

Article

Sickness absence in the UK labour market: 2022

Sickness absence rates of workers in the UK labour market, including number of days lost and reasons for absence.

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1 . Main points

- The sickness absence rate - the percentage of working hours lost because of sickness or injury rose to 2.6% in 2022, an increase of 0.4 percentage points from 2021 and the highest it has been since 2004, when it was 2.7%.
- An estimated 185.6 million working days were lost because of sickness or injury in 2022; this level was a record high, but the number of days lost per worker, at 5.7, was not.
- The most common reason for sickness absence was minor illnesses, accounting for 29.3% of occurrences.
- All age groups experienced increases in their sickness absence rate in 2022.
- Groups with the highest rates of sickness absence in 2022 included women, older workers, those with long-term health conditions, people working part-time, and people working in care, leisure, or other service occupations.

Warning: Caution should be taken when analysing and comparing total days lost or days lost per worker for 2020 and 2021, because of the impact of furloughed workers and policy during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. Please see [Section 7: Data sources and quality for more details](#).

2 . How sickness absence has changed over time

The coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic affected sickness absences in many ways. While the virus may have led to additional absences, measures such as furloughing, social distancing, shielding and increased homeworking helped to reduce other causes of absence in 2020. However, the reduction to the furlough scheme and its eventual end in September 2021, coupled with the decline in homeworking, shielding, and social distancing policies, and new COVID-19 variants, led to a rise in sickness absence in 2021 to above pre-pandemic levels.

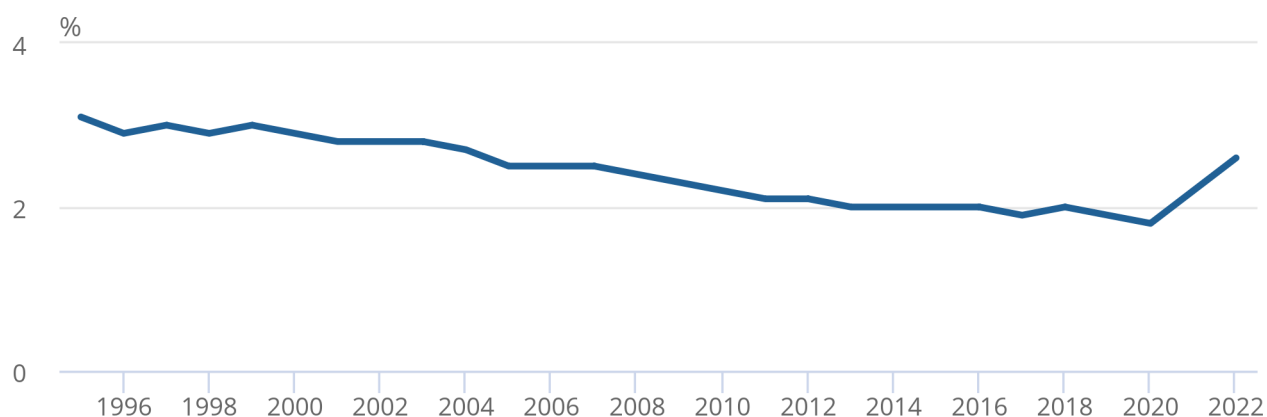
The sickness absence rate (the percentage of working hours lost because of sickness or injury) increased to 2.6% in 2022, an increase of 0.4 percentage points from 2021 and up 0.7 percentage points from its pre-pandemic 2019 level. It is now at its highest point since 2004, when it was 2.7%.

Figure 1: The sickness absence rate rose to 2.6% in 2022; this is the highest sickness absence rate since 2004

Sickness absence rate, for all people in employment aged 16 years and over, UK, 1995 to 2022

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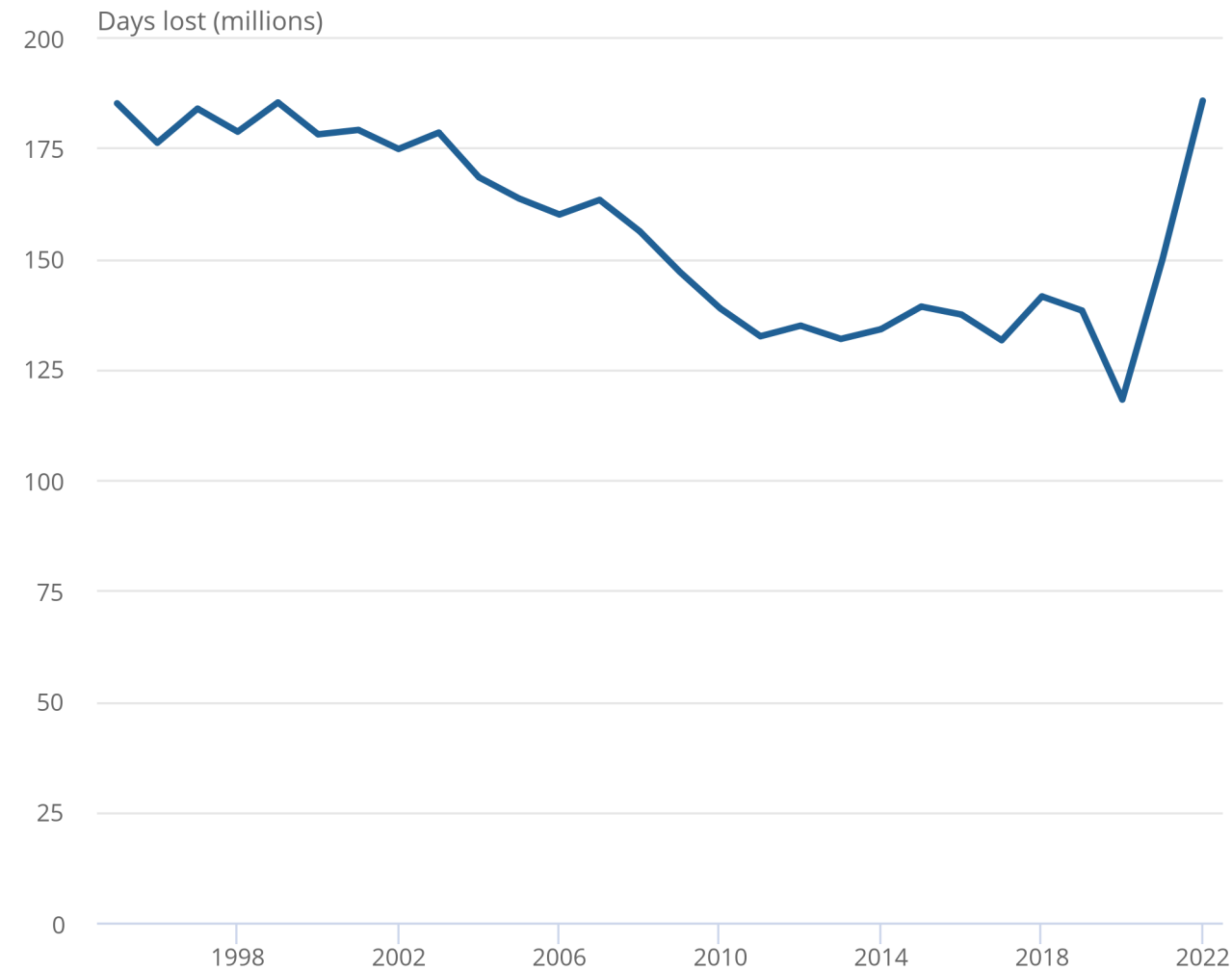
Source: Labour Force Survey from the Office for National Statistics

Figure 2: The number of days lost to sickness absence has increased to a record high in 2022 after remaining relatively flat in the 10 years leading up to the pandemic

Total days lost to sickness absence, for all people in employment aged 16 years and over, UK, 1995 to 2022

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Total days lost to sickness absence, for all people in employment aged 16 years and over, UK, 1995 to 2022



Source: Labour Force Survey from the Office for National Statistics

The number of working days lost because of sickness or injury was an estimated 185.6 million working days in 2022, a new record high. This represents an increase of 35.8 million from 2021 and 47.4 million more than its pre-pandemic 2019 level. While the number of working days lost was a record high in 2022, days lost per worker was not, as the total number of workers in the UK has risen since the 1990s. The number of days lost per worker was 5.7 in 2022.

Caution should be taken when analysing total days lost and days lost per worker for 2020 and 2021, because of the impact of furloughed workers and policy during the coronavirus pandemic. For more information see [Section 7: Data sources and quality](#).

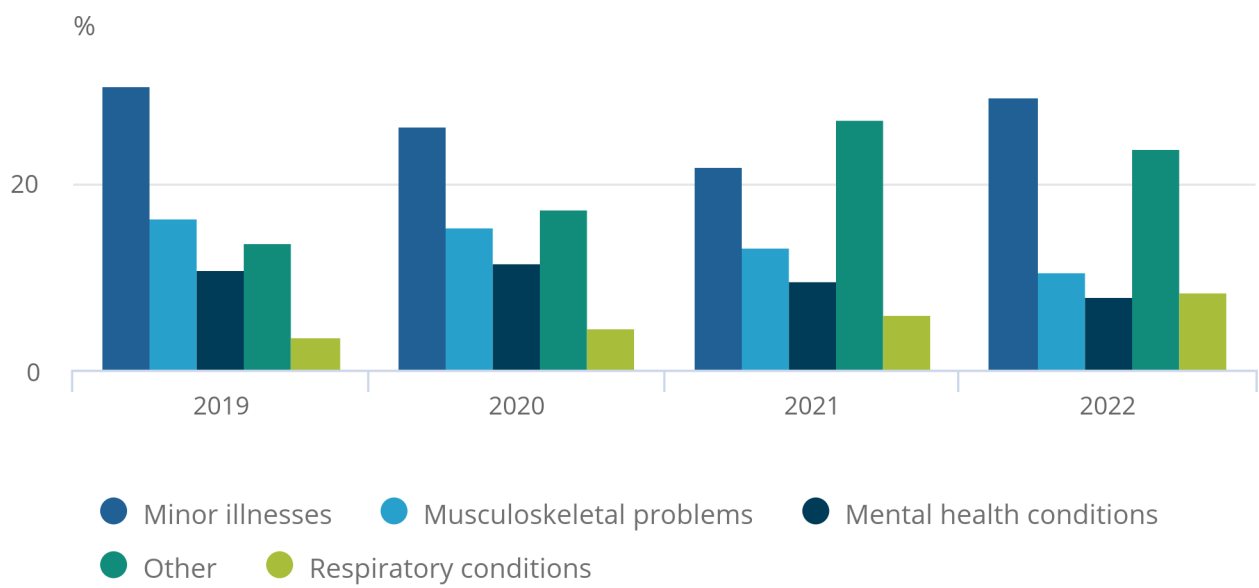
3 . Reasons for sickness absence

Figure 3: “Respiratory conditions” has overtaken “mental health conditions” to become the fourth most common reason for sickness absence in 2022

Percentage of occurrences of sickness absence, by top five reasons in 2022, UK, 2019 to 2022

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Percentage of occurrences of sickness absence, by top five reasons in 2022, UK, 2019 to 2022



Source: Labour Force Survey from the Office for National Statistics

Notes:

1. The percentage of occurrences is the percentage of times a specific reason was given for hours lost because of sickness.
2. Definitions of reasons can be found in the Glossary.
3. "Other" includes coronavirus (COVID-19), accidents, poisonings, infectious diseases, skin disorders and diabetes.
4. Reasons not included in the top four can be found in the data tables.

Minor illnesses were the most common reason given for sickness absence in 2022, accounting for 29.3% of occurrences of sickness absence. This was followed by "other" conditions at 23.8%, musculoskeletal problems at 10.5%, respiratory conditions at 8.3% and mental health conditions at 7.9%.

Minor illnesses have increased sharply in 2022 to nearly the same proportion of occurrences as pre-coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic 2019 levels. "Other" conditions (which includes COVID-19) has fallen to the second most common reason for occurrences of sickness absence, after being the top reason in 2021.

Respiratory conditions have overtaken mental health conditions as the fourth most common reason for sickness absence in 2022, accounting for more than twice the proportion of occurrences they did before the pandemic.

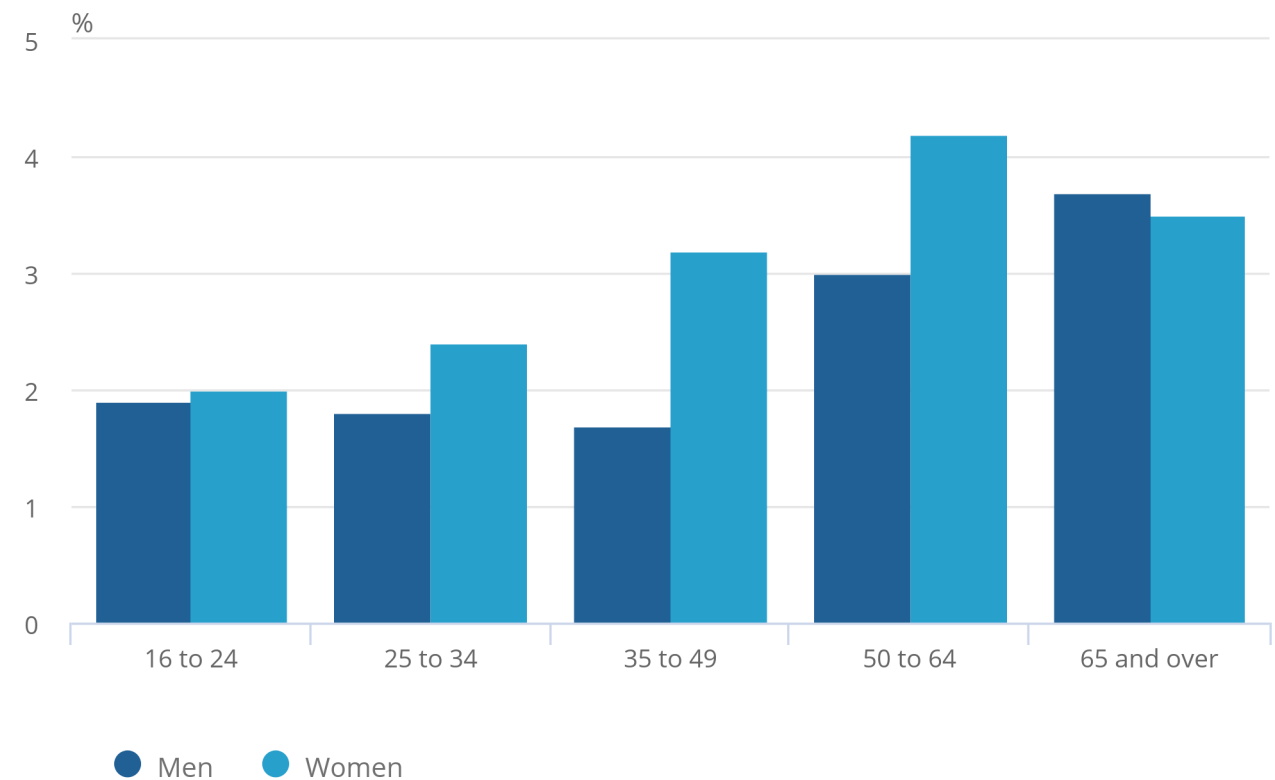
4 . Groups with highest sickness absence rates

Figure 4: The sickness absence rate was higher for women in most age groups in 2022

Sickness absence rate, by age group and sex, UK, 2022

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Sickness absence rate, by age group and sex, UK, 2022



Source: Labour Force Survey from the Office for National Statistics

The sickness absence rate rose for all age groups in 2022. For those aged 65 years and over, the sickness absence rate increased again to 3.7%, an increase of 0.5 percentage points and the highest on record.

Sickness absence rates continued to be lower for men than women, as they have consistently been since 1995. In 2022, the sickness absence rate for men was 2.2% and for women 3.2%.

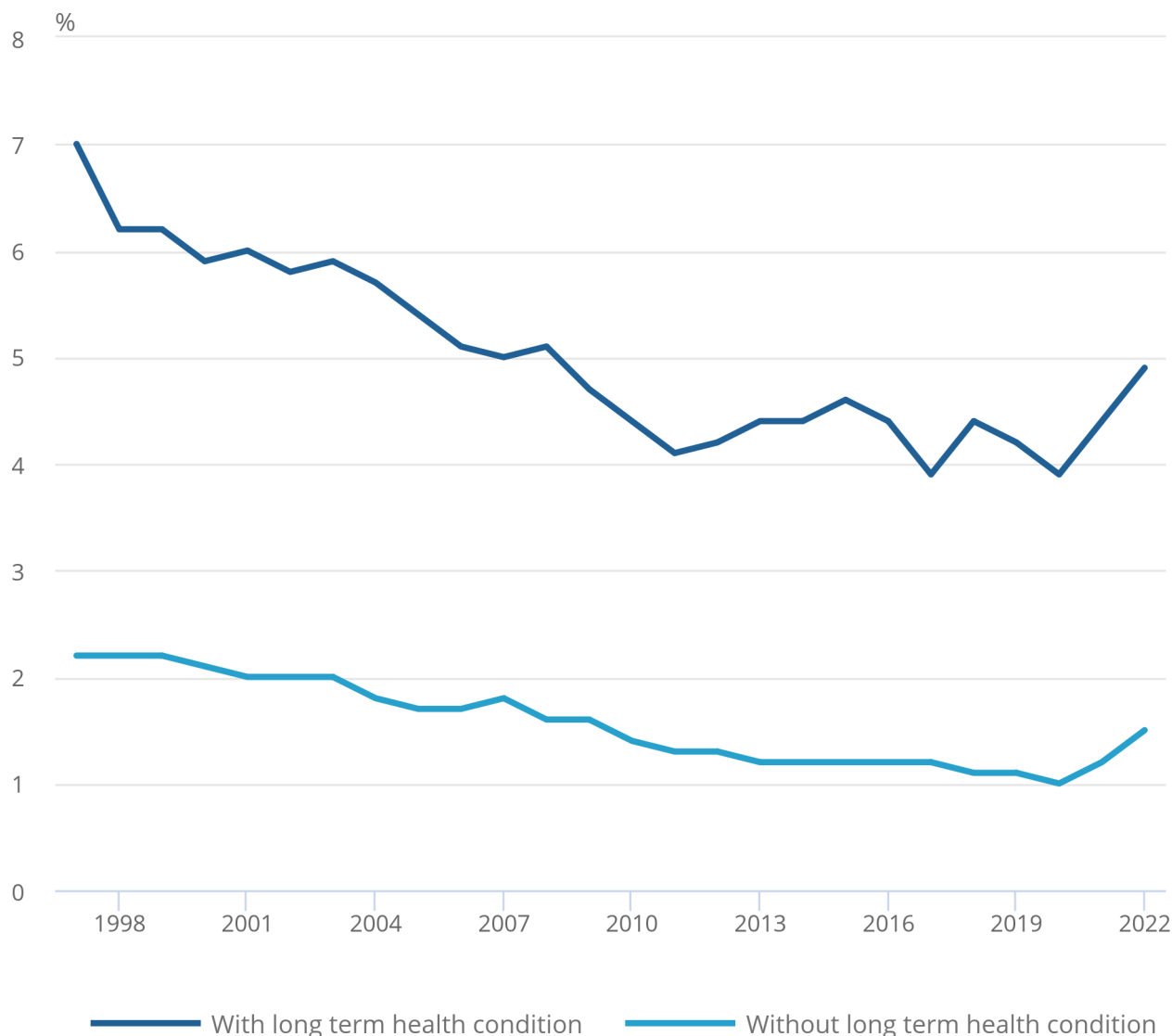
Rates increased in 2022 in all age groups for men, and all age groups for women except those aged 16 to 24 years. Rates were higher for women than men in 2022 in all age groups except for those aged 65 years and over.

Figure 5: Sickness absence rate for those with long-term health conditions has increased to highest point since 2008

Sickness absence rate by long-term sickness, UK, 1997 to 2022

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Sickness absence rate by long-term sickness, UK, 1997 to 2022



Source: Labour Force Survey from the Office for National Statistics

At 4.9%, the sickness absence rate for those with long-term health conditions is at its highest point since 2008, when it was 5.1%. The number of days lost to sickness absence for those with long-term health conditions is now at a record high of 104.9 million days.

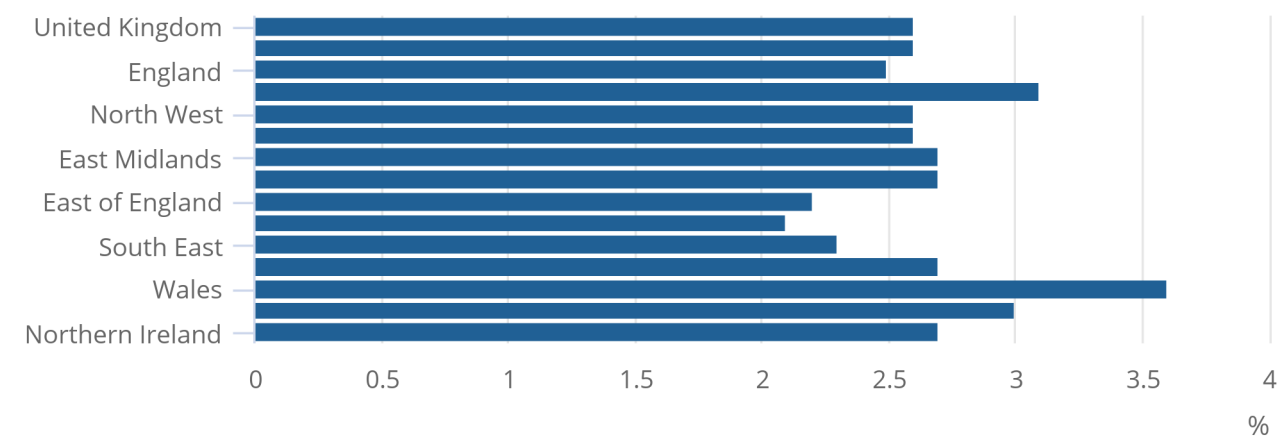
Our recent analysis showed that [half a million more people are out of the labour force because of long-term sickness than in 2019](#). Despite record numbers exiting the labour market and becoming economically inactive because of long-term sickness, absence rates for those with long-term conditions still in the workforce have increased.

Figure 6: Those living in London had the lowest sickness absence rate in 2022

Sickness absence rate, by UK country or English region of residence, 2022

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Sickness absence rate, by UK country or English region of residence, 2022



Source: Labour Force Survey from the Office for National Statistics

In 2022, as in previous years, workers living in London had the lowest sickness absence rate, at 2.1%, and those living in Wales had the highest rate, at 3.6%.

All countries and English regions experienced an increase from 2021 to 2022, except for the East of England, which saw no change.

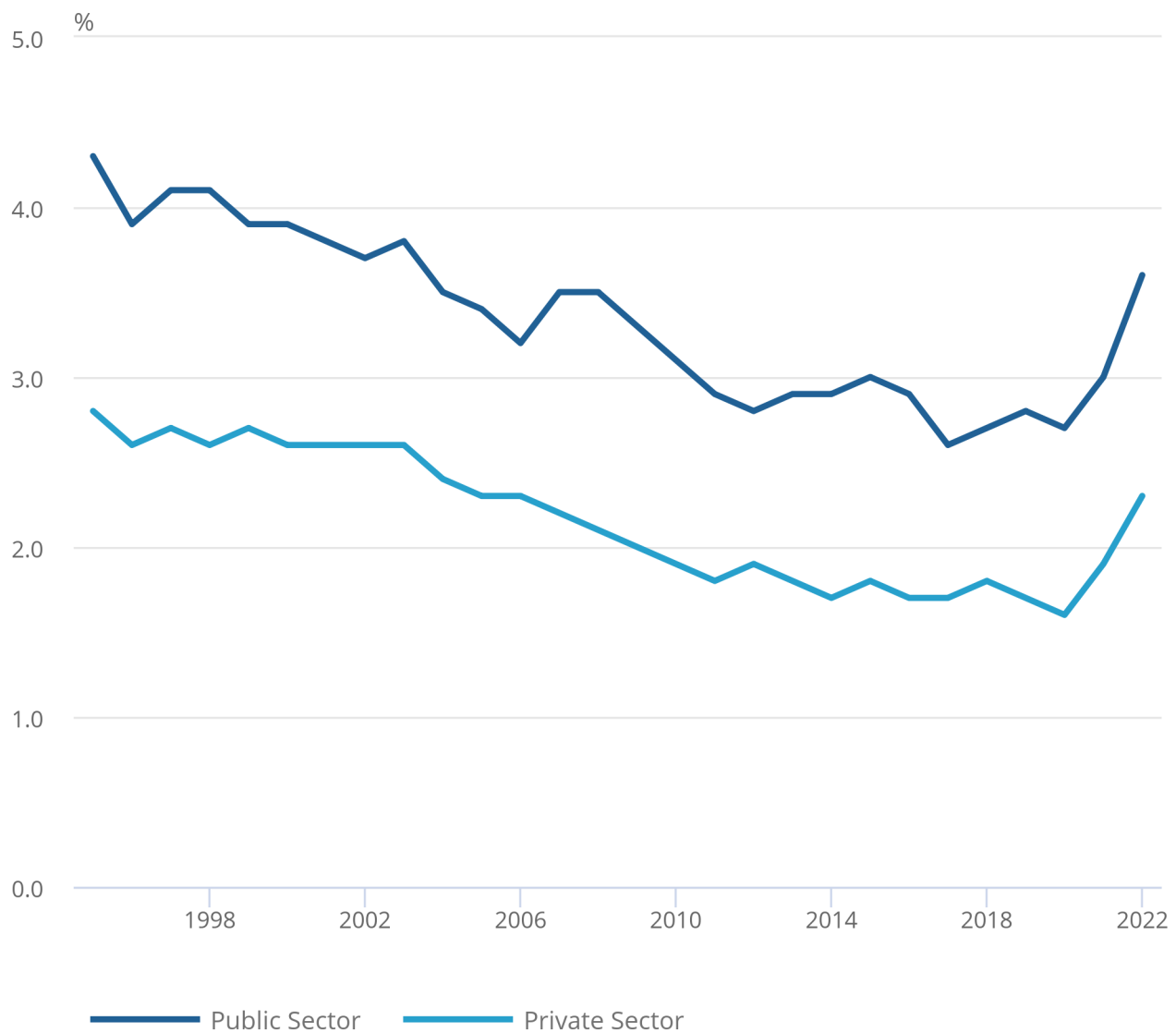
The low sickness absence rate in London can largely be explained by the younger age profile of workers living there and the types of occupations that they do. There is also a large concentration of high-skilled jobs in London, which tend to have lower rates of sickness absence.

Figure 7: The sickness absence rate has been consistently higher for public sector employees

Sickness absence rate, by public and private sector, UK, 1995 to 2022

Figure 7: The sickness absence rate has been consistently higher for public sector employees

Sickness absence rate, by public and private sector, UK, 1995 to 2022



Source: Labour Force Survey from the Office for National Statistics

In 2022, the sickness absence rates were 3.6% for public sector workers and 2.3% for private sector workers, up 0.6 and 0.4 percentage points, respectively, from 2021.

Sickness absence rates for public sector workers have been higher than those in the private sector for every year on record.

There are several factors to consider when examining the differences between the public and private sectors, including:

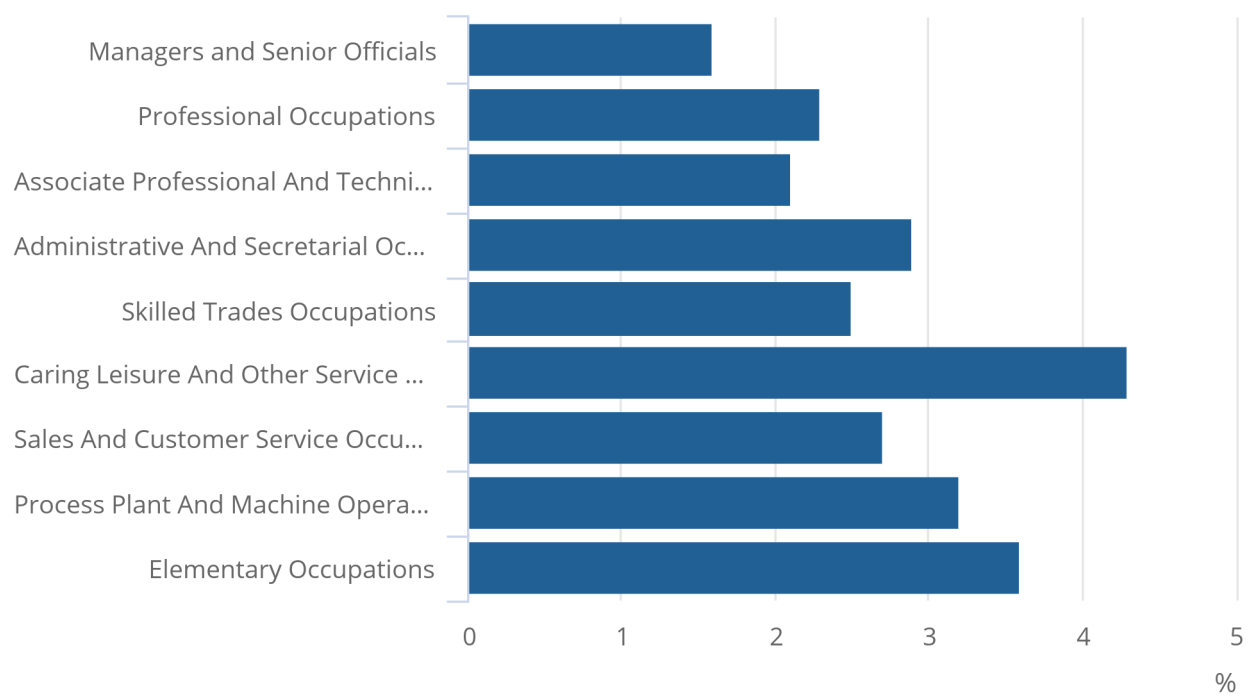
- differences in the types of jobs between the sectors, some of which have higher likelihoods of sickness than others
- workers in the private sector are less likely to be paid for sickness absence than those in the public sector
- the analysis only counts people as sick if they work fewer hours than they are contracted for and would exclude those who make up lost hours at a later point in the week; individuals in smaller workforces, which are more prominent in the private sector, may be under more pressure to make up any lost hours, but no data are collected on hours made up following sickness absence

Figure 8: Workers in caring, leisure and other service occupations had the highest sickness absence rates in 2022

Sickness absence rate, by major occupation group, UK, 2022

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Sickness absence rate, by major occupation group, UK, 2022



Source: Labour Force Survey from the Office for National Statistics

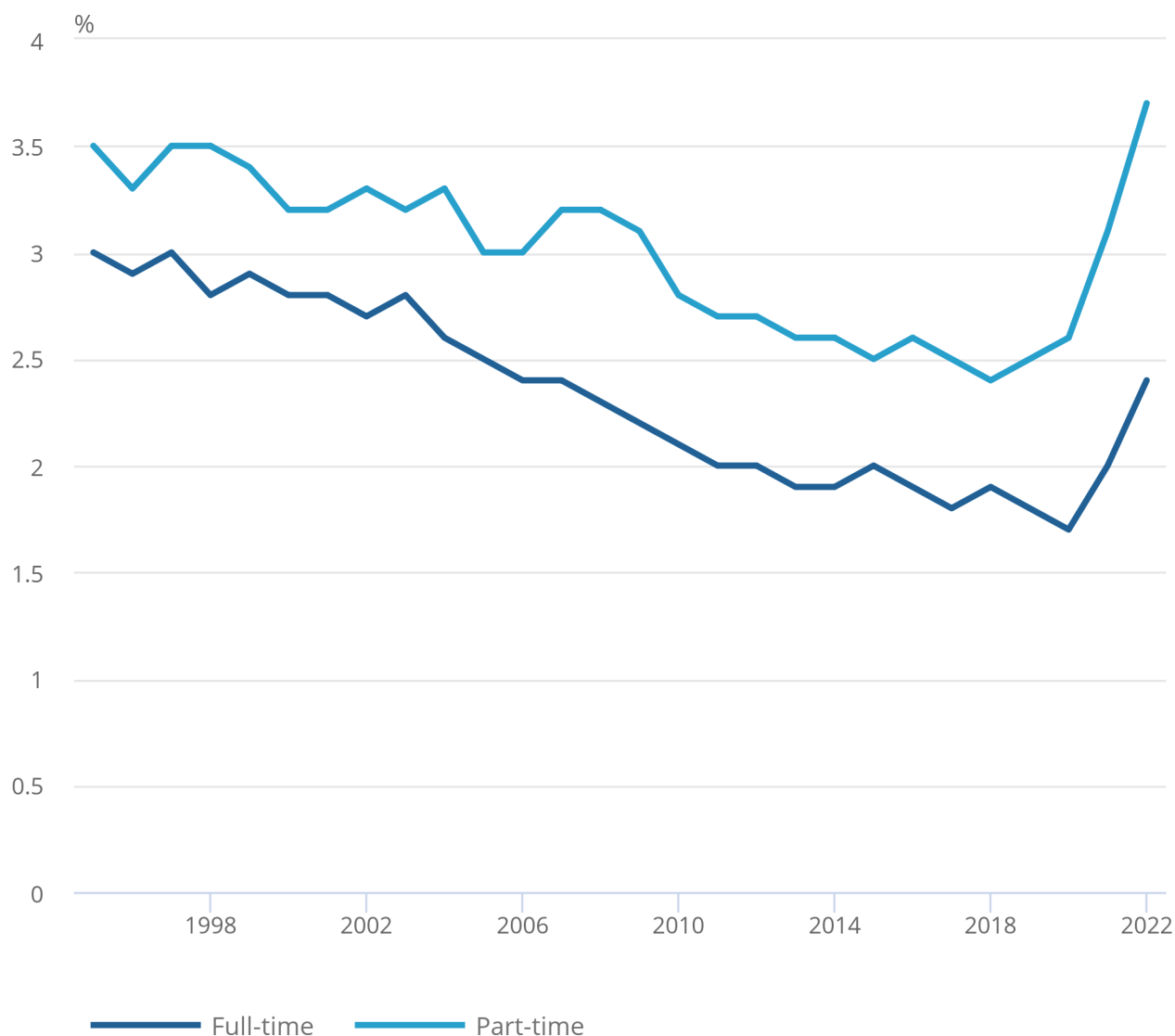
As in 2021, workers in caring, leisure or other service occupations had the highest rate of sickness absence in 2022, at 4.3%, an increase of 0.5 percentage points on 2021. Managers and senior officials had the lowest rate, at 1.6%, although this was an increase of 0.5 percentage points on 2021. Most occupations saw increases in sickness absence rates, with the exceptions of process, plant and machine operatives and sales and customer service occupations.

Figure 9: The gap between sickness absence for part-time and full-time workers has widened in 2022

Sickness absence rate, by part-time and full-time status, UK, 1995 to 2022

Figure 9: The gap between sickness absence for part-time and full-time workers has widened in 2022

Sickness absence rate, by part-time and full-time status, UK, 1995 to 2022



Source: Labour Force Survey from the Office for National Statistics

The sickness absence rate for part-time workers has been consistently higher than for full-time workers. This is explained, in part, by the higher numbers of women, who tend to have higher rates of sickness absence, working part-time, and by the types of jobs typically done part-time.

In 2022, the sickness absence rate was 3.7% for part-time workers and 2.4% for full-time workers.

5 . Sickness absence data

[Sickness absence in the UK labour market](#)

Dataset | Released 26 April 2023

Annual sickness absence rates of workers in the UK labour market.

6 . Glossary

COVID-19

The name used to refer to the disease caused by the SARS CoV-2 virus, which is a type of coronavirus. The Office for National Statistics takes COVID-19 to mean presence of SARS-CoV-2 with or without symptoms.

Definitions of reason for sickness absence

- "Musculoskeletal problems" includes back pain, neck and upper limb problems, and other musculoskeletal problems.
- "Other" includes the total number of days lost to accidents, poisonings, infectious diseases, skin disorders, diabetes and anything else not covered.
- From April 2020, interviewers were advised to code any mention of coronavirus (COVID-19) as "other", however, it is believed people could self-report this in "minor illnesses" or "respiratory conditions".
- "Mental health conditions" includes stress, depression, anxiety and serious mental health problems.
- "Minor illnesses" includes coughs, colds, flu, sickness, nausea and diarrhoea.
- "Long COVID" may fall under any of the main categories if relevant, as Long COVID can present differently and so is wide ranging; however, it could also be coded to "other" as it often presents in the same way as many other viruses do once the active viral infection has passed despite being given its own specific name.

Furlough

A temporary absence from work allowing workers to keep their job during the coronavirus pandemic.

Number of days lost per worker

The number of days lost per worker is proportional to the number of days lost divided by the number of persons in employment aged 16 years and over.

The total number of days lost because of sickness or injury and the number of days lost per worker both saw a significant fall in 2020. The data that feed into the total number of days lost, and days lost per worker, include furloughed workers. Therefore, some of this fall will be because fewer people were in work and taking days off because of sickness or injury. In addition, those employed but on furlough are included in the denominator for the number of days lost per worker, as they are defined as in employment, but would not be contributing to the numerator as they are away from work.

Sickness absence rate

Sickness absence rate is proportional to the total hours lost because of sickness or injury divided by total hours multiplied by 100, as seen in the following.

$$\text{Sickness absence rate} = \frac{\text{Total hours lost due to sickness or injury}}{\text{Total hours}} \times 100$$
$$\text{Total hours} = \text{Total actual hours (for those with no sickness absence)} + \text{Total usual hours (for those with sickness absence)}$$
$$\text{Number of days losts} = \frac{\text{Hours lost due to sickness or injury} \times 52}{7.5}$$
$$\text{Number of days lost per worker} = \frac{\text{Number of days lost}}{\text{Number of persons in employment, aged 16 +}}$$

The sickness absence rate will not be affected by furloughed workers in the same way as number of days lost in 2020 and 2021. This is derived as the total hours lost as a proportion of total hours worked. Neither the hours lost nor the hours worked measures include those on furlough, therefore this measure should still be comparable over time. Since this measure is least affected by the coronavirus pandemic policies, it is therefore the most appropriate measure to use for sickness absence analysis to ensure comparability over time.

Working day

The working day is defined as 7 hours and 30 minutes.

7 . Data sources and quality

The estimates included in this release have been produced using the Labour Force Survey (LFS). They relate to people aged 16 years and over in employment and are for the whole of the UK. Estimates are based on annual averages across quarters for each calendar year: taking an average of the January to March, April to June, July to September and October to December datasets.

Quality and Methodology Information reports

More quality and methodology information on strengths, limitations, appropriate uses, and how the data were created is available in our [LFS Quality and Methodology Information \(QMI\) report](#).

Accuracy in estimates

Estimates of sickness absence at the UK level in 2022 were based on an average sample size of approximately 1,000 people who had worked fewer hours because of sickness or injury. There is therefore a limit to how many breakdowns can be made without significantly reducing quality or requiring an element of disclosure control.

Because of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, a high number of people in employment were on furlough (away from work which they expected to return to) during 2020 and 2021. This affected some of the measures of sickness absence; some of the falls seen in 2020 will be because there were fewer people in work, therefore fewer people taking days off because of sickness or injury. However, decreases in furlough in 2021 and the end of the scheme in September 2021 could have led to higher levels of sickness absence as people return to work.

Coronavirus and measuring the labour market

Because of coronavirus and the suspension of face-to-face interviewing, we had to make operational changes to the LFS, which moved to a by-telephone approach. This introduced an increased non-response bias to the survey, which was partially mitigated by the introduction of housing tenure-based weights into the survey in October 2020, as detailed in our [Coronavirus and its impact on the Labour Force Survey article](#).

However, it was acknowledged that further improvement work was required to deal with the increase in non-response from those with a non-UK country of birth or nationality. As a result, a new weighting methodology was introduced in July 2021. Further information is available in our [Impact of reweighting on Labour Force Survey key indicators, UK: 2022 article](#).

The population totals used for the latest LFS estimates use projected growth rates from real-time information (RTI) data for EU and non-EU populations based on 2021 patterns. The total population used for the LFS therefore does not take into account any changes in migration, birth rates, death rates and so on since June 2021, and hence levels estimates may be under- or over-estimating the true values and should be used with caution. Estimates of rates will, however, be robust.

Estimates for 2020 and 2021 have been revised since our [Sickness absence in the UK labour market: 2021 article](#).

Occupational data in ONS surveys

The Office for National Statistics (ONS) has identified an issue with the collection of some occupational data in a number of our surveys, including the LFS. While we estimate any impacts will be small overall, this will affect the accuracy of the breakdowns of some detailed (four-digit Standard Occupational Classifications (SOC)) occupations, and data derived from them.

On 26 September 2022, we published an [article based on initial analysis of the potential impact on different four-digit SOC codes](#). We, at the ONS, advise to continue exercising caution in the use of detailed SOC breakdowns until the issue has been corrected.

8 . Related links

[Coronavirus \(COVID-19\) latest data and analysis](#)

Web page | Updated as and when data become available

Latest data and analysis on coronavirus (COVID-19) in the UK and its effect on the economy and society.

[Employment in the UK: April 2023](#)

Bulletin | Monthly

Estimates of employment, unemployment and economic inactivity for the UK.

[Half a million more people are out of the labour force because of long-term sickness](#)

Article | Released 10 November 2022

Profile of those who are economically inactive because of long-term sickness, including age, sex, health condition and previous employment. Trends in economic inactivity because of long-term sickness in the UK over time from 2019 to 2022.

9 . Cite this article

Office for National Statistics (ONS), released 26 April 2023, ONS website, article,[Sickness absence in the UK labour market: 2022](#)