RSA

CRISIS, COMMUNITIES, CHANGE

Demands for an equitable recovery

AUTHORS: IAN BURBIDGE | ELLA FIREBRACE | JOANNA CHOUKEIR | WILL GRIMOND

BACKGROUND

During the winter of 2020-2021, the royal society for arts, manufactures and commerce (RSA) undertook a community inquiry to listen to stories of resilience, challenge and imagination arising from the pandemic. We explored the differing realities and responses to the Covid-19 pandemic across the UK: the importance of pre-existing conditions in the lead-up to Covid-19 *(what was)*, the breadth of experiences and responses to the crisis *(what is)*, and future aspirations as we emerge from it *(what might be)*.

The pandemic has raised questions of justice and equity between different groups in society. The impact on health and wellbeing, the economic ramifications, and the other costs of isolating, have been distributed unevenly: across generational, regional and ethnic lines, the pandemic has had diverse effects.

We have looked from the perspectives of local communities and national systems change communities, conducted interviews, considered broader global trends and third-party research, and explored insights from scholars, writers, thinkers, workers and citizens, alongside public polling.

As part of our community inquiry, this short briefing is an attempt to understand in greater detail how those of ethnic minority backgrounds have been impacted. In the context of a growing body of research that suggests that minority groups have been badly impacted by the pandemic, we hope that this briefing can shed some light on community experiences during the pandemic, and contribute to a conversation on how to best foster an equitable recovery from it.

KEY FINDINGS

In March 2021, we polled the public on how they have fared during the pandemic: their experience with local government services, who they have turned to for support, and what they think the big issues are for the country going forward. Together with Savanta ComRes, we surveyed 2,677 members of the UK public aged 18+, weighted for age, gender, region and social grade. This included a weighted sample of 1000 people of ethnic minority backgrounds, in order to get a reliable idea of how specific ethnic minority groups fared during the pandemic. We found:

1. **Minority communities have been badly impacted by Covid**

As has been widely reported, minority communities in the UK have been badly impacted by the pandemic. Our findings suggest that minority communities have suffered economically and disproportionately felt the impacts from infections, illnesses and deaths.

'My local area has felt the economic impacts of Covid-19 worse than others'

	White	Mixed	Asian	Black
Net Agree	25%	43%	53%	41%
Net Disagree	26%	14%	17%	20%

Minority groups are also more like to have struggled to access government support: all of the minority groups we have data for found it challenging to get hold of the support for which they are eligible.

'I have been unable to (or have found it very difficult) to access government financial support during the pandemic, despite being eligible for it'

	White	Mixed	Asian	Black
Net Agree	21%	41%	46%	39%
Net Disagree	37%	23%	18%	24%

A particularly hard-hit group during the pandemic are those with no recourse to public funds. People may be unable to legally access public money for a variety of reasons: often this can be the result of being 'subject to immigration control', which can limit access to welfare and other forms of support. This group can be difficult to reach with conventional methods of data collection – taking part in public polling through an agency may require a UK bank account, for instance. However, our findings show greater awareness of these issues among minority communities. 61 percent of Asian respondents and 58 percent of Black respondents say that they are concerned for those with no access to public funds, compared to 43 percent among White respondents.

2. **These issues have been compounded by a lack of living and outdoor space**

Repeated lockdowns have made us re-evaluate our relationship with our immediate physical environment – both in terms of what we have available at home and in our local areas. Overcrowded housing has been blamed for increasing the rate that the pandemic has spread, and a lack of opportunities for outdoor exercise has further contributed to mental and physical health impacts faced by many over this pandemic.

'I have struggled to carry out day-to-day activities during the pandemic due to not having enough space at home'

	White	Mixed	Asian	Black
Net Agree	23%	49%	50%	46%
Net Disagree	55%	20%	24%	23%

Minority groups are far more likely to say they have struggled during the pandemic due to lack of living space. When asked what might improve your local area, every minority group we collected data on was more likely to choose access to green space and places to exercise area than White respondents. Issues with living space can also go hand-in-hand with pressures due to caring responsibilities: this is also significantly higher among minority communities.

'I have struggled to carry out day-to-day activities during the pandemic due to caring responsibilities'

	White	Mixed	Asian	Black
Net Agree	22%	48%	46%	45%
Net Disagree	54%	27%	26%	30%

3.   **Among Black and Asian respondents, half have suffered discrimination when accessing local services**

The stand-out finding from this work is the distrust in certain public services from minority groups. This is not uniform – some services fare better than others – but the police and the UK government are seen as particularly unhelpful by these groups.

Perhaps most dishearteningly of all, our survey suggests that half of Asian and Black respondents have faced discrimination when accessing local services – a number far higher than that of White respondents. Minority groups are also slightly more likely to say that government services are not designed 'with people like me in mind': 56 percent of mixed ethnicities and 53 percent of Black respondents say this versus 45 percent of White respondents.

'I have faced discrimination while accessing local services due to my ethnicity, religion, gender or sexuality'

	White	Mixed	Asian	Black
Net Agree	19%	44%	52%	50%
Net Disagree	59%	20%	21%	21%

The police and justice system, and the UK government, are viewed as unsupportive by many in the UK: 25 percent of Black respondents and 20 percent of respondents from mixed ethnic backgrounds said that the police 'actively make my life more difficult', compared to just 9 percent of White respondents. When considering how well the police and justice system operates, 42 percent of White respondents said that the police 'do their job', while twice as many Black respondents and those of a mixed background say that the police are not fit for purpose – 17 percent and 15 percent respectively compared to 7 percent of White respondents.

The same applies to the UK government and politicians. While White respondents and Asian respondents are split on whether they feel supported by this group, Black respondents and those of mixed backgrounds are more likely to feel unsupported: 28 percent of Black respondents say that the UK government and politicians 'actively make my life more difficult'.

4. **This institutional distrust may translate into vaccine hesitancy**

Various explanations have been given for the relatively lower take-up of Covid vaccinations in Black and Asian populations in the UK, including misinformation and language and transport barriers. Our data suggests that institutional distrust because of discrimination may play a role.

Data from the Office for National Statistics shows that for people over 70, those identifying as Black African and Black Caribbean had vaccination rates of just 59 percent and 69 percent respectively, and that take-up by people of Bangladeshi and Pakistani backgrounds are below 75 percent. This compares to a 90 percent take-up rate overall. This tallies with our own data: we asked two questions on vaccine hesitancy, with minority communities more reluctant to take the vaccine both due to health concerns or as a result of what they have read in the news.

*'I am hesitant about getting a vaccine due to health concerns'*

	White	Mixed	Asian	Black
Net Agree	20%	44%	44%	45%
Net Disagree	63%	28%	32%	30%

'I am hesitant about getting a vaccine due to stories I have heard in the news'

	White	Mixed	Asian	Black
Net Agree	22%	41%	40%	48%
Net Disagree	61%	29%	32%	26%

Our survey suggests that historic discrimination could be contributing to vaccine hesitancy: among ethnic minority respondents, those who are vaccine-hesitant are almost twice as likely to have faced discrimination when accessing local services in the past.

'I have faced discrimination while accessing local services due to my ethnicity, religion, gender or sexuality' (Ethnic minority respondents only)
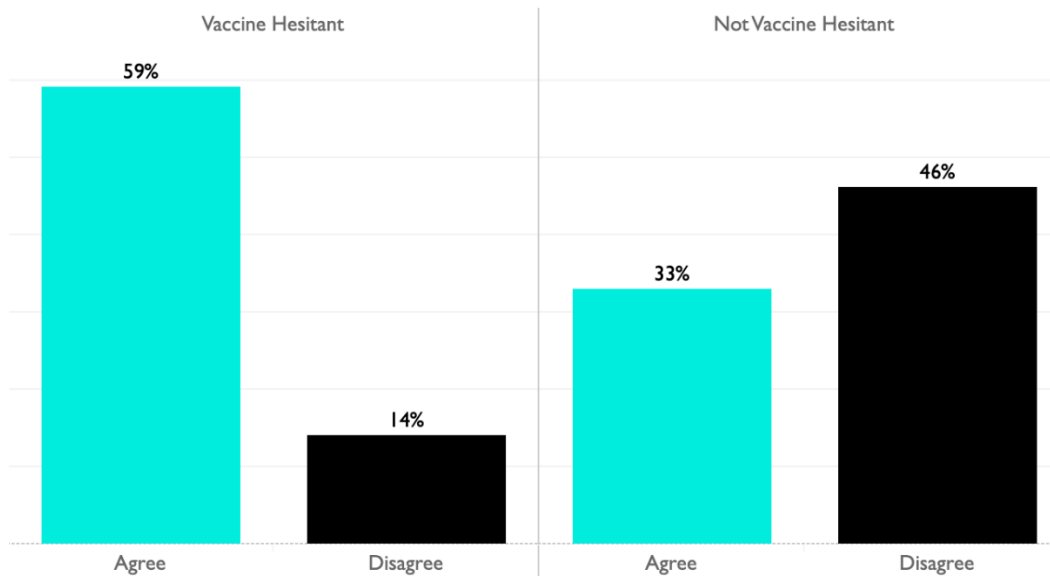
While this does not represent a causal link, the role of structural discrimination in vaccine hesitancy is supported by interviews carried out as part of this project. Samira Ben Omar, co-founder of Community Voices, an initiative which is seeking to understand the health impacts of Covid on BAME communities and frontline health staff in North West London, told us:

> *"...if someone says 'the vaccine is about making GP's rich' or 'I don't trust Pfizer, look at what they did to our communities. I'll have the Oxford one, but no way will I have the Pfizer one', the question is really, what did 'they' do to our communities? As a system, we're not that comfortable with having those conversations. But who is unpicking those, who is saying, 'tell me a bit more about that'? For me, it's not about making the GPs rich, it's about a disconnect between our healthcare systems and our communities.*

> *"The conversations that need to happen are about the longer-term and about what changes need to happen in our system to repair that disconnect. The disconnect is not because of the way our communities have behaved, it's the disconnect with how systems, our system, all public sector services have behaved."*

5. **Despite this, our data suggests that minority respondents feel better supported by other services and groups in their area**

It is worth noting that every group we surveyed is more likely than not to agree that there is a strong sense of community in their local area: 41 percent of the public say that they've felt better connected to it during the pandemic, versus 23 percent disagreeing. Minority communities are generally happier with the unemployment support, mental health and youth services in their area. This may be partly explained by levels of contact with

these services – White respondents are more likely to respond 'don't know' or that they don't come into these services when asked about the levels of service or support they receive. We also heard evidence in our qualitative work that these services can often be more tailored to specific groups, and are often more representative of the communities they service.

Minority groups are also more likely than White respondents to feel supported by community organisations, charities, schools and local businesses. Perhaps the starkest difference is levels of support religious and faith groups – 42 percent of white respondents answered 'I don't come into contact with this group often enough to have an opinion', while 54 percent of Asian and 52 percent of Black respondents feel at least somewhat supported by them.

6. **When it comes to making decisions about our local areas, the public want better information, clarity and accountability**

Devolving government spending is popular: 53 percent agree that local leaders should have greater decision-making powers, versus just 13 percent disagreeing. Spaces to deliberate on issues were also slightly more popular than help participating in local government.

Which of the following would help you to get more involved in decisions on issues which impact your local area?

More information about what facilities and groups and services are available in my local area	36%
More clarity from local government and other public services on their decision-making	35%
More accountability from local leaders, and those who provide local services, on the decisions they make	35%
Better online/digital tools to communicate with people and organisations in your local area	30%
Regular opportunities to meet and deliberate on issues which impact the local community	27%
More help participating in local government - for instance, help with voting and more information and contact with councillors	22%
Specific spaces for members of minority communities to input in decisions that affect your local area	19%

More information on local services scored highly among Asian and Black respondents (41 percent and 43 percent). While specific spaces for minority communities did not score highly overall, the idea was popular with those of mixed ethnicities (30 percent) and Black respondents (29 percent).

7. There is a consensus that poverty is the largest issue facing the country

Respondents were invited to choose which they thought were the most concerning issues facing the country – poverty came out on top overall, and was the most-selected for many demographic groups.

Beyond this, however, there is a split on which issues are most concerning. Among White respondents, issues like the climate crisis, misinformation, Brexit and government corruption are viewed as the most important. Meanwhile, among Black, Asian and Mixed respondents, issues like racial discrimination, quality of the education system, abuses of police power and Brexit score most highly.

'Thinking about the bigger picture, which of these issues most concern you?'[i]

	White	Mixed	Asian	Black
Abuses of power by the police & in the criminal justice system	22%	33%	33%	33%
The Climate Crisis	37%	28%	29%	21%
Economic inequality	32%	27%	29%	32%
The Impact of Brexit	33%	32%	32%	33%
Government misspending & corruption	31%	24%	26%	25%
Online misinformation	31%	28%	21%	18%
Poverty	43%	41%	41%	40%
The quality of our education system	21%	30%	28%	35%
Racial discrimination in society	19%	36%	37%	50%
Widening divides in the public's political views	18%	20%	17%	16%
None of the above	8%	9%	4%	4%

8. Looking forward, different groups have different hopes for the future

We asked the public what they would most like to see in the future. Across all ethnicities, people most often responded that they would like to see better support for our key workers. While White respondents rated more highly a desire to see real action to combat climate change, respondents from other ethnic groups were significantly more likely to want to see the UK tackle racial inequalities. Black respondents were more than twice as likely to select this (45 percent) than white respondents (20 percent). The same is true for tackling inequalities arising from gender and sexuality, with 36 percent of Black respondents seeing this as important to focus on in the future ,compared to 16 percent of White respondents.

Given the high rates of discrimination during the pandemic, and the impact it has had on these communities, these results are unsurprising. When looking at how we want to emerge out of this pandemic, these public concerns, hopes and aspirations for the future should be central to overall recovery, repair and renewal.

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[i] Respondents were invited to select up to 5 answers. The top 3 for each group are highlighted.

NEXT STEPS

This briefing directly challenges the recent findings of the Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities: namely the assertion that 'institutional' racism has largely lost its validity as a means of understanding discrimination in the UK. Our findings on discrimination and distrust add to the already extensive body of evidence that suggests the Commission's report is not reflective of the experiences of many in the UK. The issues highlighted in this briefing are structural and systemic by nature and require a similar response: invest in resources, invest in conversations, invest in the longer-term and invest in experimentation.

First, we call for **fair funding on the basis of need**. Austerity and recent changes to the way local government is funded have left our towns and cities at the mercy of market forces and left the most deprived areas the most vulnerable to a crisis. Marginalised and minority communities are paying the price of this disinvestment and neglect. Relative levels of poverty and deprivation need again to be at the heart of a fair funding deal for local places. This needs to go beyond devolution with accountability to government. In being needs-based, it is 'bottom-up', with the focus on accountability to those who most need support.

Fair funding is supported by **community conversations**. Only by recognising the diversity of experience and impact of Covid-19 can communities collectively come together to look to the future. Minority groups have been disproportionately impacted. Their voices need to be heard. We can't collectively aspire to a better future if we ignore the past. Inclusive, reconciliatory conversations would enable communities to give voice to their needs and aspirations.

Building on these local conversations we reiterate the call we made in our recent report ['a stitch in time'](#) to take **a longer-term perspective in efforts of community renewal**. There is no 'right' way of undertaking community foresight work, and we call for UK Government to invest – through the fair funding settlement for local government – in a range of approaches to learn what works. Crucially, the core challenge is to ensure such processes are inclusive and enable wide participation, brokering different viewpoints. They should not simply replicate existing power imbalances.

The fourth pillar of our call for fair investment in communities is to **invest in innovation and experimentation**. We must get beyond UK Government 'one size fits all' prescriptions and liberate the creativity and energy in diverse communities up and down the country to respond to the issues they face. Many have done this out of necessity during the pandemic. And we know innovation is more likely where we bring diverse perspectives to bear. Our call is to invest in the conditions that stimulate and support such local creativity to flourish, not to step into the space left by a retreating state, but alongside a local public sector that has fair investment.

Taken together these foundations begin to address the core structural challenges that led to the inequality of impact and the diversity of experiences of Covid-19, as illustrated in our polling and wider research. But they will

remain incomplete until they become fundamental mechanisms through which communities evolve and adapt into the future. This work is not a one-off exercise, therefore, but the start of an ongoing endeavour to support people and communities to actively create the future they want and need. And particularly those communities hardest hit by the pandemic.

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For more information, contact Ian Burbidge, ian.burbidge@rsa.org.uk.

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