Post-covid geographies of work and home: 
Implications for social and spatial inequalities

Supervisor: Dr David McCollum
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Topic area: Quantitative data analysis in population or environmental geography

Background
Dating back to the early development of agricultural systems over 10,000 years ago, proximity to where people derive their livelihood has largely determined where they live. Advances in transport and Information Communication Technologies have, for some people and in some places, since loosened the relationship between place of work and place of residence. However, the covid-19 health crisis and the associated shifts that it has brought about in working practices and residential preferences has potentially fundamentally reordered the nexus between where people work and where they live, perhaps indefinitely. Pre-pandemic, in the UK only around a quarter of the workforce reported doing any homeworking. By April 2020, a month into the first national lockdown, this figure had doubled. It remains to be seen whether, post-pandemic, around half of the workforce will continue to earn their livelihoods away from traditional workplaces. Such a structural shift towards home and remote working will have significant implications for the economic and social geographies of the UK and elsewhere. Might, for example, larger urban areas haemorrhage jobs and population whilst some rural ones increasingly attract footloose remote workers? Anecdotal evidence abounds of a professional exile from cities towards coastal locales. However, as of yet, the nature and consequences of these developments have not been studied in a systematic, empirically grounded manner. Understanding and communicating these will be the core objective of this project.

Critically, changing working practices and residential preferences will be evaluated through the lens of social and spatial inequalities. Over two-thirds of those in professional occupations worked remotely during the pandemic, but the equivalent figure for workers in roles towards the bottom of the occupational hierarchy was less than a fifth. Correspondingly, over half of London employees worked remotely but only a third did so in the West Midlands. The prevalence and longevity of covid-19 related changes in working practices thus has considerable scope to exacerbate existing cleavages between more footloose, higher skilled professionals and their lower earning compatriots, who remain physically tied to specific workplaces. The attendant shifts in residential preferences that have followed the widespread adaptation of remote working practices also pose questions about inequalities. Recent research points to rural and coastal housing markets being distorted by an influx of professionals from cities, rendering housing unaffordable for existing residents. Likewise, the older industrial regions that are ostensibly the focus on the UK Government’s ‘levelling up’ agenda may struggle to retain and attract human capital in an era when most higher skilled workers have greater autonomy to work and thus live in a place of their choosing. The issues touched upon above are some of the myriad of questions and challenges that a pandemic induced reconfigured work-home relationship raises. This project will elucidate these, assess their implications for social and spatial inequalities and, in consultation with policymakers and other relevant stakeholders, proactively raise awareness of and promote effective responses to them.
Objectives
The first phase of the research will take a quantitative approach in order to generate a detailed account of preferences and practices in relation to work and home pre, during and post pandemic. This will actively inform the more qualitative second phase, which will engage with key stakeholders to add explanatory power to the findings via a focus on the processes that are driving these changes and their implications. Issues of particular foci in the research include:

1. How working practices have changed pre, during and post-pandemic.
2. The extent to which these changes are socially and spatially differentiated.
3. The changing geography of residential mobility within the UK.
4. Socio-economic variations in residential preferences and the extent to which population sub-groups are able to actualise them.
5. How levels and determinants of job and residential satisfaction have changed pre, during and post-pandemic.

Data and Methodology
This first phase of the research will involve the student undertaking an analysis of a range of statistical datasets to chronicle how working and residential practices and preferences have changed, with particular attention to the socio-economic and spatial dimensions of these developments. This will enable the creation of a typology of how particular types of places are being reshaped by the changing work-home nexus. This will in turn inform a case study approach, which forms part of the subsequent qualitative phase of the research.

The UK has a rich vein of high quality secondary statistical data available to social scientists. This research will mostly draw on datasets which are available via the UK Data Service and which contain individual-level data pertaining to people’s changing attitudes, behaviours and circumstances in relation to their working and home lives. Changes in working practices and residential preferences, and their socio-economic and spatial dynamics, will be the focus of the analysis. Key datasets include: census data, Understanding Society, the Annual Population Survey, the British Social Attitudes survey, the ONS UK House Price Index and ONS internal migration statistics.

The programme specified above will generate original insights into post-pandemic geographies of work and home, and the extent to which they are socially differentiated. The second phase of this research will shed light on the processes which sit behind these trends. To enable this, a suite of in-depth qualitative interviews will be conducted with key national stakeholders in the labour and housing market arenas. Drawing on the typology created by the statistical analysis, additional stakeholder interviews will be undertaken with those who can offer insights into the dynamics of these changes in the context of specific types of places. The case study approach will focus on particular geographical areas, with key stakeholder interviews in each. The benefit of the case study element is that it will create insights into how the global pandemic has influenced the fortunes of specific types of places and the residents and businesses within them.