

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-23-105999](#), a report to congressional committees

Why GAO Did This Study

For many years, employers have used telework to manage their business operations and to promote a better work-life balance for their employees. In this report, telework refers to a flexible work arrangement under which employees perform their duties from a worksite—often at home—other than the location from which they would otherwise work. More recently, telework became an important part of the national response to the COVID-19 pandemic, which emerged in the U.S. in early 2020.

GAO was asked to examine the impact of telework, both as it pertains to the workforce and various sectors of the economy. This report is the first in a series of reports that will respond to this request, and examines: (1) changes in the extent of telework in the United States before and during the COVID-19 pandemic, and (2) reported impacts of teleworking on worker productivity and firm performance. Subsequent reports will focus on public policies affecting telework, among other issues.

GAO used the ACS and ATUS to describe trends in the use of telework from 2010 through 2021, the most recent data available at the time of the analysis in May 2023, and the growth of telework by select worker characteristics between 2019 and 2021. GAO also reviewed 44 studies that met GAO criteria for methodological rigor and examined the relationship between telework and worker productivity and firm performance.

View [GAO-23-105999](#). For more information, contact Michael Hoffman at (202) 512-6445 or hoffmanme@gao.gov, or John Sawyer at (202) 512-7215 or sawyerj@gao.gov

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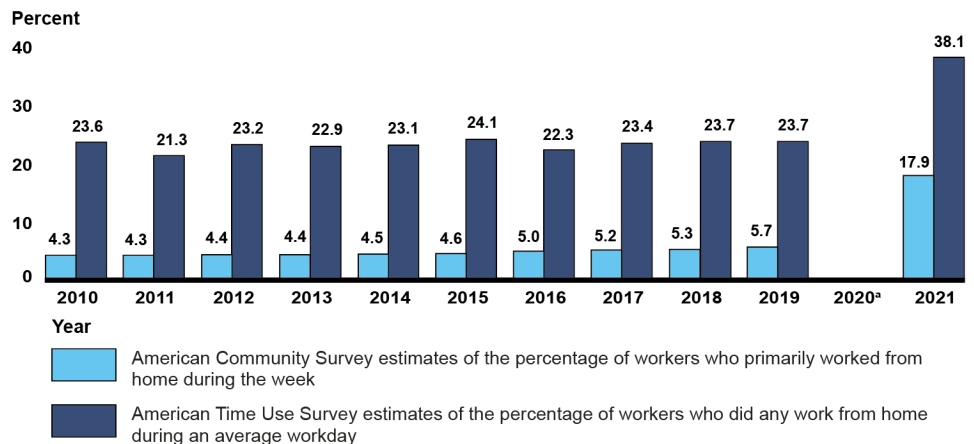
TELEWORK

Growth Supported Economic Activity during the Pandemic, but Future Impacts Are Uncertain

What GAO Found

The percentage of workers who worked from home (teleworked) rose sharply between 2019 and 2021 (see figure). The increase was concentrated among workers with higher earnings and education and in certain occupations, according to GAO's analysis of nationally representative survey data. Specifically, GAO's analysis of the American Time Use Survey (ATUS) found that the estimated percentage of workers who teleworked for any portion of an average workday increased from 24 percent in 2019 to 38 percent in 2021. Similarly, GAO's analysis of the American Community Survey (ACS) found that the estimated percentage of workers who primarily teleworked in the prior work week more than tripled from 5.7 percent in 2019 to 17.9 percent in 2021. The extent of telework also varied across occupations. For example, 28 percent of workers in management and related occupations primarily worked from home in 2021 compared to 7.5 percent of workers in service occupations. Despite increases in telework, most workers did not telework in 2021.

Estimated Percentage of U.S. Workers Who Primarily Worked from Home and Who Did Any Work at Home on an Average Workday, and during the Week, 2010–2021



Source: GAO analysis of data from the Census Bureau's American Community Survey (ACS) and the Bureau of Labor Statistics' American Time Use Survey (ATUS). | GAO-23-105999

^aData for 2020 are not shown because ACS 2020 1-year data and the 2020 annual ATUS estimates failed to meet Census Bureau's quality standards for publication.

Studies GAO reviewed found that telework generally had a positive impact on worker productivity and firm performance in certain sectors, but methodological issues complicate efforts to estimate its long-term impacts. For example, a study of a Chinese call center found that telework increased productivity by 13 percent. Some studies also found that telework mitigated the negative impact of the pandemic on firm performance and the economy. Estimating the long-term impacts of telework is difficult however because some economic effects may emerge only over time. For example, studies GAO reviewed identified potential cost savings from reduced office space needs and potential collaboration challenges that could impact worker productivity or firm performance in the longer run.