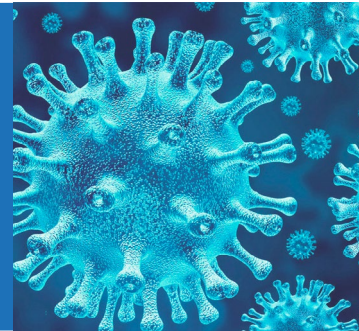


Well protected at work? Occupational safety and health in the Corona pandemic from the employees' point of view



baua: Report brief

For over a year, the Corona pandemic has presented companies and employees with special challenges in the development and implementation of, as well as compliance with, occupational safety and health measures. Data from a supplementary survey by the Socio-Economic Panel (SOEP) show that personal occupational safety and health measures are implemented at a high level, whereas organisational measures are used less frequently. The findings also illustrate different priorities for measures in different occupational groups.

Everyday working life in the Corona pandemic – a survey provides information

The ongoing epidemic situation in Germany is continuing to have an impact on day-to-day operations in spring 2021 – and thus also on employees. In order to find out how employees perceive the implementation of pandemic-specific occupational safety and health measures in companies, the Federal Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (BAuA) together with the SOEP analysed the data of the supplementary survey SOEP-CoV¹.

DATA BASIS

As part of the supplementary survey SOEP-CoV, the Socio-Economic Panel (SOEP) and Bielefeld University interviewed people from about 6,700 households. So far, data has been collected in two rounds of surveys: from April to June 2020 and from January to February 2021. The aim was to gain insights into the socio-economic factors and consequences of the spread of Corona in Germany (Kühne et al., 2020). Among other things, respondents provided information about their employment situation during the pandemic. Based on these data, the Federal Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (BAuA) carried out analyses regarding occupational safety and health in the Coronapandemic in cooperation with the SOEP. The analyses focussed on employees up to and including the age of 65 who were interviewed by telephone from May 2020 on occupational safety and health measures in their companies (survey round 1: 940 persons, survey round 2: 2,654 persons). Weighting of the data compensates for biases and enables representative statements for employees in Germany.

Occupational safety and health measures 2020 and 2021 – personal protective measures at a high level

The SOEP-CoV survey contains information from respondents on the implementation of various occupational safety and health measures to contain the Corona virus. These can be divided into personal and organisational occupational safety and health measures. Personal protective measures are, for example, distancing rules, or the provision of mouth/nose masks, disinfectants and other hygiene products. Examples of organisational measures are the reduction of contact frequency by reorganising tasks or teams and the release from duties of vulnerable persons. Individual changes in the work situation, such as the possibility of partial or full use of working from home, and flexible working hours, are also considered as organisational measures. In addition to the analysis of individual measures, which are based on the individual level of knowledge and information provided by employees, sum scores for personal (max. 4) and organisational measures (max. 5) are also considered.

In January/February 2021, the majority of employees reported that personal measures had been taken in their company (Fig. 1). For example, 95 % of employees say disinfectants had been provided. Ninety per cent reported the provision of mouth/nose masks. Organisational occupational safety and health measures, on the other hand, were implemented much less frequently. For example, about half of the employees reported that a company-related measure was the reorganisation of working tasks (57 %) or teams (48 %) to reduce contact frequency. With regard to the individual Corona-related work situation, one third of employees confirmed that they work partially or completely from home. It must be taken into account that not every activity is suitable for the implementation of organisational mea-

¹ cf. <https://soep-cov.de>

asures (especially working from home). Only 2 % of employees state that none of the personal measures requested have been taken in their company, whereas for 22 % none of the organisational measures have been introduced.

A comparison of the implementation of the various occupational safety and health measures between the first round of surveys from May to July 2020 with the second in January/February 2021 shows a trend: while significantly more employees in the second round of the survey report on the introduction of various personal measures – apart from distancing rules – significantly fewer employees state that organisational occupational safety and health measures are taken in their company. The difference is most marked in the release from duties of vulnerable persons (54 % in survey round 1 vs. 33 % in survey round 2) and in employees whose work situation has changed due to more flexible working hours in the course of the Corona pandemic (32 % in survey round 1 vs. 12 % in survey round 2).

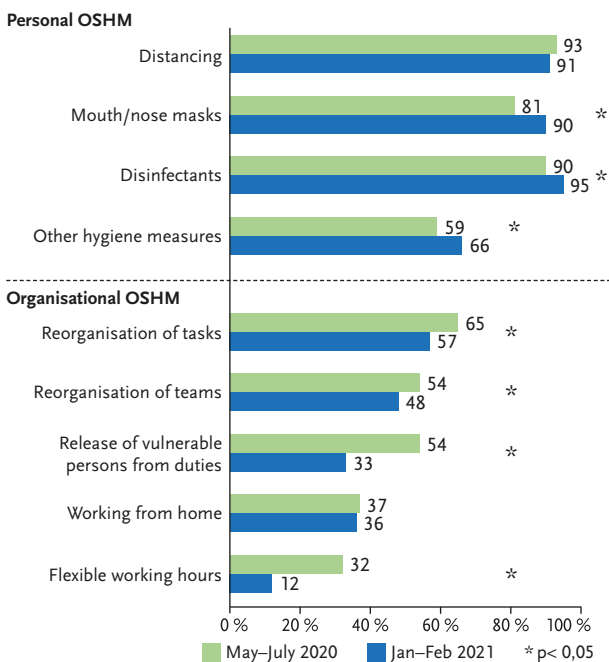


Fig. 1 The data include the occupational safety and health measures (OSHM) taken by the company in comparison between survey round 1 (N_{unweighted} =909) and survey round 2 (N_{unweighted} =2596), where working from home and flexible working hours explicitly refer to information on the individual Corona-related work situation of employees. Database: SOEP-CoV, weighted data, rounded.

The data can be related to the development of occupational safety and health-related regulations. After many companies had already taken the first measures in March 2020

(Adolph et al., 2021), with the introduction of the occupational health and safety standard² in April a guideline was provided that already gave recommendations for the organisation of occupational safety and health at an early stage in the epidemic. According to employees, measures such as the introduction of distancing rules or the provision of disinfectants were implemented particularly frequently from May to July 2020. Protective measures such as the provision of masks (survey round 1: 81 %, survey round 2: 90 %) were only widely introduced in the further course of the epidemic. In addition to the availability of protective masks, this can also be related to the concretisation of the rules by the SARS-CoV-2 occupational safety and health rule³ or the stricter provisions of the SARS-CoV-2 Occupational Health and Safety Ordinance⁴.

Does the occupation make a difference? Existence of occupational safety and health measures in various occupational segments

Looking at the number of reported personal measures by occupation (Fig. 2), there are hardly any differences between them. For example, employees in IT/natural science service occupations (service occupations), business related service occupations or occupations in commerce and trade report an average of 3.3 (out of a maximum of 4) personal measures taken. In (non-) medical health care occupations, the score is 3.6. On the other hand, there are clearer differences in the number of organisational measures taken. For example, whereas in social and cultural service occupations an average of 2.4 (out of a maximum of 5) organisational measures were implemented, in manufacturing occupations this figure is 1.0. Looking at the individual measures (not shown), the clearest differences can be seen in working from home as well as in the reorganisation of work tasks. Here, too, it must be taken into account that the organisational occupational safety and health measures considered are not equally suitable for every job.

² BMAS (2021). SARS-CoV-2 Occupational Safety and Health Standard. https://www.bmas.de/SharedDocs/Downloads/DE/Arbeitsschutz/sars-cov-2-arbeitsschutzstandard.pdf?__blob=publicationFile&v=1

³ BAuA (2020). SARS-CoV-2 Occupational Safety Rule. GMBI 2020, p. 484-495 (No 24/2020 of 20.08.2020), amended: GMBI 2021 p. 227-232 (No 11/2021 of 22.02.2021).
Retrievable at: www.baua.de/SARS-CoV-2-Arbeitsschutzregel

⁴ BMAS (2021). SARS-CoV-2 Occupational Health and Safety Ordinance. https://www.gesetze-im-internet.de/corona-arbschv_2021-07/ (retrieved 02.09.2021)

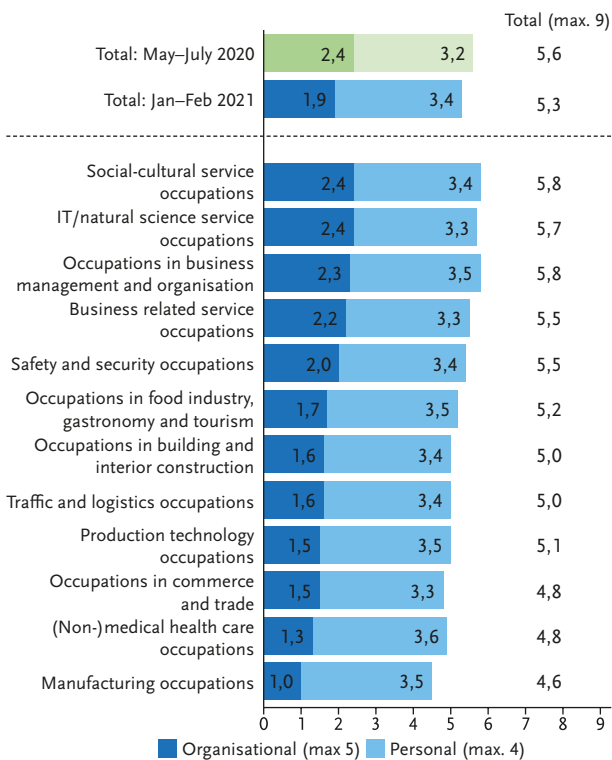


Fig. 2 Information on personal and organisational occupational safety and health measures taken by the company by occupational segment (KldB 2010), whereby working from home and flexible working hours refer to information on the individual Corona-related work situation of employees. Occupations in cleaning services, and occupations in agriculture, forestry and horticulture, are not shown due to insufficient number of cases ($N_{unweighted} < 60$). Database: SOEP-CoV 2020/2021 (survey round 1, $N_{unweighted} = 940$, survey round 2, $N_{unweighted} = 2654$), weighted data, rounding errors possible.

How are the occupational safety and health measures evaluated by the workforce?

Overall, 98 % of employees report that at least one of the infection protection measures surveyed has been introduced. In addition to the mere introduction of occupational safety and health measures, compliance with them plays a central role. Overall, at the beginning of 2021, 86 % of employees for whom at least one measure was implemented agreed (fully/rather) with the statement that compliance with measure(s) is ensured in the company. However, there are also clear differences between different occupations here. (Fig. 3). For example, while 91 % of employees in occupations in food industry, gastronomy and tourism rate compliance as full or more likely, only 84 % of employees in business related, social and cultural service occupations, and only 76 % of employees in traffic and logistics occupations agree. Compared to the data from survey round 1, the estimated compliance with occupational safety and health measures has increased significantly – especially among employees in safety and security occupations, traffic and logistics occupations, as well as

occupations in food industry, gastronomy and tourism. It should be borne in mind that these results do not necessarily reflect actual compliance in the company, since the assessments of respondents are also likely to be characterised by individual and occupational cultural characteristics. However, the differences by occupational segment are also reflected in regression analyses (not shown), which control for socio-demographic and company characteristics. Overall, the results thus provide indications as to the occupational segments in which efforts to comply with occupational safety and health measures can be improved.

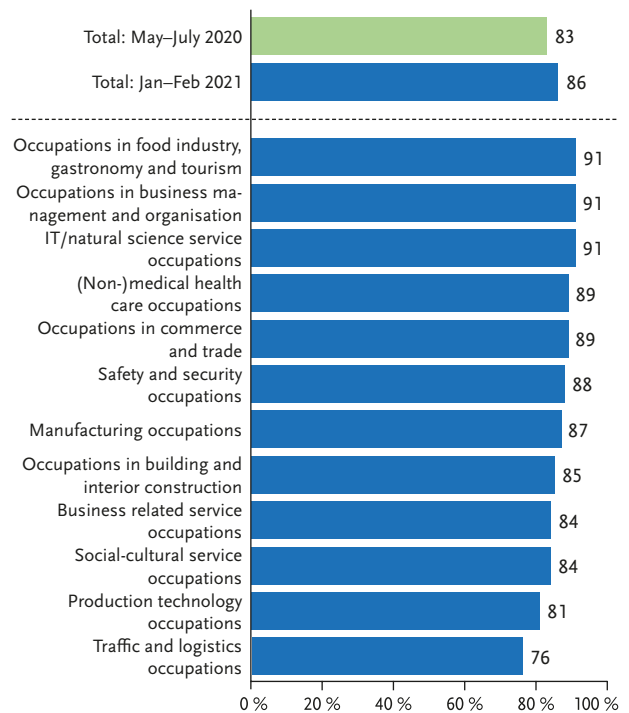


Fig. 3 Compliance with occupational safety and health measures (agree fully/tend to agree) in the company by occupational segment (KldB 2010). Occupations in cleaning services, and occupations in agriculture, forestry and horticulture are not shown due to insufficient number of cases ($N_{unweighted} < 60$). Database: SOEP-CoV 2020/2021, survey round 1, $N_{unweighted} = 920$; survey round 2, $N_{unweighted} = 2596$, weighted data, rounding errors possible.

A similar picture can be seen in the employees’ assessment of the extent to which occupational safety and health measures that are taken are appropriate or not far-reaching enough (Fig. 4). For example, 19 % of employees in social and cultural service occupations and 12 % of employees in traffic and logistics occupations find that the occupational safety and health measures taken are not far-reaching enough, whereas this only applies to 4 % of employees in IT/natural science service occupations. A large proportion of employees as a whole consider the occupational safety and health measures taken to be appropriate (survey round 1: 90 %, survey round 2: 85 %), only very few employees consider them to be too far-reaching.

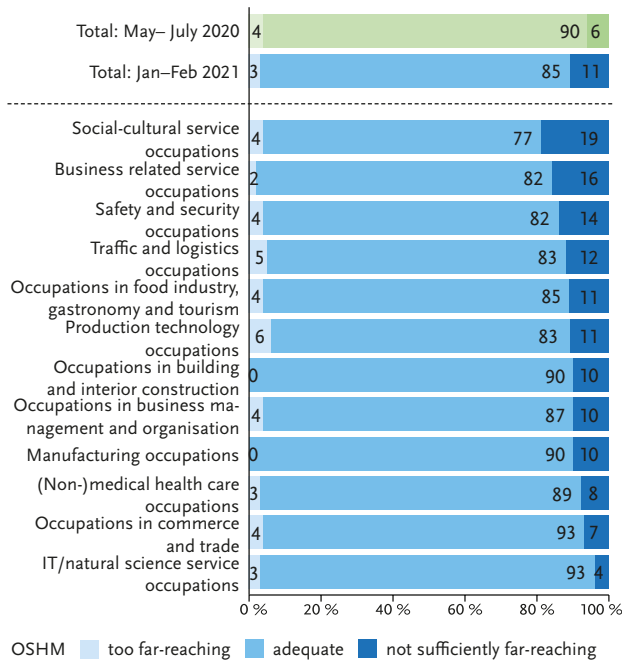


Fig. 4 Assessment of the adequacy of the occupational safety and health measures (OSHM) taken in the company by occupational segment (KldB 2010). Occupations in cleaning services, and occupations in agriculture, forestry and horticulture are not shown due to insufficient number of cases ($N_{unweighted} < 60$) not shown. Database: SOEP-CoV 2020/2021, survey round 1, $N_{unweighted} = 912$; survey round 2, $N_{unweighted} = 2598$, weighted data, rounding errors possible.

Conclusions

Workers in Germany report that numerous occupational safety and health measures have been taken in the course of the Corona pandemic. In particular, the provision of disinfectants and the introduction of distancing rules were confirmed by over 90 % of employees in January/February 2021. According to 98 % of employees, at least one of the measures surveyed was taken in the company. A clear dominance of personal measures compared to organisational measures can be observed, which is even stronger in a time comparison and is also confirmed by other studies (Adolph et al., 2021; Robelski et al., 2020). This may be due to the fact that personal occupational safety and health measures are easier to implement and are more dynamically adaptable. Also, some organisational measures may have proven to be suitable only for a short-term response to the risk of infection. In view of the observed decline in the organisational measures considered, it should be borne in mind that they are not equally suitable for every job. Nevertheless, the question arises as to whether uncertainties about (regulatory) framework conditions, company-related reservations or changed necessities (e.g. with regard to the exemption of vulnerable persons) are con-

sidered to be further triggers here. Should it turn out that the reduction is due to a shift of occupational health and safety responsibility to employees, this would have to be critically evaluated from an occupational safety and health perspective. Rather, occupational safety and health measures should, as far as possible, be carried out according to the ranking of the TOP principle (technology, organisation, person), as described by the SARS-CoV-2 occupational health and safety standard (BMAS, 2021).

Eighty-six per cent of employees for whom at least one measure was implemented agree fully or tend to agree with the statement that occupational safety and health measures are complied with in their company. Nevertheless, there are also different assessments for some occupational segments. Overall, an increase in compliance with occupational safety and health measures can be observed across almost all occupations at the beginning of this year compared to the first survey round. Nevertheless, it is clear that there is further potential for better compliance with measures.

English translation. German original available: doi:10.21934/baua:berichtkompakt20210504

References

Adolph, L., Eickholt, C., Tausch, A. & Trimpop, R. (2021). SARS-CoV-2-Arbeits- und Infektionsschutzmaßnahmen in deutschen Betrieben: Ergebnisse einer Befragung von Arbeitsschutzexpertinnen und -experten. Dortmund: Bundesanstalt für Arbeitsschutz und Arbeitsmedizin 2021, DOI: 10.21934/baua:fokus20210205. Abrufbar unter www.baua.de/DE/Angebote/Publikationen/Fokus/SARS-CoV-2-Befragung.html

Kühne, S., Kroh, M., Liebig, S. & Zinn, S. (2020). The need for household panel surveys in times of crisis: the case of SOEP-CoV. *Survey Research Methods*, 14(2), 195–203.

Robelski, S., Steidelmüller, C. & Pohlen, L. (2020). Betrieblicher Arbeitsschutz in der Corona-Krise. Dortmund: Bundesanstalt für Arbeitsschutz und Arbeitsmedizin 2020, DOI: 10.21934/baua:berichtkompakt20201012. www.baua.de/DE/Angebote/Publikationen/Berichtkompakt/Betrieblicher-Arbeitsschutz-Corona.html