellbeing in January 2018 and January 2019, a gap had opened up in January 2022 when half of women but only one third of men said that they were extremely worried about their parents. Similar differences were seen in people's worries about their children's health and wellbeing in January 2022, but a gap had already opened up in this area in January 2019.
- When asked about both their parents' and children's health and wellbeing in January 2022, women were also more likely than men to be caught between worrying about both generations. Four out of 10 women reported being extremely worried about both their parents' and their children's health and wellbeing. Half as many men (two out of 10) reported being extremely worried about both.
- The worry gap between men and women extended beyond areas related to the health and wellbeing of people's families. In January 2022, women were also more likely than men to be extremely worried about their work-life balance and about their level of education, training and qualifications. These gaps were not seen in data collected in January 2018 or January 2019.

Respondents were asked about their levels of worry across a range of different areas of life. The same 16 questions were used in each survey, asking respondents **“On a scale of 0 to 10, how much do you worry about...?”**:

- Your physical health
- Your mental health
- Your relationship with your partner or spouse
- Your relationship with your family
- Your relationship with your friends
- Your children’s health and wellbeing
- Your partner or spouse’s health and wellbeing
- Your parents’ health and wellbeing
- Your work-life balance
- Your education, qualifications and training
- Your work situation
- Money or debt
- Your housing situation
- How safe you feel in your local area
- Your appearance (including your weight and looks) and
- Your social life

Respondents were only asked the questions that were relevant to them. For example, only respondents with children were asked how much they worried about their children’s health and wellbeing while all respondents were asked about their own physical and mental health.

General levels of worry

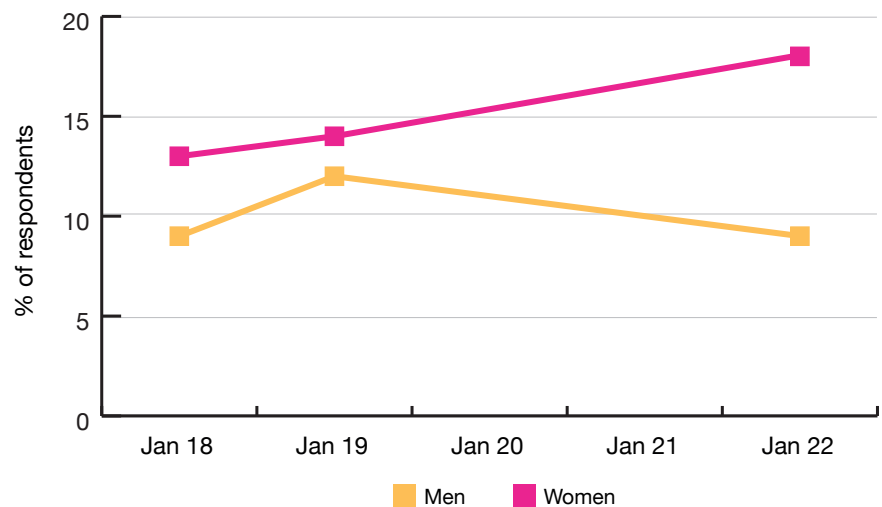
Levels of worry, in general, changed little across the three time points. In January 2018, January 2019 and January 2022, between 11% and 14% of people were extremely worried (with a score of 8 or more out of 10) about the majority of the areas they were asked about in each survey. Although this proportion remained relatively stable across the three surveys for most sub-groups of the population (including, for example, within different age groups), this was not the case when this analysis compared responses from men and women.

As shown in [Figure 1](#), levels of worry in general increased amongst women but not men between January 2019 and January 2022. In January 2022, almost one in five

women (18%) indicated that they were extremely worried about the majority of areas they were asked about in the survey. This was twice as high as the proportion of men (9%, or almost one in 10), despite men and women recording similar levels of worry in January 2018 and January 2019.

This gap was even wider when comparing men and women who had children. In January 2018 and January 2019, a similar number of men with children and women with children were extremely worried about most areas. In January 2022, however, almost three times as many women as men with children reported being extremely worried about most of the areas they were asked about (23% compared to 8%).

Fig 1. Proportion of men and women extremely worried about the majority of areas of life



Specific worries

Similar patterns were seen when comparing people's level of worry in each of the specific areas asked about in the 16 individual questions. Across the population as a whole, the proportion of people who were extremely worried about each area was relatively stable in January 2018, January 2019 and January 2022, with people most likely to report being extremely worried about areas relating to their family's health and wellbeing across all three surveys. There was only one area of worry where there was a constant difference across all surveys; women were consistently more likely than men to be extremely worried about their appearance.

However, in January 2022 a gap had developed in the levels of worry reported by men and women in multiple areas, particularly those related to their family's wellbeing (Figure 2). In January 2018 and January 2019, a similar proportion of men and women reported being extremely worried about their parents' health and wellbeing. By January 2022, though, a gap had developed and the majority of women (52%) reported being extremely worried about this. This was compared to only one in three men (32%).

Furthermore, although women were more likely than men to be extremely worried about their children's health and wellbeing in January 2019, the size of this gap had increased by January 2022. By this time, a majority of women with children (53%) but only one in three men with children (34%) reported substantial worries about their children's health and wellbeing.

In January 2022, women were not only more likely than men to be extremely worried about their parents' or about their children's health and wellbeing, but they were also more likely to be caught between worrying about both generations. As Figure 3 shows, women were twice as likely as men to be extremely worried about both their children and parents in

January 2022, with four out of 10 women (43%) compared to only two out of 10 men (21%) reporting being caught between worrying about both generations.

These newly developed differences were not only limited to people's concerns about their family's health and wellbeing. The latest data collected in January 2022 also suggested, perhaps unsurprisingly, that a gap between men and women had opened up when they were asked about their work-life

balance; three out of 10 women (31%) but only two out of 10 men (20%) reported being extremely worried about their work-life balance in January 2022 (Figure 4). Similarly, a gap developed with regards to people's worries about their level of education, qualifications and training; women were more than three times as likely as men to report substantial worries in this area in January 2022 (17% compared to 5%).

Fig 2. Proportion of men and women extremely worried about their parents' and about their children's health and wellbeing – January 2018 to January 2022

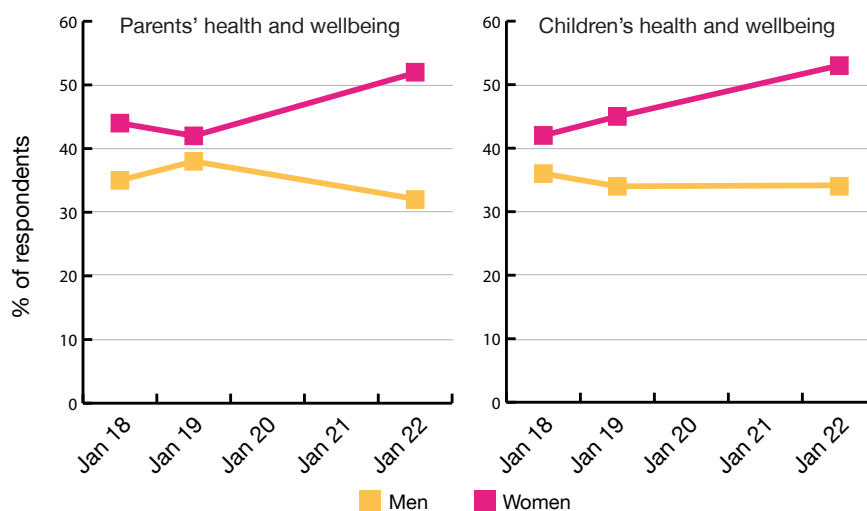


Fig 3. Proportion of men and women extremely worried about both their parents' and children's health and wellbeing – January 2018 to January 2022

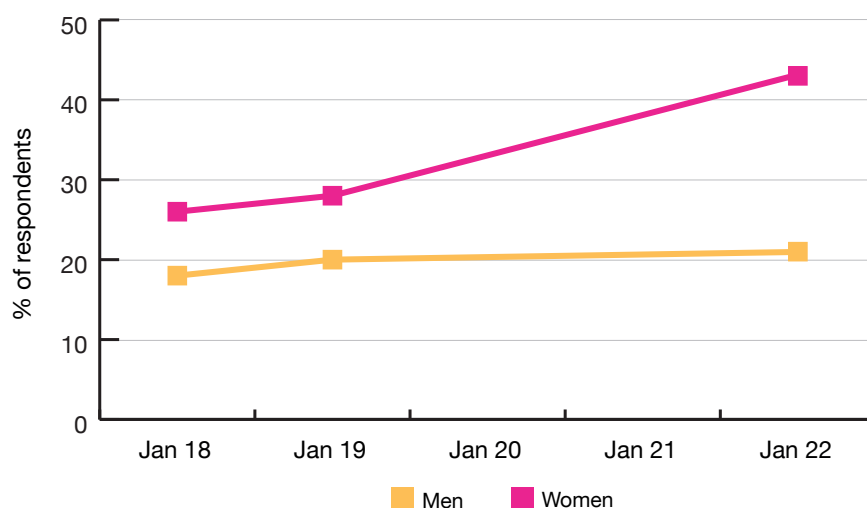
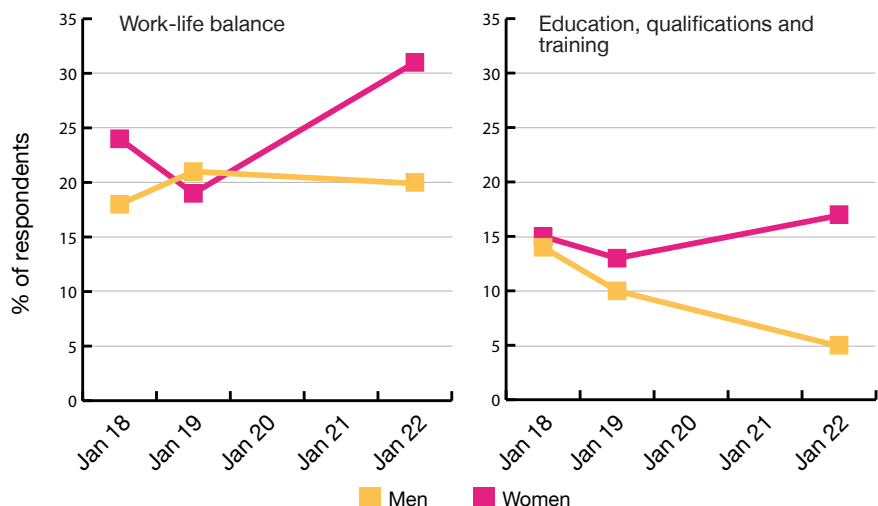


Fig 4. Proportion of men and women extremely worried about their work-life balance and education, qualifications and training – January 2018 to January 2022



While the biggest differences that had developed by the start of 2022 related to worries about people’s family’s health and wellbeing, **Figure 4** highlights how the recent gaps between men and women were not limited to the domestic sphere. People’s work-life balance became a particularly pertinent issue during the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly for women who take on the majority of caring responsibilities inside the home. This, along with factors related to employability such as education and training, were a greater worry for women than men in January 2022, almost two years after the start of pandemic.



Conclusions

Overall levels of worry in Britain were largely consistent in January 2018, January 2019 and January 2022. This was the case for both levels of worry in general and worries in specific areas of life. Although these data were collected at two time points before the start of the COVID-19 pandemic (January 2018 and January 2019) and one point since then (January 2022), this does not suggest that worries have increased across Britain overall during this time period.

This may be because there were already notable levels of worry across Britain; more than one in 10 adults reported worries in a majority of areas even before the COVID-19 pandemic. However, it might also be because, without data from the period of strictest lockdowns and highest number of COVID-19 deaths during the pandemic, we cannot determine if people’s worries increased to a higher peak during this period. Nonetheless, this analysis suggests that by January 2022, overall levels of worry were

generally in line with pre-pandemic levels. By this point, almost two years into the pandemic, the initial shock of the COVID-19 outbreak may have worn off, with many people either accepting the “new normal” or learning to adapt to the stresses brought about by the pandemic.

However, this conceals clear differences in the levels of worry that have developed across Britain. Women appear to have borne the brunt of an increase of worries between January 2018, January 2019 and January 2022. While levels of worry were, in most areas of life, similar for men and women before the COVID-19 pandemic, a gap appears to have opened in a number of areas, including those relating to families and to work. This may be because the COVID-19 pandemic increased the burden on many women who often had to deal with additional caring pressures and because many female-dominated employment sectors were particularly badly hit (from care work to the service industry). Even as the country returns to a “new normal”, women may still be experiencing a greater impact from the ongoing legacy and stress that the pandemic brought about.

Although Britain is starting to learn to live with COVID-19, there continue to be challenges ahead

that might lead to an increase in worries across Britain. In particular, the cost of living crisis is likely to increase people’s worries about their financial situation, particularly amongst those who are already struggling to get by, while there is still uncertainty as to the ongoing impact of COVID-19. If these challenges worsen, then the worries associated with them are also likely to intensify as people across the country try to balance potentially increasing and competing pressures on them and their families.

However, even if overall levels of worry remain relatively stable across Britain, this may continue to conceal important differences within the population. In particular, if the social, familial or financial burden of upcoming challenges falls disproportionately on women then we may also see an even greater divergence in levels of worry experienced by men and women across Britain.



Data and methods

Data from three waves of the NatCen Panel are used for this analysis. This allows us to analyse responses to identical questions from [data collected](#) from a nationally representative sample of people at three different time points, in January 2018 (n=2,199), January 2019 (n=2,048) and January 2022 (n=1,122). Data from January 2018 and January 2019 were collected as part of [Sainsbury's Living Well index](#). Although this project also collected data at additional time points, only data collected in January of each year was used in our analysis to avoid any seasonal effects impacting our findings. The January 2022 data was collected as a follow-up, with a smaller sample of respondents, to generate up-to-date insights on people's level of worry. We can therefore use this data to investigate changes in the reported worries of people across Britain at two points before the COVID-19 outbreak, and almost two years after it first hit Britain.

Each survey contained an identical set of questions asking respondents how much they worried about 16 different areas of life (their physical health, their mental health, their relationship with their partner or spouse, their relationship with their family, their relationship with their friends, their children's health and wellbeing, their partner or spouse's health and wellbeing, their parents' health and wellbeing, their work-life balance, their education, qualifications and training, their work situation, money or debt, their housing situation, how safe they feel in their local area, their appearance (including their weight and looks) and their social life). Respondents were only asked about the areas that were relevant to them. So, for example, only respondents with children were asked how much they worried about their children's wellbeing. Responses were collected on an 11-point scale from 0 ("not at all") to 10 ("a lot") to measure how much respondents reported worrying about each area.

For each question, respondents who indicated a level of worry of 8, 9 or 10 out of 10 were considered to be extremely worried about the specified area. These respondents are the focus of this analysis. To investigate respondents' general level of worry, an additional variable was created to indicate whether or not a respondent reported being extremely worried about a majority of the areas they were asked about in the survey.

Repeated cross-sectional analysis was used to compare levels of worry amongst adults across Britain at the three different time points. Survey weights were used to ensure that findings were representative of the population more widely. Weighted descriptive analysis was also used to compare responses for different sub-groups of the population, with levels of worry estimated for men and for women. Only significant differences in levels of worry are reported in this paper.

