NSUL

NAVIGATING SPACE UNDER LOCKDOWN

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PERSPECTIVES AND EXPERIENCES OF YOUNG BLACK AND MINORITISED ADULTS

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1 INTRODUCTION

In September 2020, The Ubele Initiative in partnership with a team of researchers from the Bartlett Development Planning Unit (DPU), University College London, were awarded a National Lottery Community Support Fund grant for a pilot research project exploring the differentiated impacts of COVID-19 and related lock-down measures on young Black and Minority Ethnic adults (18-35) in England.

The following report summarises the context and rationale, methods and key findings of this collaborative action research, and concludes with a brief discussion of policy and practice implications as well as possibilities for future research.

2 CONTEXT AND RATIONALE

There is a large and growing body of evidence that Black and minoritised communities in the UK have been disproportionately affected by the health and broader socio-economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.

However, little is known about the specific experiences and needs of young Black and minoritised adults under COVID-19, echoing the relative invisibility of this demographic in public discourses and policy. The collaborative pilot research between The Ubele Initiative and the DPU aims to start addressing this evidence gap in the context of COVID-19.

Working alongside a group of 12 volunteer peer researchers, a mix of quantitative and qualitative methods were used to explore evolving understandings and experiences of home, work, mobility, community and well-being for Black and minoritised young adults in England, in the context of COVID-19.

3 METHODS

The research piloted a combination of quantitative, spatial and qualitative methods, including:

Focus Group Discussions - To grasp the key issues and priorities for young Black and minoritised adults under COVID-19 related lockdowns, two focus group discussions were organised in November 2020, as a primary step in the research. The first focus group brought together the 12 volunteer peer researchers. Initial discussions helped identify the broad themes for the research: mental health and well-being; housing, relationships and connectivity; mobility, space and household economy. The second focus group included 25 individuals (including but not limited to the peer research volunteers) with participants selected based on a call for interest posted on The Ubele Initiative's website and with attention to the gender and regional balance of participants across England's eight regions. Discussions were organised in thematic sub-groups, followed by group-wide discussions.

Online survey - Analysis of the focus group discussions enabled the research team to refine common issues and experiences that could be explored at scale using a geocoded survey. Given the constraints imposed by the pandemic in terms of data collection during lockdown, the team used Maptionnaire, a web-based participatory mapping tool that made remote engagement with a diverse and geographically disparate group of respondents possible. Survey questions were extensively workshopped with the 12 volunteer peer researchers. Collected between 8/02/2021 and 12/03/2021, the pilot sample of 152 surveys provided a data pool sufficient for a meaningful quantitative analysis of some of the key issues and experiences of the pandemic among the target demographic of this research.

Podcasts - Six facilitated hour-long discussions among the volunteer peer researchers were audio recorded and edited in podcast format to further explore the themes of education and employment; mental health; positives of lockdown; and relationships. The themes were generated and agreed within the peer volunteers group.

Short-film – Production of a short film (20 mins) on young Black and minoritised adult's experiences of Covid-19 and related lockdown policies in England. The production work was led by Foam20 and included 3 creative workshops which enabled the volunteer peer researchers to learn key technical skills (on interviews, video footage and photography) to be able to collect appropriate audiovisual content of their local area. The creative content (video footage and photography) was collected by the volunteer peer researchers from 1 January to 15 March 2021.The short film final editing was completed by 31 March.

Project website – a web-based platform (https://nsul.org.uk/) was created to disseminate the research project's main findings and outputs (podcasts, short film) with a wider audience.

Reflections on methodology - The mixed methods approach detailed above, including the incorporation of non-traditional creative media (visual – film; auditory - podcast), aimed to provide respondents and the peer volunteers with a variety of platforms through which to express themselves and engage with the research, according to their interests and preferred ways of communicating. The pilot also sought to identify the most interesting / fruitful combination of research methods to capture the nuances in respondents' lockdown experiences. The contributions and insights from the group of peer researchers were invaluable in advising on the relevance and accessibility of these approaches, and in shaping the thematic focus of the on-line survey.

The peer researchers further led on the data collection using creative audio-visual tools such as a podcast series and working closely with The Ubele Initiative and FOAM to produce a short film.

In practice, each method produced a distinct set of data and added a layer of understanding about the complex, overt and subtle impacts of COVID-19 on respondents. The quantitative survey enabled engagement with a larger sample of respondents and provided a sense of scale and commonality of issues. The detailed nature of the survey also delivered a rich dataset which will enable ongoing analysis of correlations to inform future research. The qualitative methods (focus group discussions, podcasts, short film) produced detailed personal accounts of respondents' individual experiences, shedding light not only on key issues arising from the pandemic for this demographic but crucially, also, on the complex interconnection between these issues, producing or compounding certain impacts (see findings section).

Saying that, the specific demographics of the volunteer peer researchers and of survey respondents are not fully representative of the young Black and minoritised adult population living in England and, as such, the findings of this pilot contain a number of biases that are important to consider when analysing the collected data, and in the development of future research. For instance, all the peer researchers and the majority of focus group discussion participants had completed, or were enrolled in, some form of higher education. Even though participants took care to reflect beyond their personal circumstances and adopt a 'community' lens in focus group discussions, their experiences cannot be taken to reflect the experiences of highly diverse Black and minoritised young adults in England more generally. Additional biases in the survey include gender (71% of respondents were female) and geographic location (large representation from Greater London, Leicester, Brighton, and Greater Manchester) (see Figure 1).

It is also unclear how far the pilot was able to tap into the diversity of young Black and minoritised adults in terms of socio-economic status. As shown in the table accompanying the map in Figure 1, most respondents were under 30, single, and in full-time employment or studying at the time of the survey. The composition of the sample is therefore relevant when interpreting the survey findings.

Figure 1. Sample distribution and composition
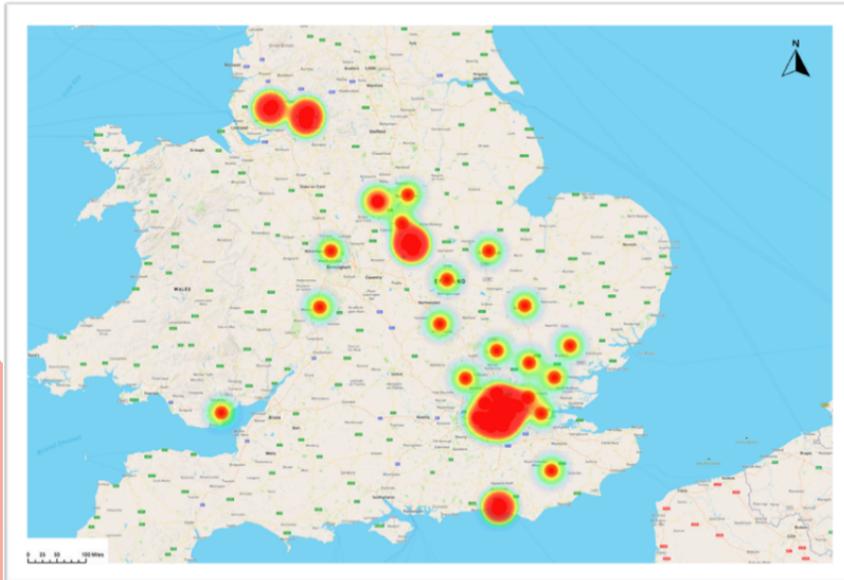
	Total	Percentage
Ethnic background		
African	35	24%
Indian	24	17%
Caribbean	16	11%
Pakistani	13	9%
Other	11	8%
Any other Asian Background	45	31%
People on household		
One	2	2%
Two	44	35%
Three	25	20%
More than three	54	43%
Age		
18 to 22	11	7%
21 to 25	49	32%
26 to 30	57	38%
31 to 35	29	19%
more than 35	6	4%
Marital status		
Cohabiting	23	16%
Divorced	5	4%
Married	24	17%
Other	3	2%
Single	87	61%
Main occupation		
Full time employee	71	50%
Self-employed / freelance	26	18%
Part time employee	9	6%
Student	25	18%
Looking for a job	7	5%
Other	4	3%

Source: Own elaboration based on survey data

Finally, and in retrospect, some of the survey questions could be refined to produce more detailed information (e.g. whether those currently working from home are doing so because the nature of their job pre-lockdown was compatible with this, or whether they were forced by the pandemic to retrain). As we argue in the recommendations section, the pilot project fulfilled its ambitions by producing rich insights, as well as identifying areas for future research.

4 FINDINGS

Key themes to emerge from this pilot pertain to the centrality of home and housing conditions for understanding the differentiated impacts of COVID-19 (and associated lockdown measures) on young Black and minoritised adults in England. This is perhaps unsurprising for a demographics generally characterised by precarious housing and employment experiences. In the context of the pandemic and lockdowns, however, the spin-off effects of differentiated housing conditions (who respondents live with, as well as space/density/cost considerations) were intensified and impacted respondents' ability to work, their work prospects and economic security, as well as their mental health and wellbeing. Additionally, the research highlighted ways in which COVID-19 (and associated lockdown measures) has contributed to a sharpening of identity awareness amongst many young Black and minoritised adults in England. The breakdown of findings follows.

Home and housing

- 38% of respondents in the survey had to change accommodation at least once since March 2020. This echoes findings from the focus groups and podcasts. Main reasons include:
    - Changes in tenancy conditions for renters: end of tenancy contract, increase of rent price.
    - Affordability factors: Change in household income, to reduce housing expenses (e.g. moving from renting alone to sharing).
    - 4% of the survey sample reported having bought their first home since March 2020.
    - Change in marital/relationship status impacting living conditions (e.g., moving together, seeking a larger place, buying the first home, separating from partner and needing to find new accommodation)
    - Most students moved back with family during lockdown

- The majority of young Black and minoritised respondents experienced COVID-19 and lockdowns in the context of shared accommodation. This has had important implications for both work and mental health/wellbeing considerations.
  - In the survey, average occupation in respondents' accommodation was 3.7 people.
  - 57% reported renting their accommodation at the time of responding to the survey; 16% of renters reported doing so in shared accommodation.

Work

- 79% of respondents in the survey have been furloughed at least once since March 2020.
- 49% of respondents in the survey sample have changed their main occupation since March 2020 (Figure A-1 in the Annex).
- Changes in respondents' main occupation suggest four frequent situations (based on findings from the survey and insights from qualitative discussions):
  - (Re)training and acquiring new skills (~9% of the survey sample).
  - Having to change jobs or being moved to part-time employment.
  - Redundancies without finding new employment (~10% of survey sample).
  - Students completing their degrees. Many respondents in this situation moved into self-employment or freelancing (~11% of the survey sample).
- 46% of respondents in the survey reported dissatisfaction with their work-life balance since March 2020.
- ~60% of respondents in the survey reported working from home at the time of responding to the survey (see Figure A-2).
- Qualitative research findings indicate a correlation between housing conditions and ability to work from home - i.e. having the space and privacy to work from home effectively, comfortably and securely / safely. Additionally, care responsibilities linked to lockdown have impacted work / study capacity of respondents in multi-generational households.

Mental health and well-being

- Mental health considerations featured high in all qualitative data and received the highest average negative scores across the board in the survey (Figure A-3)
- Shared accommodation – either with family or with strangers – has been a defining feature of COVID-19 related lockdown experiences for respondents. In some instances, it has acted as a source of comfort and a shield from potential isolation. In other cases, it has been a major point of stress, anxiety and insecurity, especially in high density households or where respondents were living with people outside their chosen peer group. Some focus group respondents recounted feeling unsafe or unable to be themselves in their own homes or having to hide aspects of themselves. This was the case for some who were forced to move in with family members, and especially pronounced among respondents living in shared accommodation with strangers whom they had little contact with prior to lockdown.
- Feelings of depression, loneliness and/or isolation were widely reported, even in shared living arrangements
  - 37% of respondents in the survey reported their perceived depression levels were high (~25%) and very high (~12%).
  - 54% of respondents in the survey reported their perceived levels of isolation were high (~34%) and very high (~20%)
- Work experiences under lockdown has also had an important impact on mental health and wellbeing:
  - Job loss/furlough and job insecurity have negatively affected mental health, especially among those who already suffer from mental health issues such as depression and/or anxiety

- The correlation between mental health, housing and work situations was picked up consistently through the mixed methods research approach. Table 1 extracted from the survey identified that:
  - Table 1 (top): respondents perceiving negative effects of lockdown on their household economy (Figure A-4) reported higher negative scores across all measures (living conditions, mental health, sleep and relationships)
  - Table 1 (bottom): those working from home reported higher negative impact on their sleep and relationships, while those commuting report higher negative scores on mental health.

Table 1. Average impact scores (scale from 1 to 5) according to perceived economic (top) and form of access of main activity (bottom)

Economic Affectation	Impact on living conditions	Impact on mental health	Impact on sleep	Impact on relationships
Negatively	3.47	3.94	3.60	3.44
Neutral	2.85	3.78	3.25	3.24
Positively	2.57	3.78	3.38	3.21

Form of access of main activity	Impact on living conditions	Impact on mental health	Impact on sleep	Impact on relationships
Commuting	3.02	3.78	3.49	3.35
Working from home	3.11	3.91	3.38	3.31

Source: Own elaboration based on survey data

- COVID-19 related anxiety, illnesses (COVID-19 or other – see Figure A-5) or loss have also had a negative impact on mental health. Lockdown restrictions meant that many had to navigate grief without family, friends or support networks.
- Many respondents noted difficulties in accessing mental health support (Figure A-6): provision is limited (especially in certain neighbourhoods) and costly. However, a positive side effect of COVID-19 picked up by participants was the new public legitimacy of discussions on the mental health of young adults.

Connectivity and access

- The loss of face-to-face interaction with peers and social networks was widely picked up as a major effect of COVID-19 and associated lockdown measures. Beyond contact with close networks, interaction with strangers in public spaces, work or study spaces was also reported as an 'unexpected' loss linked to the pandemic. Figure A-7 captures the spatial dimensions of this loss of connectivity, albeit not its emotional dimensions which were picked up in qualitative data. It highlights the dissatisfaction with access to community spaces, and the significant role of local convenience stores, small businesses and open public spaces, perceived as accessible by a large share of the sample.
- Inter-generational connectivity was another important dimension of lockdown experience for the research demographic. For some, shared intergenerational space was imposed and, relatedly, a cause for anxiety. For others, it provided a source of comfort. For others still, lack of connectivity due to imposed social distancing measures represented a source of concern and worry. Qualitative data highlights an awareness amongst some respondents of the differentiated ability of generations to cope with changes associated with lockdowns.
- Social media was described as both a source of support and of anxiety: 57% of the sample in the survey reported that their level of engagement with social media was high (22%) and very high (35%) at the time of responding.

Identity

- Increasing evidence (experiential or recorded in the press) of the differentiated impact of COVID-19 and associated lockdown on Black and minoritised communities has contributed to a sharpening of identity awareness for many young Black and minoritised adults in England. In some cases, this has coincided with a heightened sense of disenchantment with the State and the mainstream / dominant institutional landscape.
    - Focus group discussions revealed experiences of institutional bias / discrimination - or at the very least institutional negligence - with regards Black and minoritised groups' access to services and support in the context of the pandemic. Many expressed the feeling that government is 'not speaking for us' and 'not focusing on us', as illustrated in the lack of government support for home-schooling / free school meals (especially in low-income neighbourhoods); lack of consideration for the practice of multigenerational living in many Black and minoritised communities, for the experiences of immigrants with no recourse to public funds, or for the conditions of asylum seekers; or indeed, a failure to include Black and minoritised communities in national and / or regional communication about the pandemic itself. In short, there was a sense that when it came to government responses to COVID-19, many Black and minoritised communities 'fell off the map'.
    - In the face of institutional failings, many respondents noted the importance of community networks, with evidence of local businesses, individuals, and community groups playing a key role in filling the gaps left by government.
    - COVID-19 and related lockdown measures revealed for many respondents the over-representation of Black and minoritised communities in essential services and the gig economy – whose members have been particularly vulnerable to COVID-19.

- For many respondents, the Black Lives Matter protests in the wake of George Floyd's murder sharpened growing perceptions of the differentiated impact of the pandemic on Black and minoritised communities. With the spotlight on race and racism that subsequently emerged in national media, some respondents living in shared accommodation said they were targeted by aggressive, antagonistic or racist behaviour from White house mates. This left them feeling anxious, policed, and unsafe in their own homes, contributing to a deterioration in their mental health – and prompting some to change their living arrangements after the first lockdown.

- Some respondents experienced COVID-19 and its differentiated impact as a catalyst for (re)newed discussions on the limitations of the 'BAME' acronym and a call for self-identification (see Figure A-8) and the use of more accurate terms / depictions such as 'racialised communities', 'communities experiencing racism' or 'racially marginalised / minoritised communities'. This sharpening of identity awareness has, in some instances, invoked the lens of intersectionality, that is, a call for nuance in the reading of 'BAME' experiences to reflect the intersection of race and ethnicity with gender, sexuality, class, religion, age, migrant status and ability.

5 MOVING FORWARD

The mixed methods pilot produced rich insights, highlighting the deep, albeit differentiated impact of COVID-19 and associated lockdown measures on young Black and minoritised adults in England. It highlighted the vulnerability of many in this demographic, marked by precarity in housing and employment conditions. COVID-19 and associated lockdowns have compounded broader experiences of disadvantage and exclusion among this demographic. Respondents' racial and intersectional identities has often added a layer of complexity to their pandemic experiences. However, the pilot has also highlighted the remarkable resilience and adaptability of young Black and minoritised adults – aided by technological know-how and, in some cases, social media - in what have been unprecedented and often traumatic times. In such context, Black and minoritised community networks have been critical pillars for this demographic and their communities, filling in gaps left by government in access to essential goods and services, and support. An important question emerging from this research becomes: how far and how long can such networks – often most affected by the pandemic, yet with limited resources – continue to pick up the slack?

The limitations of the pilot described above have also pointed to areas for future research, if our understanding of the varied experiences of COVID-19 related lockdowns for the diversity of young Black and minoritised adults in England is to be sharpened – and for appropriate policies and programmatic responses to be developed accordingly. Importantly, the pilot has provided key guidelines for such future research, including:

- The importance of deepening an intersectional understanding of young Black and minoritised adults' experience of lockdowns (and recovery): As illustration, if we are to better understand the impact of COVID-19 and associated lockdowns on young adults' work chances, the pilot indicates the need to examine the rationale behind decisions to (re)train, reflected as a response of choice in both the survey and qualitative methods. Does re/additional training reflect skills mismatch in the job market or the adaptability of young Black and minoritised adults in the sample? Addressing such questions requires, on the one hand, a deeper examination of the job opportunities currently being accessed by young Black and minoritised adults and how they have changed in response to the pandemic. On the other hand, it suggests examining closely the adaptability suggested by the limited sample in this pilot study, including interrogating the conditions (from identity, to education, to socioeconomic conditions, to housing, etc.) that enable such adaptability.

- The importance of adopting a cross-sectoral approach: The pilot research has shed light on the links between housing, work, access, and mental health, and how these various factors have interacted to produce differentiated experiences of lockdowns for diverse groups of young Black and racially minoritised adults. These links were observed at different scales and operating through different timeframes. For example, data from the pilot suggests that challenges in aspects such as housing, access and mental health are driven by challenges at the individual and household scales, as well as by structural factors at the neighbourhood or city scale (e.g., the differentiated availability of local facilities and open public spaces, or shifts in the economy that are transforming the job market accessible to this demographic). Measuring the extent to which levels of access to economic, social and mental health support has an effect on the well-being of young adults from ethnic minority backgrounds needs to be further researched, using a broader sample that better reflects the diversity of individual circumstances, needs and preferences. This pilot has provided insights and instruments that can be extended to a larger and more diverse sample of participants; this will help deepen our understanding of the links initially identified in our research.

Annex: Additional findings from the survey

Figure A-1. Change in main occupation among respondents in the survey
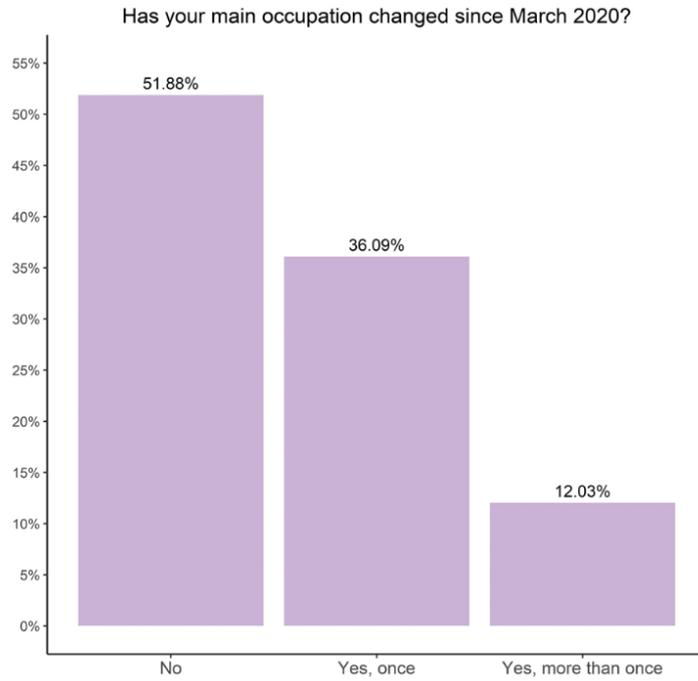
Figure A-2. Mode of access and difficulty for accessing respondents' main occupation in the survey
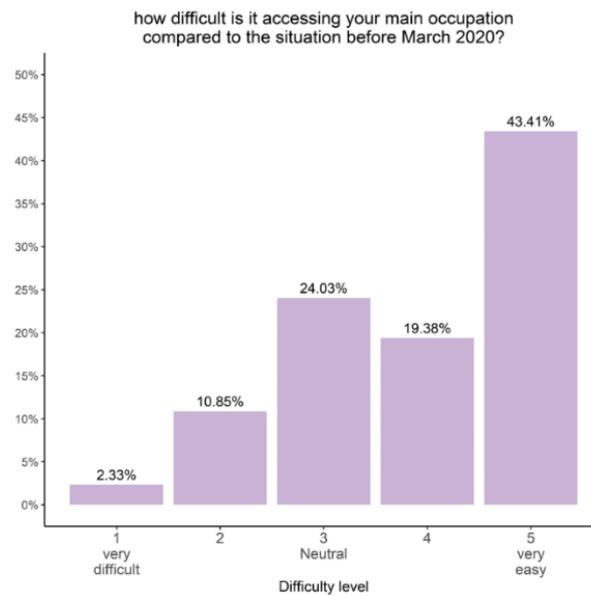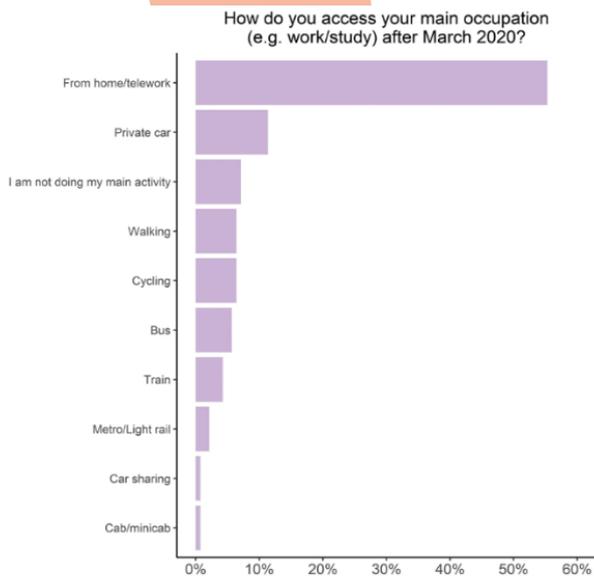
Figure A-3. Perceived impact on mental health, sleep and personal relationships for respondents in the survey
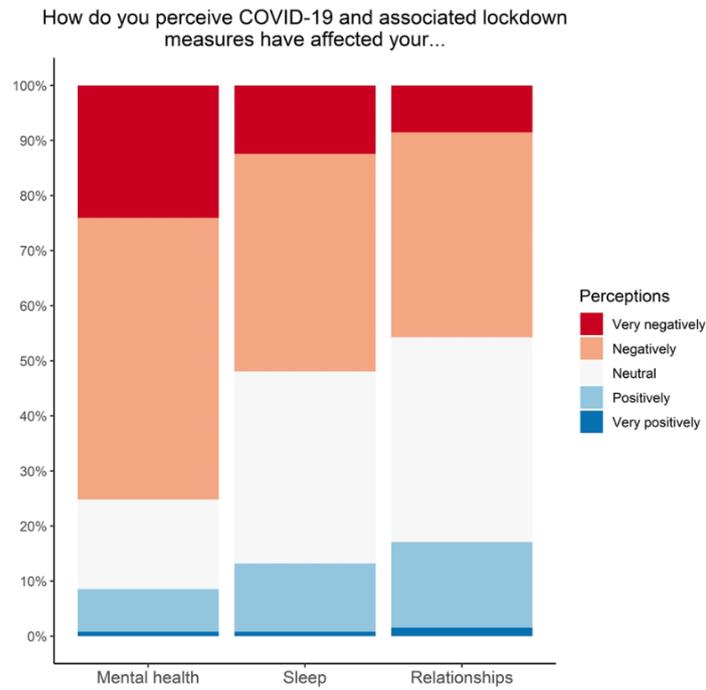
Figure A-4. Perceived economic impact of lockdowns for respondents in the survey
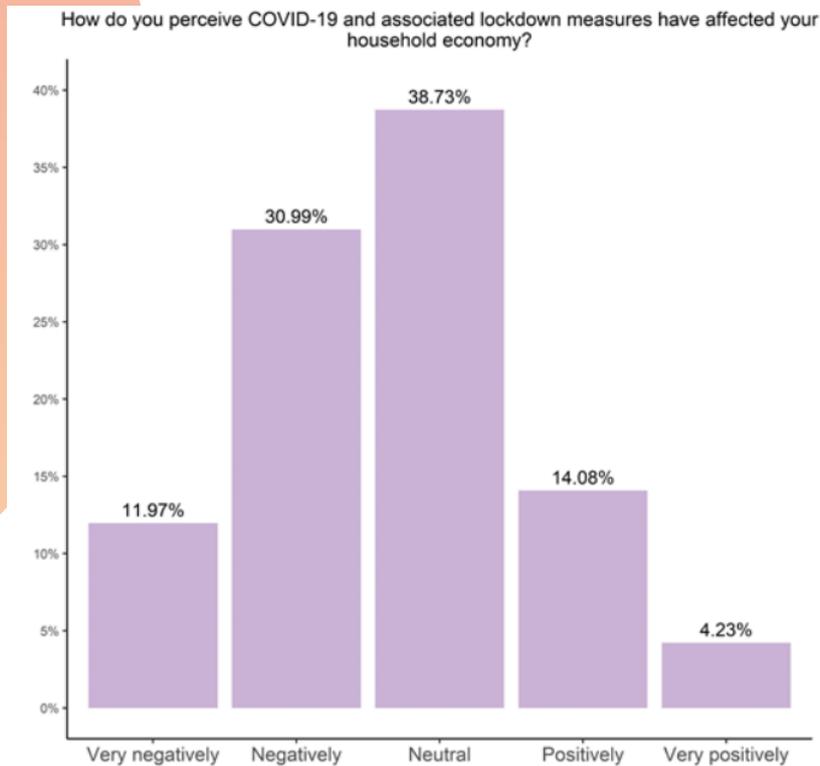
Figure A-5. Incidence of COVID-19 among respondents in the survey
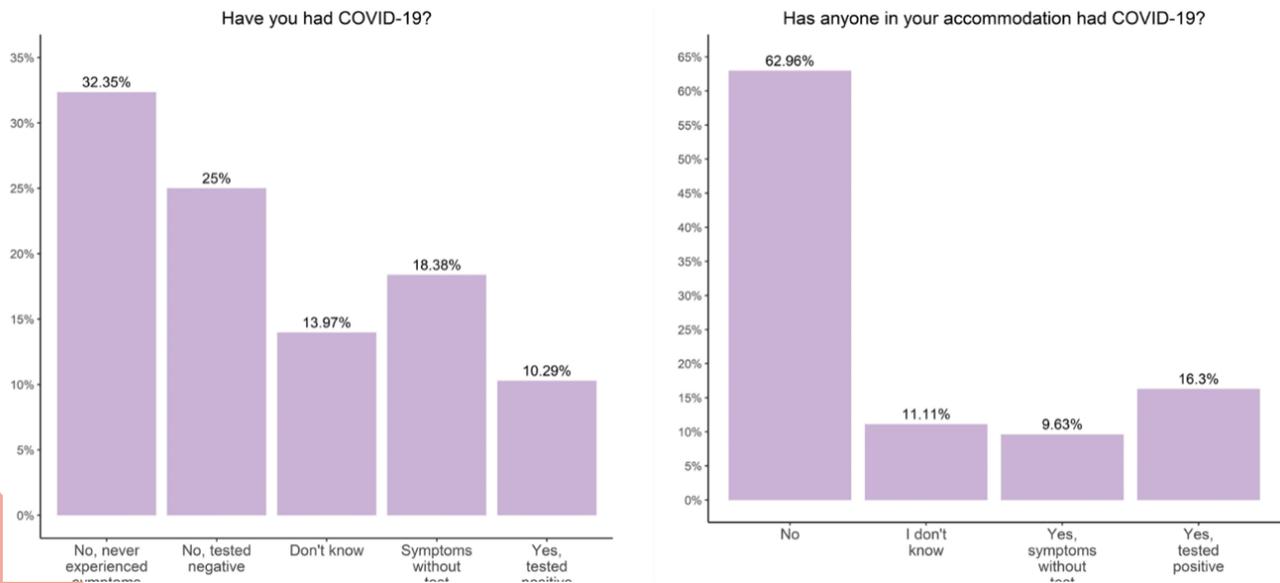
Figure A-6. Percentage of respondents in the survey by access to mental health support

Figure A-7. Satisfaction with access to different opportunities for respondents in the survey

Figure A-8. Word cloud of responses to the question on self-identification in the survey