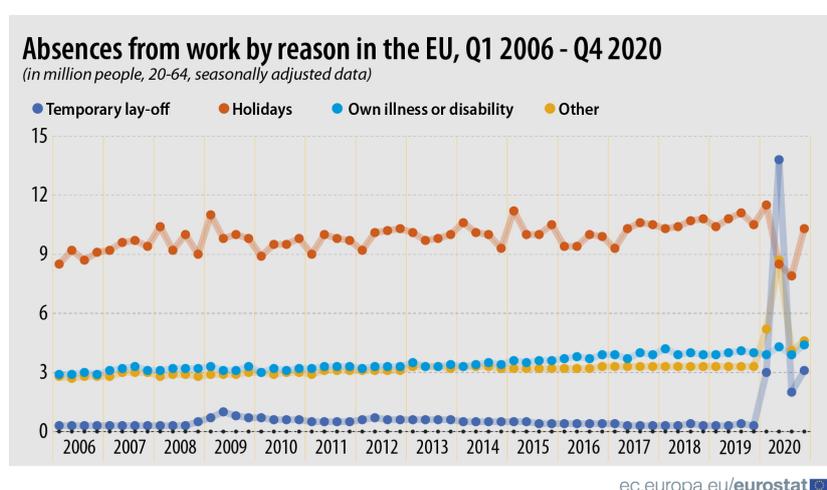


Absences from work - quarterly statistics

Statistics Explained

Data extracted in April 2021
No planned article update



Absences from work can be classified into two groups: on one side, the planned, desired absences (e.g. annual holidays) and on the other side, the unplanned, undesired absences (e.g. illnesses, lay-offs). While the first type of absences could be easily “absorbed” by the companies as their effect could be planned and also mitigated, for example, by rescheduling the work priorities or recruiting temporary staff, the second type can disrupt the production cycles and lead to material losses to both employers and employees.

It is worth noting that sometimes this distinction is not so easy to make. Typically, annual leave is guaranteed by legislation, which may lead some employers to encourage their employees to take holidays when the enterprise is facing economic difficulties. This means that holidays sometimes may mask actual lay-offs.

The beginning of 2020 was marked by an outbreak of the worldwide pandemic COVID-19, leading almost all governments around the globe to take restrictive measures, of which social distancing had a pivotal role. To prevent the spread of the virus and to ensure the social distancing of people, many businesses were temporarily closed and many employees confined to their homes. Whereas worker protection laws may imply that employment, especially for employees, will not be affected, at least in the early stages of the pandemic, one may expect over time a sharp increase in absences from work, which fall under the aforementioned second category of undesired, unplanned absences.

This article aims to depict the absences from work in the [European Union \(EU\)](#) as a whole, for all EU Member States individually (except Germany for which data is not available), as well as for three [EFTA](#) countries (Iceland, Norway and Switzerland) and four [candidate countries](#) (Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia and Turkey). Please note that the data presented is seasonally adjusted.

The population of interest in this article is employed people aged 20-64 who are temporarily absent from work

(incl. business). The notion of "temporary absence from work" refers to situations in which a period of work is interrupted by a period of absence.

The article is part of the online publication [Labour market in the light of the COVID-19 pandemic - quarterly statistics](#) along with the articles [Labour market slack - unmet need for employment](#) and [Hours of work](#).

Absences from work sharply increase in first half of 2020, decrease in the 3rd quarter then increase again in the 4th quarter

Absences from work recorded unprecedented highs in 2020 in comparison with the whole time series dating from 2006 (see Figure 1). In the last quarter of 2019 (Q4 2019), 18.1 million people in the EU were temporarily absent from work. This figure reached 23.5 million at the start of 2020, i.e. during the first quarter of the year (Q1 2020). In the second quarter of 2020 (Q2 2020), the number of people temporarily absent from work was even higher, reaching 35.3 million.

During the third quarter of 2020 (Q3 2020), the COVID-19 confinement measures were eased in many countries. The number of people absent from their jobs also reflected this. After a sharp increase during the first two quarters of 2020, absences from work went down in the third quarter of the year and accounted for 17.9 million people, i.e. a number closer to the pre-pandemic EU in Q4 2019. However, in the last quarter of 2020 (Q4 2020), the pandemic situation deteriorated and the number of absences from work went up again to reach 22.3 million people. For comparison, over the last fourteen years, until the end of 2019, the total number of absences from work varied from 14.4 to 18.9 million.

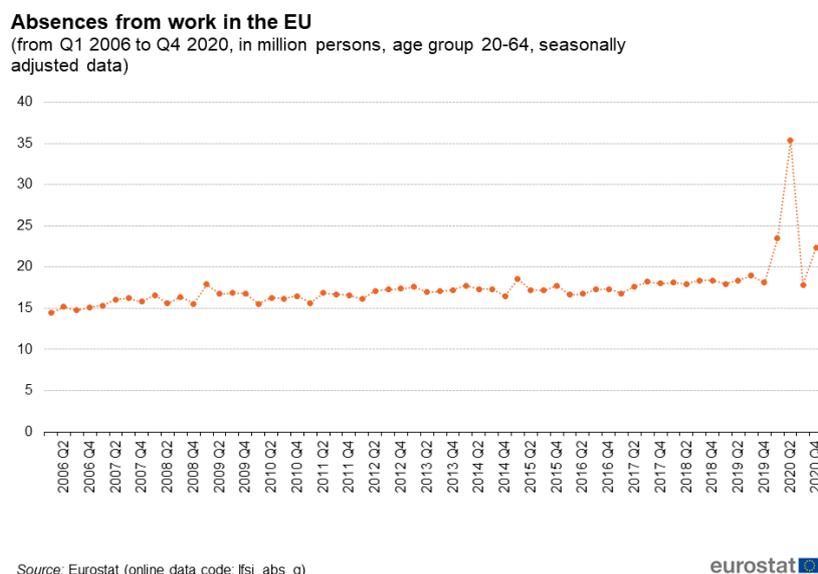


Figure 1: Absences from work in the EU, Q1 2006 - Q4 2020 Source: Eurostat (Ifsi_abs_q)

Primarily the number of temporary lay-offs determined the dynamic of the absences from work in the EU during 2020 (see Figure 2). The level of temporary lay-offs had been relatively stable in the period before 2020, with the exception of 2009 when it increased to 1.0 million. This number also never surpassed 0.5 million after the third quarter of 2014. However, in Q1 2020, 3.0 million people were absent from work because of temporary lay-offs, an increase of 2.7 million in comparison with the previous quarter. This number had a nearly fivefold increase in the following quarter (Q2 2020) reaching 13.8 million. In Q3 2020, the number of temporary lay-offs steeply decreased to 2.0 million. Nonetheless, this was significantly higher than the 0.3 million people who were absent from work for this reason in the last quarter of 2019. The number of temporary lay-offs rebounded to 3.1 million in Q4 2020, matching the level seen at the start of the year (Q1 2020).

Following temporary lay-offs, the number of people absent from work for “other” reasons impacted the most the development of the total absences in 2020. The number of people who had “other” reasons for not being at work went from 3.3 million in the last quarter of 2019 to 5.2 and 8.7 million for Q1 and Q2 of 2020 respectively. The number of people in this group then fell to 4.1 million in Q3 2020, but rose again in the following quarter (Q4 2020), this time to 4.6 million. The long-term evolution of this category reveals no significant fluctuations in its number; additionally, it ranged between 2.7 and 3.3 million prior to 2020.

“Holidays” had traditionally been the most common reason for the employed population’s absence from work. However, in 2020, this position was challenged by the aforementioned two reasons for absence. Following an increase from Q4 2019 to Q1 2020 from 10.5 to 11.5 million, the number of people absent from work due to holidays fell to 8.5 million in Q2 2020 and then to 7.9 million in Q3 2020, the lowest level for the entire time series since 2006. Hereafter, the number of absences due to holidays went up to 10.3 million in Q4 2020, i.e. a similar level to the values from a year ago (from Q4 2019).

In contrast, the last category of absence, outlined in Figure 2, namely “Own illness or disability”, did not fluctuate as dramatically during 2020. There were 3.9 million people in this group during Q1 and Q3 2020, and 4.3 and 4.4 million in Q2 and Q4 2020 respectively. For comparison, this number was 4.0 million in Q4 2019. It is worth noting that, when looking at the evolution of the number of employed people absent from work due to their own illness or disability, one can see a slow but steady increase from the first quarter of 2006 onwards: from values slightly below 3 million at the start of the time series to values firmly exceeding 4 million near the end of the observed period, i.e. the final quarter of 2020.

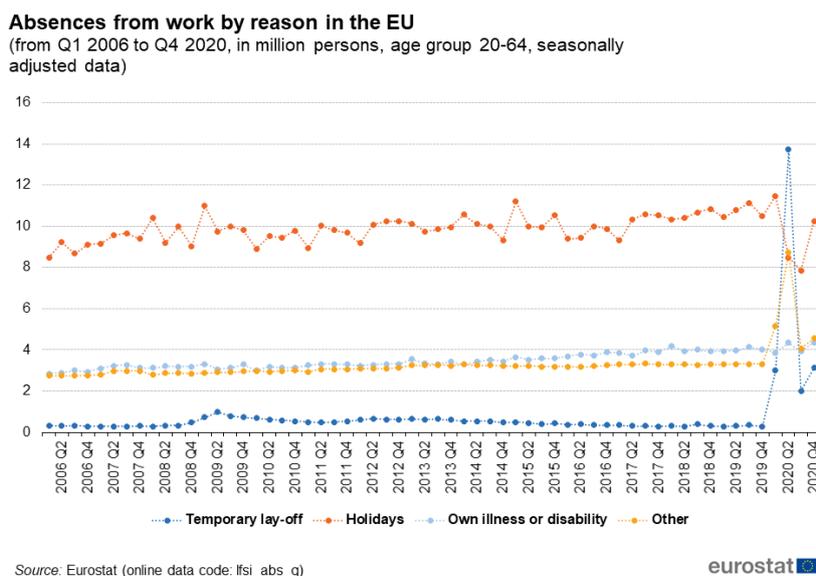
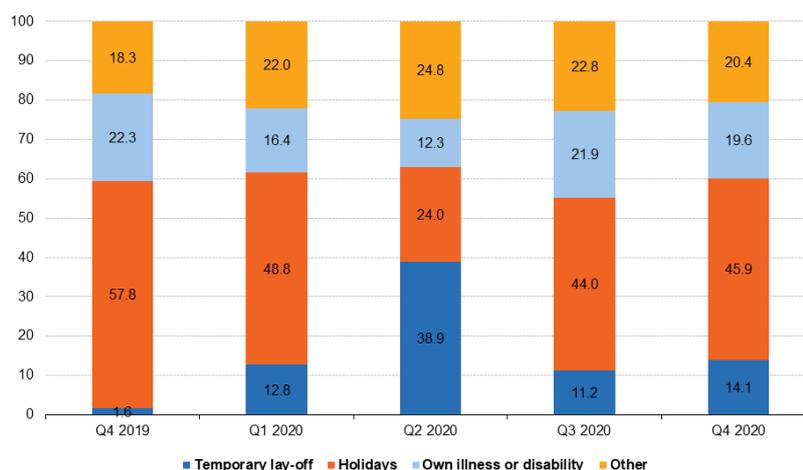


Figure 2: Absences from work by reason in the EU, Q1 2006 - Q4 2020 Source: Eurostat (ifsi_abs_q)

The structure of absences from work by reason in the EU during the last five quarters (Q4 2019 - Q4 2020), presented in Figure 3, shows that holidays were the most common reason for absence in Q4 2019, representing 57.8 % of all absences during this quarter. Between Q4 2019 and Q2 2020, the situation changed and holidays were replaced by temporary lay-offs as the most widespread reason for absence. Temporary lay-offs amounted to 38.9 % of all absences from work in Q2 2020. In the following two quarters, holidays regained their prevalent position among absences, with respectively 44.0 % and 45.9 % of all absences in Q3 and Q4 2020. However, this was still less than the level at the end of 2019 (Q4 2019). On the other hand, temporary lay-offs accounted for 11.2 % of all absences in Q3 2020 and 14.1 % in Q4 2020, which was lower than the value in Q2 2020 but still significantly higher than the value of 1.6 % in Q4 2019. It is also worth noting that the share of absences for own illness or disability in Q3 2020 (21.9 %), after two consecutive quarters of reduction (16.4 % in Q1 2020 and 12.3 % in Q2 2020), closely returned to the level of Q4 2019 (22.3 %). Then in Q4 2020, it slightly diminished again, this time to 19.6 %.

Absences from work by reason in the EU, Q4 2019 - Q4 2020
(% of total absences, age group 20-64, seasonally adjusted data)



Note: The summation of the percentages may not equal precisely 100 % due to rounding.
Source: Eurostat (online data code: lfsi_abs_q)

eurostat

Figure 3: Absences from work by reason in the EU, Q4 2019 - Q4 2020 Source: Eurostat (lfsi_abs_q)

Absences: 9.5 % of employment in Q4 2019 and 11.8 % of employment a year later in Q4 2020

The article's next figure (Figure 4) compares overall absences from work as a percentage of employment in the period from the last quarter of 2019 to the last quarter of 2020. At EU level, absences accounted for 9.5 % of employment in Q4 2019. In the following two quarters, alongside the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in Europe, this share rose first to 12.3 % in Q1 2020 and then to 18.9 % in Q2 2020. Hereafter, in Q3 2020, it returned to 9.5 %. In the last quarter of 2020 (Q4), the share of absences from work rose again and reached 11.8 % of the employed population. Note that the evolution of this ratio encompasses the evolution in the level of absences but also in the level of employment. For more information on employment in the light of the COVID-19 pandemic, please consult the articles [Employment](#) and [Employment in detail](#).

The situation among the majority of the Member States was similar as for the EU as a whole: the share of absences from work increased consecutively from Q4 2019 to Q1 2020 and from Q1 to Q2 2020 and then dropped in Q3 2020. Considering only this period, Finland was an exception with a slight decrease in the share of absences between Q4 2019 and Q1 2020 (-0.1 percentage points). Also, as in the EU, the share of absences rose again between Q3 2020 and Q4 2020 for most of the Member States; exceptions here were Malta (-0.2 p.p.), Denmark (-0.3 p.p) and Romania (-0.8 p.p.).

The development from the last quarter of 2019 and throughout 2020 was quite dynamic in the majority of EU countries, with the biggest fluctuations in Greece and Cyprus. In Greece, the share of absences increased from 3.4 % in Q4 2019 to 10.6 % in Q1 2020, and then more than doubled to 23.6 % in Q2 2020, dropped to 4.9 % in Q3 2020, and increased again to 12.4 % in Q4 2020. In Cyprus, this rate rose from 7.8 % in Q4 2019 to 13.5 % in Q1 2020, increased sharply to 28.5 % in Q2 2020, dropped to 8.3 % in Q3 2020, then increased to 9.2 % in Q4 2020. Furthermore, Cyprus was at the top of the scale with the highest rate in Q2 2020, when the overall absence rate for the year was the highest.

In Sweden, by contrast, the share of absences increased from 15.5 % in Q4 2019 to 16.2 % in Q1 2020 and remained relatively stable throughout the remaining three quarters of 2020: 16.7 % in Q2, 16.1 % in Q3 and again 16.7 % in Q4. Nevertheless, Sweden registered the highest share of absences among the EU countries in Q3 and Q4 2020, and the second-highest, following France, in Q1 2020. It is also worth mentioning that France was consistently among the EU countries with the highest shares of absences from work during all four quarters of 2020, with 18.1 % in Q1, 27.3 % in Q2, 14.5 % in Q3, and 16.0 % in Q4. Bulgaria and Romania also stood out from the rest of the EU during the same period, but this time with consistently low rates of absences.

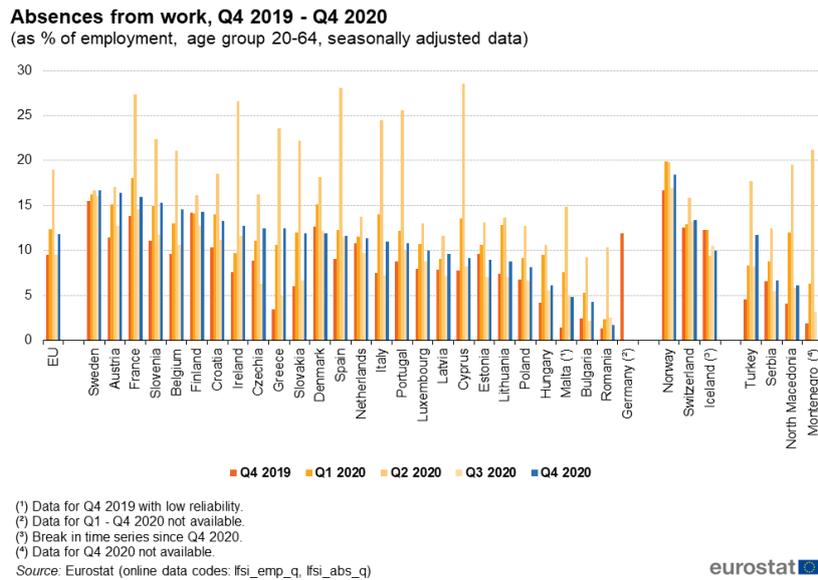


Figure 4: Absences from work, Q4 2019 - Q4 2020 (as % of employment, age group 20-64, seasonally adjusted data) Source: Eurostat (ifsi_emp_q), (ifsi_abs_q)

Focusing only on the evolution between Q4 2019 and Q4 2020, almost all Member States (24 countries out of 26 with available data) experienced an increase in the share of absences from work. Greece (+9.0 p.p.) had the highest increase, followed by Slovakia (+5.8 p.p.) and Ireland (+5.1 p.p.). Only two Member States had a lower share of absences in the last quarter of 2020 than in the last quarter of 2019, namely Estonia and Denmark, both with a 0.7 p.p decrease.

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Higher share of absences from work among women than men

Considering all four quarters of 2020, the share of absences in employment was higher for women than for men in almost all countries throughout the year (see Figure 5). The EU aggregate also confirms this with a share of absent from work women for the four consecutive quarters of 2020 accounting for 14.5 %, 21.5 %, 11.4 % and 14.2 % compared with a lower share for men of 10.5 %, 16.7 %, 7.8 % and 9.8 %. The only exception to this pattern was Malta in Q4 2020, where women had a lower share than men (4.4 % compared with 5.1 %).

The largest gender gap among the EU Member States was found in Lithuania during Q1 2020, where women were absent from work at a rate of 19.0 %, compared with 6.6 % for men. The second-largest gap was in Portugal during Q2 2020, where the absence rate for women was 30.9 %, compared with 20.3 % for men. Finally, Slovenia had the third-largest gap; during Q4 2020, 20.8 % of employed women were away from their jobs and employed men in the same situation were 10.8 %. It is worth noting that the employed women in Portugal in Q2 2020 constituted the group with the highest shares of absences from work in 2020 among the EU countries.

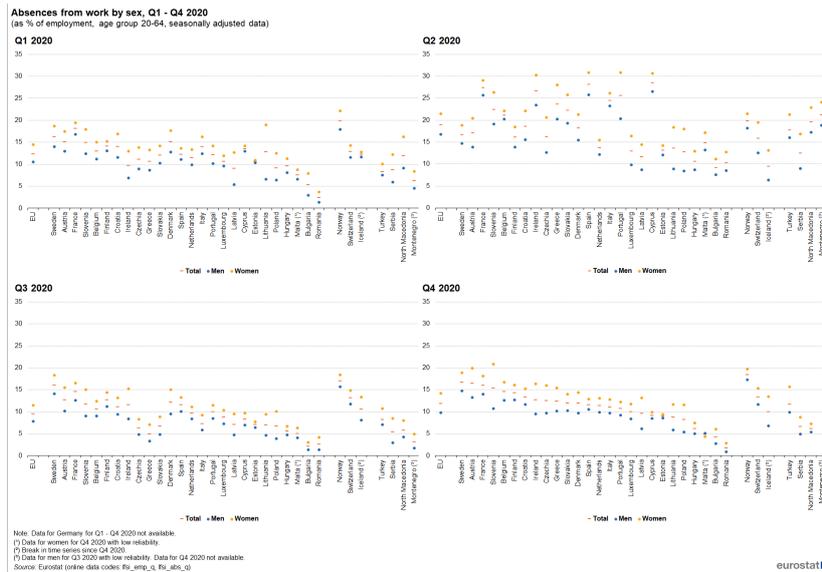


Figure 5: Absences from work by sex, Q1 - Q4 2020 Source: Eurostat (Ifsi_emp_q), (Ifsi_abs_q)

Figure 6 indicates that at EU level the share of absences for women was higher than the share for men during all four quarters of 2020, regardless of the reason for absence. The temporary lay-offs, with 1.6 % for both genders in Q1 2020, were an exception. Having said that, the size of the gap between men and women’s shares varied depending on the reason for absence. Indeed, temporary lay-off showed the least different shares between both genders throughout the four quarters of 2020. The proportion of women laid-off was on average 0.2 p.p. higher than the proportion of men. On the other hand, the difference was the most pronounced for absences for “other” reasons, which include, but are not limited to, absences for personal or family responsibilities. On average, for the four consecutive quarters of 2020, the shares of women having this reason for being absent from work were 2.5 p.p. higher than for men.

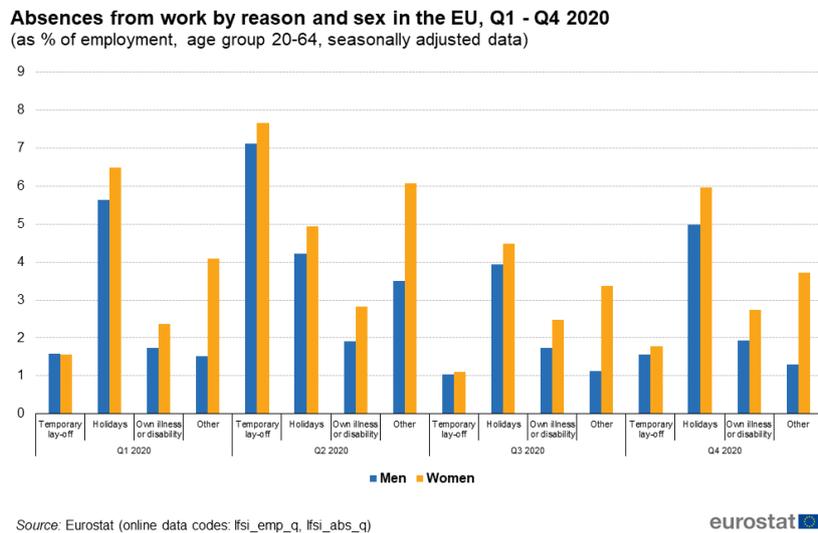


Figure 6: Absences from work by reason and sex in the EU, Q1 - Q4 2020 Source: Eurostat (Ifsi_emp_q), (Ifsi_abs_q)

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Absences from work due to own illness or disability

From Q4 2019 to Q4 2020, the number of people absent from work due to their own illness or disability represented a relatively stable share of employment at EU level. These were 2.1 % of employed people both in Q4 2019 and in Q3 2020, 2.0 % in Q1 2020 and finally 2.3 % for both Q2 and Q4 2020 (see Figure 7).

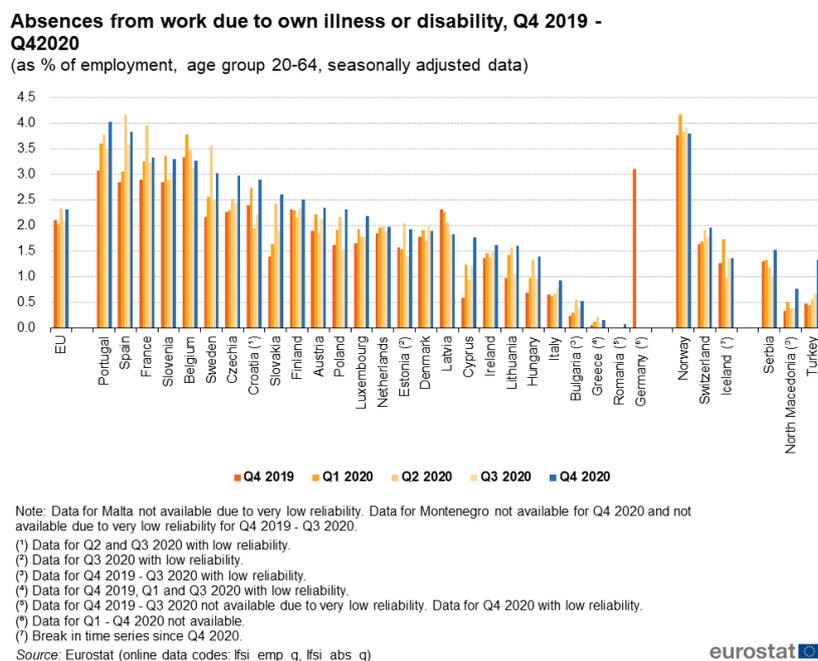


Figure 7: Absences from work due to own illness or disability, Q4 2019 - Q4 2020 Source: Eurostat (ifsi_emp_q), (ifsi_abs_q)

Comparing the EU countries during the four quarters of 2020, the rate of absences due to own illness or disability was the highest in Portugal, Spain, France and Belgium. Throughout the year, the rate in these countries never fell below 3 %. It even reached 4.2 % in Spain and 4.0 % in France during Q2 2020 and 4.0 % in Portugal during Q4 2020. Moreover, between Q1 and Q2 2020, Spain (+1.1 p.p.) registered the most significant quarter-on-quarter increase for this rate considering all EU countries throughout the year. In contrast, absences due to own illness or disability never exceeded 1 % in Italy, Bulgaria, Greece and Romania (where Q1, Q2 and Q3 values are not precise but still very low) during all four quarters of 2020.

Taking into account the development of the share of absences due to own illness or disability between Q4 2019 and Q4 2020, Latvia was the only Member State to register a decrease (2.3 % compared with 1.8 %) between these two quarters. The vast majority of EU countries (22 out of 24 with available data) had a higher share in Q4 2020 than in Q4 2019, with Slovakia, Cyprus (both +1.2 p.p.) and Spain (+1.0 p.p.) showing the greatest increases. In Belgium, the share remained stable at 3.3 % in both the fourth quarters of 2019 and 2020.

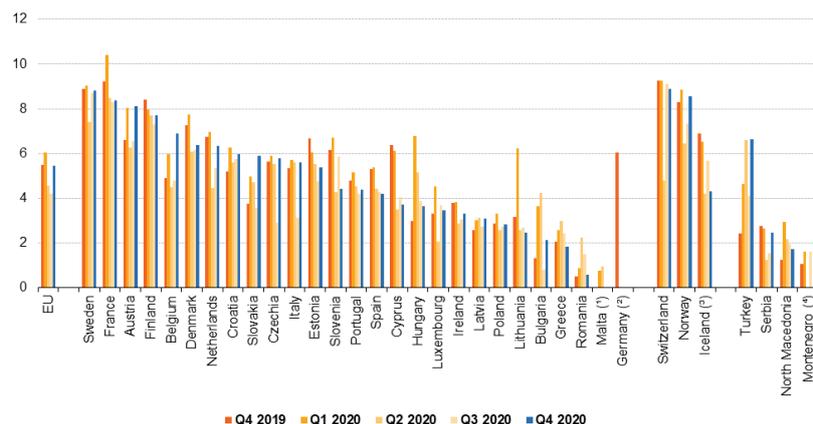
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Absences from work due to holidays

Expressed as a share of employed people, absences due to holidays in the EU represented 5.5 % in Q4 2019. Following that, in Q1 2020, this share increased to 6.0 % before dropping to 4.6 % and 4.2 % in the following two quarters (resp. for Q2 and Q3 2020). The share of people absent due to holidays increased again in Q4 2020, reaching 5.4 %, almost identical to its level a year prior in Q4 2019 (see Figure 8).

Absences from work due to holidays, Q4 2019 - Q4 2020
(as % of employment, age group 20-64, seasonally adjusted data)



(*) Data for Q4 2019, Q3 and Q4 2020 not available due to very low reliability. Data for Q1 and Q2 2020 with low reliability.
 (†) Data for Q1 - Q4 2020 not available.
 (‡) Break in time series since Q4 2020.
 (‡) Data for Q2 2020 not available due to very low reliability. Data for Q4 2020 not available. Data for Q4 2019 with low reliability.

Figure 8: Absences from work due to holidays, Q4 2019 - Q4 2020 Source: Eurostat (lfsi_emp_q), (lfsi_abs_q)

Among the EU countries, Sweden, France, Austria and Finland had the highest shares of people absent from work due to holidays during the four quarters of 2020. Moreover, in Q1 and Q2 2020, France was on the top of the scale with 10.4 % and 8.5 % respectively, whereas in the second half of the year Sweden was on the top with 8.7 % and 8.8 % respectively for Q3 and Q4 2020. Greece, Romania, and Malta, on the other hand, were on the other end of the spectrum, with shares never exceeding 3 % in any of the four quarters of 2020.

It is also worth noting that, as with the EU aggregate, most of the Member States had their highest share of absences due to holidays in Q1 2020. This might be down to the fact that some people took annual leave during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic when attendance at the workplace was difficult or even impossible.

The comparison of Q4 2020 and Q4 2019 data shows that less than half of the Member States (11 countries out of 25 with available data) saw an increase in the share of people absent from work due to holidays. The greatest increases were registered in Slovakia (+2.2 p.p.), Belgium (+2.0 p.p.) and Austria (+1.5 p.p.). The bigger part of the EU countries, the remaining 14, recorded lower shares in Q4 2020 than in Q4 2019. The greatest decreases were in Cyprus (-2.7 p.p.), Slovenia (-1.7 p.p.) and Estonia (-1.3 p.p.).

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Absences from work due to temporary lay-off

The number of absences due to temporary lay-off had the most dramatic development after the last quarter of 2019 and throughout the whole of 2020. Converted into a share of employment at the EU level, lay-offs represented 0.2 % of the employed population in Q4 2019, and for the four consecutive quarters of 2020, this share stood at 1.6 %, 7.4 %, 1.1 % and 1.7 %.

Even though there are differences between the Member States, the situation in most countries is similar to the overall pattern at EU level: a sharp increase in the share of temporary lay-offs can be observed from Q4 2019 to Q1 and Q2 2020 followed by a drop in Q3 2020 and an increase in Q4 2020 (see Figure 9).

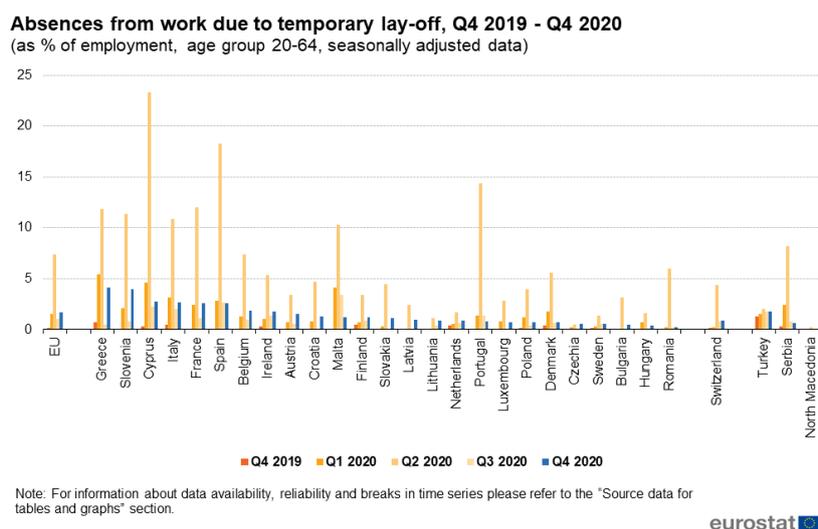


Figure 9: Absences from work due to temporary lay-off, Q4 2019 - Q4 2020 Source: Eurostat (lfsi_emp_q), (lfsi_abs_q)

Cyprus was invariably among the Member States with the highest proportions of temporary lay-offs in employment during the four quarters of 2020. In Q1, this share in Cyprus (4.7 %) was the second-highest after Greece (5.4 %) and before Malta (4.1 %). In Q2, when the share of temporary lay-offs was overall the highest, Cyprus was on top with 23.3 %, followed by Spain (18.2 %) and Portugal (14.4 %). In the second half of 2020, Cyprus dropped to third place with 2.3 % in Q3 after Malta (3.4 %) and Spain (2.7 %) and with 2.8 % in Q4 after Greece (4.1 %) and Slovenia (4.0 %). It is worth noting that Greece had the highest share of temporary lay-offs in both Q1 and Q4 2020. Czechia, on the other hand, was the Member State with the lowest share of temporary lay-offs in the EU in almost all quarters of 2020, never exceeding 1 %.

For comparison, no Member State had a share of temporary lay-offs among employed people greater than 1 % in Q4 2019.

Source data for tables and graphs

- [Download Excel file](#)

Data sources

All figures in this article are based on [seasonally adjusted](#) quarterly results from the [European Labour Force Survey \(EU-LFS\)](#).

Source: The European Union Labour Force Survey (EU-LFS) is the largest European household sample survey providing mostly quarterly and annual results on labour participation of people aged 15 and over as well as on persons outside the labour force. It covers residents in private households. Conscripts in military or community service are not included in the results. The EU-LFS is based on the same target populations and uses the same definitions in all countries, which means that the results are comparable between countries.

European aggregates: EU refers to the sum of 27 EU Member States. If data are unavailable for a country, the calculation of the corresponding aggregates is computed with estimates. Such cases are indicated.

Country note: In Germany, from the first quarter of 2020 onwards, the Labour Force Survey (LFS) has been integrated into the newly designed German microcensus as subsample. Unfortunately, for the LFS, technical issues and the COVID-19 crisis has had a large impact on data collection processes, resulting in low response rates and a biased sample. For this reason, the full sample of the whole microcensus have been used to estimate a restricted set of indicators for the four quarters of 2020 for the production of [LFS Main Indicators](#). These estimates have been used for the publication of German results, but also for the calculation of EU and EA aggregates. By contrast, EU and EA aggregates published in the [Detailed quarterly results](#) (showing more and different breakdowns than the LFS Main Indicators) have been computed using only available data from the LFS subsample. As a consequence, small

differences in the EU and EA aggregates in tables from both collections may be observed. For more information, see [here](#) .

Definitions: The notion of temporary absence from work refers to situations in which a period of work is interrupted by a period of absence. This implies that persons are generally to be considered as having been temporarily absent from work and therefore employed, if they had already worked at their current activity and were expected to return to their work after the period of absence. Persons without work who had made arrangements to take up paid employment or to engage in some self-employment activity at a date subsequent to the reference period, but who had not yet started work, are not to be considered as temporarily absent from work.

This article refers to the following reasons for absence from work: temporary lay-off, holidays, own illness or disability and other. Absent from work due to “temporary lay-off” are those whose written or unwritten contract of employment, or activity, has been suspended but have an assurance of return to work within a period of 3 months or receive at least 50 % of their wage or salary from their employer. These absences are also referred to as “slack work for technical or economic reasons”. People both without an assurance of return to work within a period of 3 months and not receiving at least 50 % of their wage or salary from their employer, are not considered as employed people temporarily absent from work. “Own illness or disability” includes own illness, injury or temporary disability. The category “other” encompasses absences due to bad weather, labour dispute, school education or training, maternity leave, parental leave, compensation leave and other personal or family reasons.

For more information on absences from work, please consult pages 22 to 28 from [EU Labour Force Survey Explanatory Notes](#)

Also, five different articles on detailed technical and methodological information are available from the overview page of the online publication [EU Labour Force Survey](#) .

Context

The COVID-19 pandemic hit Europe in January and February 2020, with the first cases confirmed in Spain, France and Italy. COVID-19 infections have since been diagnosed in all European Union (EU) Member States. To fight the pandemic, EU Member States have taken a wide variety of measures. From the second week of March, most countries closed retail shops, with the exception of supermarkets, pharmacies and banks. Bars, restaurants and hotels were also closed. In Italy and Spain, non-essential production was stopped and several countries imposed regional or even national lock-down measures which further stifled the economic activities in many areas. In addition, schools were closed, public events were cancelled and private gatherings (with numbers of persons varying from 2 to 50) were banned in most EU Member States.

The large majority of the prevention measures were taken during mid-March 2020, and most of the measures and restrictions were kept for the whole of April and May 2020. The first quarter of 2020 was consequently the first quarter in which the labour market across the EU has been affected by COVID-19 measures taken by Member States.

Employment and unemployment as defined by the ILO concept are, in this particular situation, not sufficient to describe the developments taking place in the labour market. In the first phase of the crisis, active measures to contain employment losses led to absences from work rather than dismissals, and individuals could not search for work or were not available due to the containment measures, thus not counting as unemployed.

See also

- [All articles on the labour market](#)
- [EU labour force survey](#)

Main tables

- [Employment and unemployment \(LFS\)](#)

Database

- [Employment and unemployment \(LFS\)](#)

Dedicated section

- [Labour market including Labour force Survey \(LFS\)](#)

Publications

- [European Union Labour force survey - selection of articles \(Statistics Explained\)](#)

Methodology

- [Statistical working papers / Manuals and guidelines](#)