



The  
University  
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Arts and  
Humanities  
Research Council

# British Academy Inquiry: What are the long-term societal effects of COVID-19?

## 1 About us and why we are responding

1.1 This evidence has been written by Dr Sarah Price and is submitted on behalf of a group of researchers at the University of Sheffield who are engaged in a UKRI-funded 12 month project focussed on the recovery of the Sheffield arts and cultural sector following the devastating impact of Covid-19. The research team is led by Professor Vanessa Toulmin, with academics specialising in arts engagement from Music and English Departments, and specialising in local planning and governance from within the Department of Urban Studies and Planning.

<https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/news/nr/covid-19-cultural-sector-help-recovery-plans-support-sheffield-uk-1.905435>

1.2 This evidence focuses specifically on **employment** in the arts and cultural sector, with consideration of the impact of COVID-19 on **inequalities** on employment in the creative sector. Evidence comes from a survey of freelance or casual arts workers in South Yorkshire (Sheffield, Barnsley, Rotherham and Doncaster) gathering information on how COVID-19 has impacted the availability of work, income, wellbeing and their thoughts on the future post-COVID.

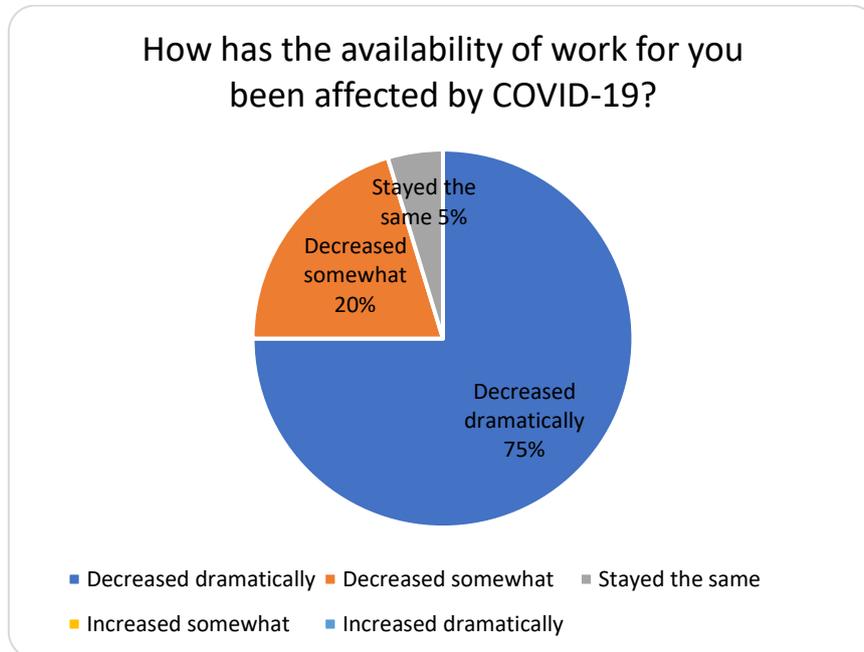
1.3 Responses were collected 27<sup>th</sup> October - 19<sup>th</sup> November 2020. The survey is still collecting responses and evidence in this report is from an interim analysis. 64 responses are included in the analysis. Some responses come from before the Second Lockdown announced on 31<sup>st</sup> October followed by an extension of the furlough scheme and an increase in payments through the Self-Employment Income Support Scheme.

1.4 The demographics of respondents were as follows:

- Age: 20-74, average age 43
- Gender: 48% Male, 45% Female
- 83% White British, 6% White Other Background, 5% Asian Indian, 3% Mixed / Multiple Ethnic Groups
- 10% have a disability, 13% have a long-term health condition
- Disadvantaged background: 18% of respondents reported that they were from a disadvantaged background

## 2 Reduction of work for freelancers in the arts and cultural sector due to COVID

2.1 The amount of available work has **decreased dramatically** for 75% of the 64 survey respondents. No respondents reported an increase in work since the start of the pandemic.



2.2 95% of respondents found that projects and events that they were due to work on were **cancelled**. Those who had been able to retain some work found that it had been harder to generate income from that work.

2.3 In particular, participants noted that it was **hard to generate income from online performances**, which did not come close to compensating for cancelled in-person events. Audiences appear to be unwilling to pay as much to view online work, and it was hard to stand out in a crowded online market.

2.4 We asked respondents to describe in their own words how the availability of work had changed. Respondents described how gigs, tours, shows, exhibitions and workshops had been cancelled during the first lockdown, and that this had in no way returned to normal as arts and cultural events were allowed to restart. Some respondents had been totally **out of work since the start of lockdown**.

"All the shows I had already booked in at local venues, including one next month, have been cancelled. ... I have not worked a show since February 26th."

"I went from a fully booked summer, April - Sept to zero within 10 days"

"The tour I was on in March got cut short and I've not had a day of normal work since."

"My industry shut down early August and I was forced to be without any income for six months."

- 2.5 Not only had events and contracts been cancelled during lockdown - respondents also described having an **empty diary** with no work booked in for the future. 67% said that new offers of work had reduced or stopped entirely.
- 2.6 The uncertainty of the future of COVID restrictions meant that bookings had been **indefinitely postponed** and there was no confidence in booking in-person events in the future.
- 2.7 Work in schools had all but stopped as they focussed on catching up on core subjects. Community groups and private teaching yielded mixed results, as some went ahead online or in person, but many individuals did not feel comfortable resuming activity in these ways. **Support should be given to schools** to find ways of continuing creative activities within COVID safety guidelines.

### 3 Financial hardship

- 3.1 Income has plummeted in 2020 for most respondents. Overall, respondents expected to make **less than half of their 2019 turnover in 2020**. Figures in italics show the turnover for only respondents who do not have a second job outside their creative work.

	Turnover for 2019	Projected turnover for 2020 before COVID	Revised expected turnover for 2020	Loss on projected 2020 turnover	Loss on 2019 turnover
<b>Monthly average per respondent</b>	£2,079	£2,111	£802	-£1,337 (-63%)	-£1,307 (-63%)
	<i>£2,300*</i>	<i>£2,361</i>	<i>£852</i>	<i>-£1,520 (-64%)</i>	<i>-£1,507 (-66%)</i>
<b>Yearly average per respondent</b>	£24,944	£25,327	£9,620	-£16,043 (-63%)	-£15,681 (-63%)
	<i>£27,597</i>	<i>£28,329</i>	<i>£10,227</i>	<i>-£18,245 (-64%)</i>	<i>-£18,087 (-66%)</i>
<b>TOTAL</b>	£1,247,191	£1,291,700	£519,488	-£754,012 (-58%)	-£737,003 (-59%)
	<i>£1,131,491</i>	<i>£1,161,500</i>	<i>£449,988</i>	<i>-£693,312 (-60%)</i>	<i>-£687,303 (-61%)</i>

\*Figures in italics show the turnover for only respondents who do not have a second job outside their creative work. All data in this table excludes two outliers of over £200k

- 3.2 While the Self-Employed Income Support Scheme has helped some, our survey also captured experiences of those who have been **excluded from COVID-19 financial support schemes**.

“I was ineligible for government support for freelancers as my income in the previous year was more than 50% from employment, despite the fact I had no employment at the time.”

“[Universal Credit] has been the saviour to my family. I’ve never had to apply before the Covid-19 pandemic.”

“It took 4 months for me to finally settle towards Universal Credit after trying and failing to qualify for other relief due to an inability to provide yearly reports because I was a freelancer full time for all of 3 months.”

3.3 The reduction in available work during this period has led respondents to have to **use savings** (55%), rely on a partner's income (43%), borrowing money from friends and family (30%) and relying on family or parents for support (17%).

3.4 More worryingly, many respondents appear to be getting themselves in **financial jeopardy** by using money set aside for tax (30%), using their overdraft (20%), using credit cards (18%) and defaulting on bills (7%). Some respondents were facing financial hardship:

"I basically have no income so have no idea how I am going to pay my bills"

"The income from [teaching private] lessons mainly covers studio rent, music license, insurance. The sale of tickets for shows and performances were for me to live."

"Yes. I cannot pay my rent and am fast approaching £5000 Rent arrears alone."

3.5 Almost half of the respondents (48%) were **worried about their ability to cover overheads**. While some respondents were financially stable at the moment, their savings were running out and they were concerned about being able to stay solvent in the future.

"I have used savings for now, but if my plans for 2021 are postponed for too long, then I will struggle with personal bills and subscriptions for my work."

"Although manageable in the short term (6-9 months) I am seriously worried about being able to cover the costs of a studio in the medium to long term."

3.6 Of the 37.5% who were did not have concerns about covering their overheads, the reasons for that were generally that their partner had a steady income, they had savings to rely on, or they had very low overheads to cover. This means that the **financial impact of COVID-19 will be far worse for arts workers from disadvantaged backgrounds** who do not have savings to fall back on, and those who are unable to turn to partners or family for support.

3.7 The **Self-Employment Income Support Scheme needs to be revised** so that a greater portion of freelancers are eligible for support. In particular, freelancers who pay tax through PAYE and casual workers with zero hours contracts are being unfairly excluded from both SEISS and furlough schemes.

## 4 Inequalities and barriers to employment

4.1 A key barrier to entering employment in this sector is precarity which has been exacerbated by the pandemic where there is so little work available. Previous research shows that this **precarity is a key driver of the lack of diversity** within the sector, since it is often only those who have the safety net of savings or financial support from family that are able to pursue a career in this sector. To encourage more diverse workers, there needs to be a shift from gig work to longer term job opportunities.

4.2 The biggest barriers that respondents faced were around a **loss of momentum** (73%) and **visibility** (60%) in their careers, as well as being unable to travel to take up work opportunities (58%).

4.3 **Loss of visibility is likely to impact arts freelancers unequally**. The hardest hit will be those who have been unable to take up work opportunities during the pandemic as a result of: increased caring responsibilities from home schooling or a lack of childcare; having health issues or grieving personal

loss as a result of COVID; or being clinically or demographically vulnerable to COVID and therefore not feeling safe to take up opportunities.

"I am nearly 65 and feeling my motivation has gone . I was also widowed in June and finding it difficult to get going again. I have had COVID and struggling to restore energy levels. I have resumed face to face teaching but am paying £12 to rent a room."

"[I have been] unfairly disadvantaged as a mother. Childcare (familial/community) no longer safe/available. Remaining performance opportunities definitely favour those with no childcare issues. Also unable to afford expensive tools for online broadcasts, filmmaking etc that colleagues have access to and are feted for."

- 4.4 In addition, the placement of much of the North of England into Tier 3 where indoor performances and amateur groups are largely prohibited risks **exacerbating existing inequalities in arts career opportunities for those in the North of England**, or outside London in general.
- 4.5 Respondents were concerned that the pandemic would **cause the sector to shrink**, meaning less work was available in the long run. Two-thirds of respondents (66%) felt that the availability of work would still not return to pre-COVID levels by autumn 2021. Advertised jobs and commissions were competitive and respondents felt very little hope of securing a contract amongst a "tsunami" of applications.
- 4.6 In our survey, 61% of respondents were considering or actively pursuing work outside the creative sector. Without additional financial support for freelance workers in the arts, continuing beyond lockdown to the point at which the cultural sector is thriving again, **we risk an exodus of creative talent from a sector** which was worth £111 billion to the UK economy before the pandemic.