

Local and Regional Economic Vulnerability to COVID-19 ‘Lockdown’ across Great Britain

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ABSTRACT

Policies to arrest the rapid spread of the COVID-19 pandemic in many nations resulted in whole sectors of their economies and social life being severely curtailed during the first wave of infection in the spring of 2020. The first month since full restrictions were in place in the United Kingdom (April 2020) saw unemployment-related receipt of state benefits rise in a single month from 1.2 to 2.1 million people, representing a jump from 3.0% to 5.0% of all persons of working age (16-64 years). The increase varied from around one percentage point in affluent parts of southern England to around three percentage points in parts of the north and west. Using a resilience framework, two aspects of ability to resist rising unemployment at local level across Great Britain during this early part of the pandemic are analyzed: (i) level of pre-lockdown unemployment; and (ii) share of employment in sectors most affected by the lockdown (those which require high levels of face-to-face contact, e.g. retail, hospitality). Findings reveal that pre-lockdown unemployment is a stronger predictor than sector mix of the rise in unemployment in the first month of the lockdown, although the latter is also important. Some places across Great Britain are particularly exposed to recessionary shocks because a large share of their employment relies on low-productivity and consumption-based service industries. These findings underline the importance of strong and spatially balanced economies in building economic resilience to future shocks.

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic, Lockdown, Economic resilience

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