



Dr. Sumana Reddy demonstrates a Telehealth exam using Updox, a HIPPA-compliant video chat software, one of several programs her clinic relies on to meet with patients. Photo by Anne Wernikoff for CalMatters

Study: In ‘Seismic Shift’ Due to Pandemic, Workers, Patients Embrace Telehealth, Remote Work for Long Haul

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A study has found that Californians now embrace telehealth and remote work because of adjustments made during the pandemic, researchers said.

Many respondents to a survey by USC expect to make far fewer work- and health-related car trips even after restrictions due to COVID-19 end.

“The hesitancy towards remote work, learning and telehealth was swept away by necessity during the pandemic,” said Hernan Galperin, the study’s lead researcher and an associate professor at the USC Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism.

“Now we’re seeing a seismic shift in the way people want to work, learn and manage health visits among those who have broadband access,” Galperin said. “Those changes give us a real opportunity to cut congestion and carbon emissions.”

Participants in the Bay Area reported the highest level of engagement with telehealth, at 58%, followed by the Inland Empire, Orange County, San Diego County and the Central Valley.

Los Angeles County had the lowest level of participation in telehealth, with 46% of participants reporting that they took advantage of such appointments.

The study, conducted in partnership with the California Emerging Technology Fund, surveyed 1,650 California residents. It found that 55% of those with access to broadband had been working fully or partly from home, with 38% working from home full time and 17% part-time.

Of those currently working from home:

- 31% said they would prefer to work from home every day after the pandemic,
- 22% said they would prefer to work three or four days from home,

- 29% said they would prefer working one or two days from home, and
- 18% said they would not prefer to continue working from home.

“This is a very fascinating result,” Galperin said, highlighting “the tremendous potential of remote work to continue after the pandemic, not by necessity but really by choice of workers.”

The study also found that those 65 and older experienced the highest level of remote work, with 63% responding that they were able to work from home.

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“We tend to think of older adults as those who are less comfortable with computers and the internet. But in fact they are the group that, when they are employed, they’re taking the most advantage of telework for obvious reasons that are related to their higher risk of COVID exposure,” Galperin said.

The second-largest age group able to work from home was 35- to 44-year-olds. The least likely to telecommute was the youngest demographic surveyed, those between 18 and 34.

Additionally, the study found income disparities for people who are able to work remotely. Only 32% of those in the lowest income group reported working from home, compared to 60% of those who earned between \$60,000 and \$99,000.

Californians’ use of telehealth also jumped, according to the study, which found that 51% of participants had sought healthcare by phone, smartphone or computer during the pandemic.

Participants also indicated that they had embraced telehealth – 70% of those who consulted with medical professionals via phone or video during the pandemic said they would cut their medical-related vehicle trips by at least half.

However, researchers found disparities in access to telehealth based on income as well as race. More than 60% of white participants reported taking advantage of telehealth, compared to 56% of Black participants, 46% of Asian participants, and 44% of Hispanic participants.

“While the COVID-19 pandemic opened new access points for patients, disparities still exist in access related to essential social determinants of health, including race and place of residence. Closing the digital divide holds promise for increasing health equity,” said study contributor Dorian Traube, an associate professor at the USC Suzanne Dworak-Peck School of Social Work.

However, the study also found that telehealth expands healthcare access to people with disabilities, with nearly 70% of participants with disabilities reporting they used technology for appointments.

“That’s tremendous because we know for our disabled communities getting to a physician can be very, very challenging,” Traube said. “Additionally, they sometimes will have many more health appointments that they have to go to at multiple facilities, so this really increases access and also reduces the burden for the patient.”