

## COVID-19 AND URBAN SPACE IN GREECE. ACTIVE POPULATION' REFLECTIONS ON IMPACTS ON EVERYDAY LIFE

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### ABSTRACT

The spread of the COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in unprecedented measures affecting the everyday life, the practices and the perceptions of the global population significantly. The aim of this paper is to investigate the perceptions, experiences and practices of active population regarding everyday life in the context of the first wave of the pandemic, by focusing on people that live and work in Greek cities. The presented analysis was based on the data collected using a structured questionnaire, addressed to the active population. The paper intends to identify impacts on everyday activities, working conditions, mobility, as well as on perceptions about urban space and urban policies and correlates the findings with the profile of the respondents. The results of the analysis can provide useful information to policy-makers and show that there is a necessity to radically rethink on aspects of urban space and urban mobility, in relation with the multiple problems and dynamics of the active population.

### KEYWORDS

cities; COVID-19; experience; mobility; perception; practice

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic that erupted in end 2019 has significantly and in multiple ways affected the everyday life, the practices and the perceptions of the global population <sup>[1,2]</sup>. In order to limit the spread of the virus, national governments have adopted emergency measures to protect citizens and public health; measures that vary from country to country and from city to city <sup>[3]</sup>. These measures focus on social distancing, suspension of economic, educational and cultural activities, as well as on restrictions on citizens' mobility for as long as necessary.

Lockdown has created new conditions for the

cities and everyday life <sup>[4]</sup>, especially for employees. Working conditions have changed significantly for a large part of the population, mainly by expanding and deepening trends that preexisted the COVID-19 crisis <sup>[5]</sup>. Strict sanitary measures have been applied in workplaces, teleworking and the use of technology have been boosted, many workers lost their jobs or found themselves unemployed, flexibility and insecurity has increased and employees in occupations critical for securing public health and supplying essentials for living have been overloaded with work. These changes in working conditions, in combination with changes in family routines <sup>[6]</sup>, urban mobility <sup>[7,8]</sup> and social activity <sup>[9]</sup> form a new condition in the cities <sup>[10]</sup>.

Obviously, changes in working conditions do not affect everyone in the same way. As the COVID-19 crisis expands and deepens, the dominant discourse about the effects on labor seems to consolidate which focuses almost exclusively on macro-economic arguments and concerns, that put special emphasis on financial recession, rise of unemployment and adoption of flexible forms of labor <sup>[11-13]</sup>. However, gender, age, marital status, as well as the type and the status of work are - among others - factors associated with differentiated perceptions, experiences and practices of employees during the lockdown <sup>[14-15]</sup>; a fact that is ignored or underestimated in the dominant academic discourse.

The aim of this paper is to investigate the perceptions, experiences and practices of employees regarding everyday life in the context of the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, by focusing on people that live and work in Greek cities. The paper intends to identify impacts on everyday activities, working conditions, mobility, as well as on perceptions about urban space and urban policies and correlates the findings with the social profile of the respondents.

The first case of COVID-19 in Greece was detected in 28 February 2020 and the first restrictive measures were taken in the beginning of March 2020. Gradually, during March 2020 and as the cases increased, the measures for the protection of public health were escalated. Schools and universities closed, commercial, leisure, entertainment and cultural activities were suspended, teleworking was imposed in public and private sectors and access to public parks and beaches was banned. Strict traffic restrictions have been put in force since 23 March 2020, with few exceptions. The first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in Greece was over in the beginning of May 2020.

The public discourse about the impact of COVID-19 and the measures to deal with it in the Greek cities is particularly intense. Emphasis has been placed on the effects of shrinking everyday life within domestic sphere

and on the inequalities that emerged in relation to this<sup>[16]</sup>. Along with the impacts in the private space, the role, the function and the surveillance of the public space has been seriously transformed. Public space is a field of special interest, which in the context of the pandemic became, not only an area of restrictions and exclusions, but also a place of relaxation and experimentation<sup>[17]</sup>. The curfew has created new conditions for mobility in the city and has affected the modal split of the Greek cities. Moreover, institutional arrangements for emergency traffic measures and relatively ad hoc traffic interventions have opened the debate on how to take decisions, enhance citizens' participation and activate urban regeneration processes. Finally, impacts on urban economy and local labor markets is a topic that has attracted much interest and raised questions about developing policies for mitigating financial recession and unemployment<sup>[18-20]</sup>.

The paper argues that, apart from obtaining a big picture about the multiple impacts of COVID-19 on urban life, emphasis on individual perceptions, experiences and practices reveals areas of knowledge that would otherwise remain in the dark and enriches our understandings with more complex and more flexible variables. The ultimate purpose of this article is to provide useful information to policy makers to design more effective urban policies in Greek cities, but also elsewhere.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

The survey was conducted, just after the lockdown, from 6 to 27 May 2020 in Greek cities, using an electronic distribution. The questionnaire was part of a work of the students of the MSc Program "Environmental Design" of Hellenic Open University. Each one of the students had to collect a certain number of questionnaires, respecting the quotation of gender, age and educational distribution, according to the data retrieved from 2011 Census of the Hellenic Statistical Authority. Only activated respondents aged over 18 years old living in urban areas of continental Greece

participated. Students distributed the questionnaire electronically through their personal networks and in a few cases through snowballing.

The investigation of the perceptions, experiences and practices of employees that live and work in Greek cities, regarding everyday life, in the context of the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, were evaluated statistically. Quantitative variables were indicated as mean  $\pm$  standard deviation. It is calculated frequency analysis, percentages, cross tabulation and chi-squared tests of independence for categorical variables. The frequencies of observed and expected values were analyzed by means of crosstabulations. These revealed the relationships between cross-tabulated variables. The chi-square test for independence was used to determine whether the variables corresponding to the questions of the first two sections of the questionnaire were statistically related to the socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents. A chi-square test is considered unreliable if more than 20% of the expected values are less than five. A 2- sided p-value less than 0.05 is significant.

### 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

#### 3.1. *Impacts on everyday activities*

In the survey, the respondents were asked to evaluate the impact of the lockdown and the restrictions against the spread of COVID-19 on their everyday life. In specific, the 70.1% and 63.0% of the respondents declared that their personal life and family life, respectively, were affected from 'moderately' to 'very much'. Similarly, the 75.3% of the respondents stated that the life of their children has been affected significantly. However, impacts on professional life seem to be more intense, especially for freelancers and unemployed (p-value=0.01<0.05), as 77.0% of the participants declared that it was affected 'moderately' to 'very much'. This is also related to the answers we received regarding financial activities, as 73.3% of the research sample claimed that they experienced serious impacts. The half of the

respondents (51.5%) declared that there is a 'moderately' to 'very much' impact on their physical health, while the other half (48.5%) declared 'not at all' or 'slightly'. Similar are the findings regarding mental health: slightly more than the half of the respondents (57.1%) declared a 'moderately' to 'very much' impact for mental health. As far as everyday activities, the impact of measures on mobility and recreation are very intense, as 61.9% stated high or very high changes in mobility and recreation activities. A chi-squared test for independence indicates a strong association between gender and impacts on mobility practices, as women have been more affected by lockdown than men (sum of 'moderately' to 'very much'= 65.8% in the first category, than 57.5% in the second one, (p-value=0.021<0.05).

#### 3.2. *Impacts on working conditions*

The pandemic and the lockdown measures had severe impacts on employment and working conditions and have pushed more and more employees to working from home. The survey revealed that 72.6% of the respondents did not have any change in their working position due to the pandemic, while 8.9% of the respondents have lost their job and 18.6% of the respondents have been suspended. Totally, the 27.5% of the respondents are severely affected from the pandemic, while 34.4% of the respondents have experienced teleworking. Chi-square test reveals again a statistically significant difference with gender (p-value=0.010<0.05), as women experienced teleworking more than men did. The pandemic had an impact on working hours and productivity. Specifically, during the lockdown period, the 42.1% of respondents work less hours per day than before. There is a significant percentage of respondents (19.2%) that they work more hours than before. Women, also, work more hours than men (p-value=0.041<0.05). Almost half of respondents declared that their productivity is the same as before the pandemic, 35.5% of the respondents declared that their productivity is lower and only a small percentage (13.6%)

declared that they are more productive. The evaluation of location and time- schedule flexibility of teleworking was examined in the survey. Only the 13.1% of respondents expressed that they warmly accept teleworking, 17.5% of the respondents expressed “moderately”, while almost seven out of ten (66.0%) denied teleworking as an alternative form of work. Women had more extreme reflections to teleworking than men. Moreover, married respondents prefer teleworking more than singles ( $p\text{-value}=0.003<0.05$ ). The pandemic has affected also educational systems worldwide, developing effective strategies for online courses and remote teaching. From the survey arises that only 13.3% of respondents declared that they warmly want to attend online courses, 20.8% of the respondents declared “moderately”, while a large percentage (66.0%) denied remote teaching and online courses. A chi- squared test for independence indicates some association between the level of education and the acceptance of online courses ( $p\text{-value}=0.035<0.05$ ). Higher level of education is more likely to deny online courses.

### *3.3.Impacts on mobility*

The outbreak of pandemic has had a profound impact on transport and mobility in the Greek cities. In the survey, respondents were asked about the modes of transport they used for commuting before the lockdown and how frequently they did so. About 60% (57.4%) of the respondents used car for commuting, while the share of public transport for commuting is quite low (19.7%). The share of other modes of transport in modal split during the lockdown is 6.2% for motorcycles, 2.2% for car-sharing, 0.7% for taxi, 1.3% for bicycle and 12.4% for walking. Almost six out of ten respondents (57.9%) declared that they commute 5 times per week, 9.4% of respondents declared that they commute 1-4 times per week, 15.1% 6 times per week, while 17.6% of participants declared that they commute more than 6 times per week. The frequency of commuting depends on the type of job and the location of residence. Travel time to work before the

pandemic was ranged from 30min (50%), 30-60 min (32.7%), 60-90 min (10.5%) to more than 90 min (6.9%). During the lockdown, only 31.4% of respondents have kept the same travel behavior for work. Most of the respondents (66.1%) have reduced the travel frequency and only a small part of the respondents (2.5%) increased the frequency of commuting. The high reduction of mobility to and from workplaces is also reflected on available data in national level (-38%), as well as in the metropolitan area of Athens (-42%) <sup>[21]</sup>. Moreover, 90.3% of our respondents use the same mode of transport as before the enforcement of the curfew. However, it is remarked that there is a small increase in cycling and walking. As far as intentions for the future, 92.4% of the respondents declared that they do not intent to change their modal choice for work after the rise of mobility restrictions, while the rest intend to use public transportation more. This opposes the findings of a survey conducted in the city of Thessaloniki, which presents a reduction by 25% of the use of public transport after the lockdown <sup>[22]</sup>.

### *3.4.Impacts on the relations with urban space*

Although imposed restrictions affected deeply everyday life and activities, the responses indicate that perceptions about their city and their neighborhood, as well as practices in urban space remain mainly the same as before the COVID-19 crisis. However, another, also significant part of the sample declares that they have a more positive view of their neighborhood. In particular, the 45.8% and the 40.1% (sum of ‘moderately’ to ‘much more’) of the respondents declared that they expanded their knowledge and experience regarding their neighborhood and their city, respectively, during the lockdown. The participants – mainly older people ( $p\text{-value}=0.003<0.05$ ) - claimed that they discovered new aspects of their neighborhood and their city, respectively. Similarly, most of the respondents stated that, during the lockdown, they have kept on having the same habits in their neighborhood: they move around in their neighborhood the same

as before the COVID-19 crisis (42.4%), they use local shops as much as in the past (57.4%) and they did not change their perception about their neighborhood (72.2%). However, we found that women move around in their neighborhood and like their neighborhood more than men ( $p\text{-value}=0.04<0.05$  and  $p\text{-value}=0.002<0.05$  respectively), a fact that reveals gendered aspects of the COVID-19 crisis in urban space.

### 3.5. Concerns about urban policies

The lockdown and the measures against the spread of COVID-19 affected deeply everyday life in the city and thus raised serious concerns about urban space. This is directly reflected on the responses we received regarding adequacy of urban infrastructures and urban policies. The need for interventions in urban space has been reported as a serious issue by the 86.4% of the respondents. Interventions in urban mobility and public space have been recorded as an important issue for urban space for about 9 out of ten of the respondents: the 87.6% of the respondents prioritize interventions in public transport, the 89.2% prioritize interventions for improving walking conditions, the 91.4% prioritize infrastructure for facilitating cycling and the 91.9% prioritize interventions for improving public space. Concerns about the quality of public space and walking conditions are slightly higher among older respondents ( $p\text{-value}=0.008<0.05$  and  $p\text{-value}=0.048<0.05$  respectively) and women ( $p\text{-value}=0.019<0.05$  regarding public space), while interest in cycling facilities are slightly higher among younger respondents ( $p\text{-value}=0.016<0.05$ ). Issues related to the density of commercial uses and the quality of telecommunication infrastructure seem to be less important, but still considered as important from the seven out of ten of the respondents. The 68.7% of the respondents claimed that the density of commercial shops, restaurants, cafes, hotels etc. is a major issue in the context of COVID-19 crisis, and the 73.2% of the responses stressed the significance of improving telecommunication services; in line with the importance both fields acquire in the public

discourse about urban life <sup>[23]</sup>.

## 4. CONCLUSIONS

During the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic major changes took place concerning the perceptions, experiences and practices of employees in the Greek cities. Lockdown destabilized employees' life and affected their everyday activities, working conditions, mobility, as well as perceptions about urban space and urban policies in various ways <sup>[26,27]</sup>.

Most of the respondents declared that their personal and family life has been affected by the lockdown, while effects on professional life and economic activities seem to be deeper. Social activity has been affected in two main ways; activities within family have increased and activities with friends have been reduced. The impacts of the pandemic on working conditions present multiple features: most respondents are still working, while few of them lost their job and many are in a 'suspension' status, some respondents have shifted to teleworking and others not, some work less and others work more, some are more productive and others are less. Urban mobility is a sector that has been deeply affected by the COVID-19 crisis and our respondents state major changes in their mobility practices, especially in commuting. In particular, most of the respondents reduced the frequency of commuting per week. Also, although most of the respondents use the same means of transport as before the pandemic, there is a slight increase in cycling and walking. Finally, the relation with the city and the neighborhood remains mainly the same as before the COVID-19 pandemic for most respondents. However, concerns about urban space have increased, especially as far as the quality of public space, walking conditions and cycling facilities.

Although most of our findings present a homogenous distribution in our sample, some changes on perceptions, experiences and practices are slightly or strongly correlated with the social profile of the respondents. For example, in many cases gender is a crucial

factor and women seem to be more vulnerable to the new conditions; a finding that is in line with the outcomes of other research projects, surveys and policy reports <sup>[24,25]</sup>. In particular, women work more, have been affected by teleworking more, have changed mobility practices more, and have stronger concern about their neighborhood, walking facilities and the quality of urban space than men. Moreover, age is another crucial factor that differentiates impacts on perceptions, experiences and practices, as it is also found by other surveys <sup>[26]</sup>. Younger respondents experience a shrinking in their recreational activities, meet their friends more often and express their concern about cycling facilities, while older respondents are more active within family circle and are more interested in the improvement of public space and walking conditions. Finally, family status seems to differentiate experiences of the COVID-19 crisis. Most married respondents declared that they came closer to their family and do more activities with other family members. -

The research approach of the paper gives us the chance to rethink on aspects of urban space and mobility in the city, in relation with the multiple needs, problems and dynamics of employees. The lessons learnt from the first wave of COVID-19 pandemic are very useful for coping with the impacts of the coming waves, as well as with the impacts of future pandemics or crises on Greek cities. In this context, what is critical for the improvement of the resilience of the Greek cities is to develop policies about urban mobility, public space and urban infrastructure that take into account the different needs, problems and dynamics of employees – and the population in general – and prevent the expansion of existing and the rise of new inequalities within urban space.

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