

Unequal Britain

Attitudes to inequalities after Covid-19

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Key findings


The pandemic has deeply affected us all – but not equally. The crisis has ruthlessly exposed how our vulnerability to shocks varies hugely, determined by a complex web of existing inequalities, across genders, age groups, races, income levels, social classes and places.

Public perceptions of the extent and causes of these inequalities are vitally important to the functioning of societies, economies and politics. If the public think that inequalities are large and growing, and crucially, that they are unfair, this can undermine faith in political and economic systems as a whole.

This is the focus of this report, exploring attitudes to a range of inequality types, and in light of the Covid-19 crisis, as part of the Policy Institute's work contributing to the Institute for Fiscal Studies Deaton Review of Inequalities.

The crisis and its aftermath also give fresh impetus to the government's "levelling up" agenda and its broader "fight for fairness", as laid out by the Minister for Women and Equalities, Liz Truss.¹ The pandemic has led to calls for the government to go further, to embrace a "Beveridge moment"² – to rethink the welfare state, as was done during the second world war. The Labour party has responded by putting tackling inequalities at the heart of its agenda, in Keir Starmer's outline of "A New Chapter for Britain". Greater action on inequality will certainly be seen by some as a logical progression from the unprecedented state intervention that's been required to weather the Covid-19 crisis.

All of this, combined with the fact that many have come into contact with the welfare system for the first time as a result of Covid-19, gives reason to think the public mood might be shifting in favour of a more interventionist state.



But our new study shows that the coronavirus crisis has not, as yet, unified the country on the need for a rethink on inequality or how to address it. Despite the response to the virus requiring a huge collective national effort, and despite significant vulnerabilities among particular groups being exposed over the past year, the crisis has, for the most part, not bridged political divides in support for action on inequality, and there is only a limited consensus on what the country's most pressing inequalities are.

Area-based inequalities are an unexpected – and unifying – top source of concern

Perhaps surprisingly given all the other impacts of the pandemic, the one issue on which there is significant agreement that cuts across political lines is place-based inequalities.

- Inequalities between more and less deprived areas (61 per cent), along with disparities in income and wealth (60 per cent), are seen as the most serious type of inequality in Britain.
- This indicates the strength of potential support for the government's "levelling up" agenda – it very much fits with the public's own priorities, almost regardless of background.
- Area-based inequalities are the only form of inequality about which Labour (67 per cent) and Conservative voters (59 per cent) have comparably high levels of concern. This concern also cuts across Brexit divides, suggesting that a policy emphasis on such inequalities could be relatively unifying.
- Among people who expect inequality to rise as a result of the pandemic, 84 per cent anticipate that disparities between more and less deprived areas will increase – the top answer given – again reflecting the high level of concern the public have about this issue.



But attitudes towards other forms of inequality, particularly between different racial or ethnic groups, are much more divided

- Inequalities between racial or ethnic groups are considered one of the most serious forms of inequality in Britain, after those between more and less deprived areas and disparities in income and wealth – but there is much greater variation in levels of concern between groups.
- Conservative voters (32 per cent) are around half as likely as Labour voters (62 per cent) to see disparities between ethnic groups as one of the most serious forms of inequality.
- Two-thirds of the public (67 per cent) say it would be a problem if the gap in incomes between white people and ethnic minorities grew as a result of the coronavirus crisis – but nearly a quarter (24 per cent) say they wouldn't consider it a problem.
- Half of Britons say that discrimination helps explain why black people have lower earnings, but one in eight (13 per cent) think this is a result of black people lacking motivation or willpower. Conservative (21 per cent) and Leave voters (21 per cent) are far more likely than Labour (4 per cent) and Remain voters (6 per cent) to believe this explanation. However, this is much lower than similar data from the US, where 36 per cent of people say that a lack of motivation holds black Americans back.

And growing gender inequality following Covid-19 is a much lower concern

- Among people who think inequality will increase as a result of the pandemic, 17 per cent expect disparities between men and women to grow – far fewer than the proportion who expect any other inequalities to worsen. This is despite evidence of adverse labour market



consequences for women in Britain resulting from the crisis.

- And of all the types of inequality between different groups in society, the public are least concerned about income inequality between genders getting worse because of the crisis – a third (32 per cent) actively say they would not consider it a problem if this were to happen.

On top of significant variations in opinion, meritocratic and individualistic tendencies also temper calls for action on inequality

- There is a strong belief in meritocracy in Britain – that hard work and ambition remain key drivers of success, and this colours views, even during a pandemic. For example, despite the exceptional circumstances, Britons are more likely to think that job losses caused by the crisis are the result of personal failure than chance.
- Nearly half – 47 per cent – say that an individual's performance at work is important in determining whether they lost their job at this time, compared with 31 per cent who say luck is an important factor. By 57 per cent to 39 per cent, Conservative voters are much more likely than Labour voters to attribute these job losses to poor performance at work.

All of this means that while there is some appetite for change, it does not reach a level of support that unifies across political and demographic divides

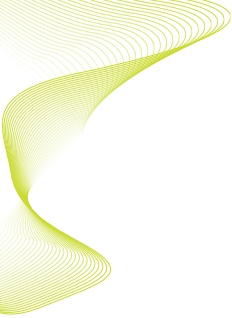
- 55 per cent of Britons think the crisis means there is more need for the government to take measures to reduce differences in income levels, compared with 15 per cent who disagree – however, there are important differences in opinion between voters for the two main parties, with Conservative voters (41 per cent) far less likely than Labour voters (77 per cent) to agree.



- ♦ But at the same time, the public are relatively divided on whether the government's support for workers and businesses during the pandemic strengthens the case for more intervention in the economy in the future: 45 per cent believe it does, while 36 per cent believe this kind of intervention should just be a one-off – and attitudes are hugely affected by existing political views and age. For example, two-thirds of Labour Remainers believe the crisis justifies more intervention, compared to only one in five Conservative Leavers.
- ♦ And linking the coronavirus crisis to the case for redistributing income from the better-off to the less well-off appears to have little impact on support. Only 8 per cent of those who disagree with government redistributing income in general go on to agree there is more need for it now in light of the pandemic.



1. Why focus on perceptions of inequalities – and why now?




Perceptions of the extent and causes of inequality are vitally important to the functioning of societies, economies and politics. If the public think that inequalities are large, and crucially, that they are *unfair*, this can undermine faith in political and economic systems as a whole.³

This applies not only to economic inequality, but across a wide range of inequalities, including in health, education and politics, and across characteristics, from gender and ethnicity, to geography and age. As the launch report of the Institute for Fiscal Studies Deaton Review of Inequalities points out: “Inequality cannot be reduced to any one dimension: it is the culmination of myriad forms of privilege and disadvantage.”⁴

The importance of how people feel about their own and others’ “privilege and disadvantage” is reflected in communications from government leaders. Theresa May talked about people who were “just about managing” in her maiden speech as Prime Minister, while Boris Johnson focused on “levelling up” in his. And the language of levelling up has continued to frame many government policies, as seen throughout the 2020 Spending Review last November. At the launch of a new Equality Hub in December 2020, the Minister for Women and Equalities, Liz Truss, emphasised geographic inequality, noting that “[f]or too many people, particularly in places beyond the South East, opportunity is diminished.”⁵

This focus on addressing inequality predates the coronavirus pandemic. Brexit was widely interpreted as a wake-up call on inequality, and seen by some as an opportunity to address structural inequalities.⁶

But, as with so many areas of life, the Covid-19 crisis has both revealed and reinforced underlying patterns and trends in inequalities. Dozens of studies have shown how the virus itself and the measures to control it have hit already disadvantaged groups hardest. It is, therefore, particularly



important to understand how this has altered perceptions, including who we consider to be most in need, and whether the experience of the pandemic has shifted public support for government action.

This report focuses on filling two important gaps in our understanding of perceptions of inequality now:

- First, despite the importance of perceptions, and the multidimensional nature of inequality, nearly all studies of attitudes focus on just one area of inequality – and most often, economic inequality. Instead, we will examine attitudes and beliefs across a range of inequalities, to understand priorities between them and how the public understand the interactions.
- Second, we will also focus on the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on attitudes, and whether this unprecedented crisis has shifted our views of how the government should respond to inequalities.

We surveyed 2,226 adults in Britain during the second lockdown, from 11 to 12 November 2020, via the YouGov GB online panel (for further details about sample size, see technical note). A key aspect of the analysis of this data is understanding what unites and divides opinion across political lines, including both party support and Brexit identities. These are important and useful perspectives on inequality attitudes, as they combine an understanding of how traditional left-right divisions (between Conservative and Labour supporters) and a more cultural division (between Leave and Remain supporters) interact with different types of economic and cultural inequalities.

2. How people see different inequalities

2.1. There is widespread belief that Britain was unequal before the pandemic – but there are large differences between political groups

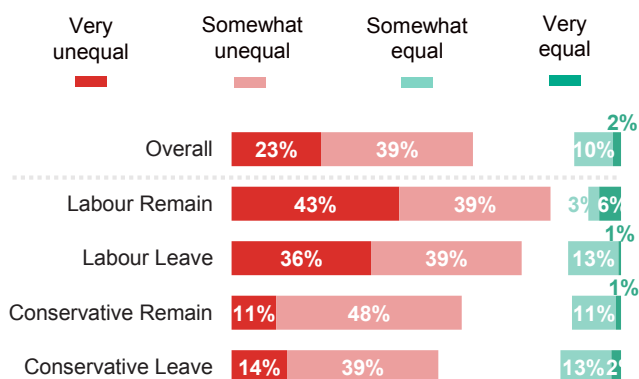
Six in 10 Britons (62 per cent) believe that Britain was either somewhat or very unequal before the pandemic, compared with just one in eight (12 per cent) who believe the country was relatively equal.

However, there are considerable and important differences in the degree to which different groups see society as unequal, particularly by political identities. For example, more than three times as many 2019 Labour voters (41 per cent) than Conservative voters (13 per cent) say that Britain was “very unequal” before the coronavirus outbreak. And similarly, almost twice as many Remain voters (32 per cent) than Leave voters (18 per cent) describe pre-pandemic Britain as “very unequal”.

The interaction between these two political identities is also important. As shown throughout this report, Labour Remainers are much more likely to perceive Britain as unequal. In this case, this runs along a gradient from 82 per cent of Labour Remainers who believe Britain was unequal before the coronavirus outbreak, to just over half of Conservative Leavers (53 per cent) (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Belief that Britain was unequal prior to the pandemic, by combination of vote in the 2019 general election and EU referendum

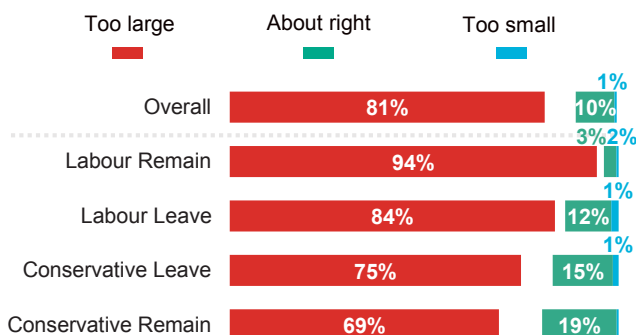
How equal or unequal do you think Britain was before the coronavirus outbreak?



There is also a clear association between our political views and our level of concern about economic forms of inequality. When asked to think about income levels in Britain today, 81 per cent of people say that the gap between those with high incomes and those with low incomes is too large, compared with only 10 per cent who say that the gap is about right. Just 1 per cent say that the gap is too small. Again, there is a clear interaction between party support and Brexit views: the belief that income gaps are too high runs from 94 per cent among Labour Remainers to 69 per cent among Conservative Remainers (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Belief that income gaps are too large, by combination of vote in the 2019 general election and EU referendum

Thinking of income levels generally in Britain today, would you say that the gap between those with high incomes and those with low incomes is...

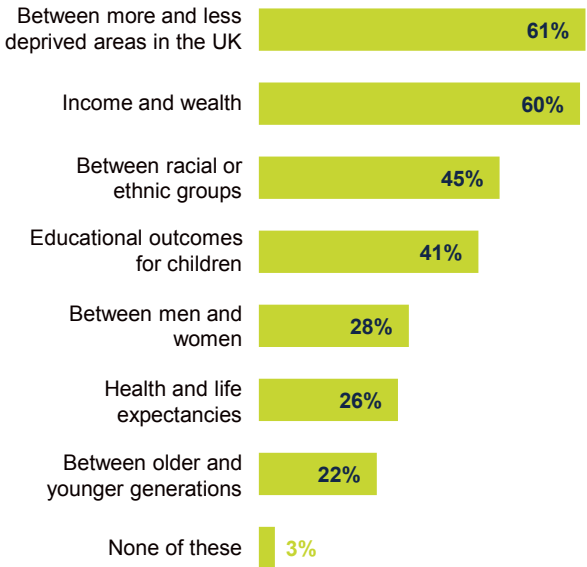


2.2. Area-based and economic inequalities are seen as the most serious in Britain

When asked to weigh up the seriousness of a range of inequalities in Britain, inequalities between more and less deprived areas, and in income and wealth, are seen as the most critical (see Figure 3). This clear focus on area-based inequality is perhaps a surprise given the range of inequalities covered in the question, but provides important context and support for the government's recent focus on "levelling up".

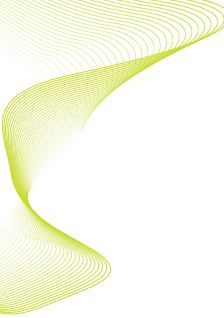
Figure 3: Public perceptions of the most serious inequalities in Britain

Which three or four of the following types of inequality, if any, do you think are most serious in Britain?



In terms of inequalities between people with particular characteristics, those between racial or ethnic groups attract much greater public concern than others: twice as many respondents say racial inequalities are among the most serious types of inequality in Britain (45 per cent) than say the same for inequalities between generations (22 per cent), and only one in four people (28 per cent) think that disparities between genders are among the most serious. Similarly, unequal outcomes for children in education (41 per cent) appear to resonate more with the public compared with those in health and life expectancies (26 per cent).

There are clear differences between voters of the two main parties on the types of inequality that are seen to be most serious. This is especially stark for inequalities between racial or ethnic groups: 62 per cent of Labour voters view racial inequalities as one of the most serious forms of inequality, almost double the 32 per cent of Conservative voters who feel the same (see Figure 4). There is a similar

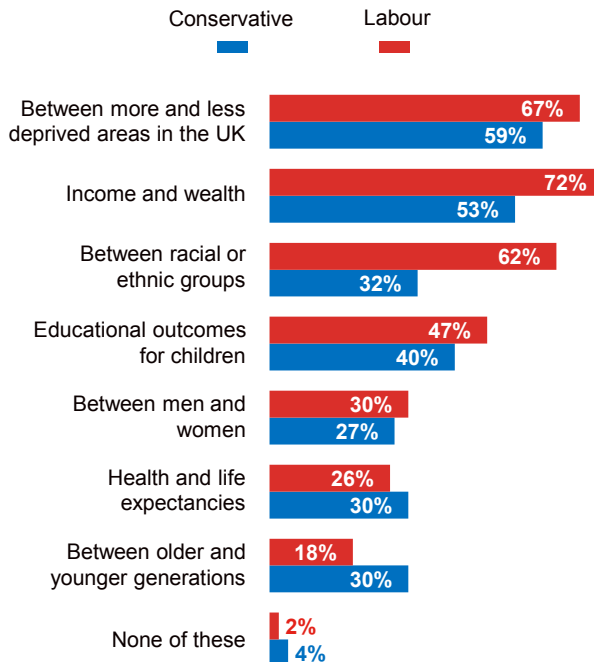



divide along Brexit lines, with almost twice as many Remain voters (59 per cent) as Leave voters (31 per cent) considering racial inequalities to be among the most serious in Britain.

There are also relatively large differences between parties when it comes to the seriousness of inequalities in income and wealth, with a 19-point gap between Conservative and Labour voters on the issue (53 per cent vs 72 per cent). Generational inequalities are a notable exception to the pattern of higher concern about inequalities among Labour voters – 18 per cent of whom consider this to be a serious problem in Britain, compared with 30 per cent of Conservative voters.

Figure 4: Public perceptions of the most serious inequalities in Britain, by vote in the 2019 general election

Which three or four of the following types of inequality, if any, do you think are most serious in Britain?





Looking at the three types of inequalities that are considered most serious, there are distinct patterns in opinion across political groups when the interaction between party and Brexit identity is taken into account (see Figure 5).

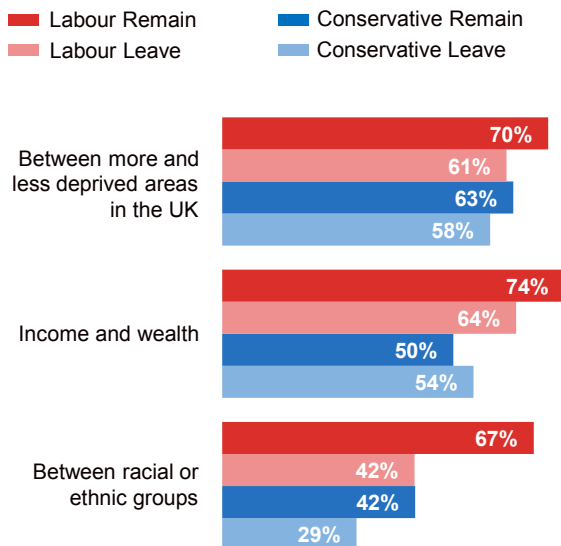
First, there are significant levels of concern about place-based inequalities across political groups, and differences in the number who see this as a serious issue are relatively small. A policy emphasis on such inequalities could therefore be a relatively unifying approach, appealing across political divides. Indeed, it is Labour Remainers who are most likely to say inequalities between more and less deprived areas are a key concern, indicating that it is not just groups who are directly affected by these disparities who see them as serious problems. This is confirmed in more detailed geographical analysis. In “red wall” constituencies in the Midlands, Yorkshire, North East Wales and Northern England – which have historically voted Labour but saw a significant shift to the Conservatives in 2019 – we might have expected to see greater concern about area-based inequalities. But the proportion of people in those constituencies⁷ who pick it out (63 per cent) is almost identical to the rest of Britain (61 per cent).

Second, with concern about inequalities in income and wealth, we see more clustering around party identity, with the largest gap being between Labour and Conservative voters, irrespective of whether they voted Leave or Remain.

And third, concern about inequalities between racial or ethnic groups appears to reflect an interaction between party and Brexit identities: it runs in a steep gradient from Labour Remainers (67 per cent), who are much more concerned than Labour Leavers (42 per cent) and Conservative Remainers (42 per cent), and ends with a further big step down to Conservative Leavers (29 per cent).

Figure 5: Public perceptions of the most serious inequalities in Britain, by combination of vote in the 2019 general election and EU referendum

Which three or four of the following types of inequality, if any, do you think are most serious in Britain? % answering “yes”



Place-based inequalities, as well as those between rich and poor, also appear to be front-of-mind when the public think about the groups most adversely affected by growing gaps in incomes and life expectancy (see Figure 6).

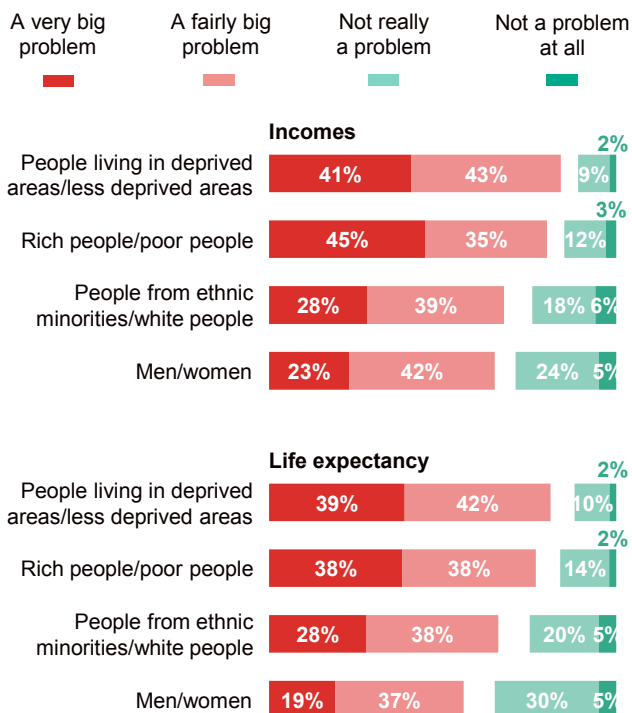
Five in six people in Britain (84 per cent) would consider widening income inequality between those living in more and less deprived areas to be a big problem, and four in five (80 per cent) say the same about a growing gap between the incomes of rich and poor people. But fewer would consider rising income inequality between men and women (65 per cent), or between ethnic minorities and white people (67 per cent), to be a big issue.

Perhaps most strikingly, one in four Britons (24 per cent) go as far as saying it would in fact not really be a problem if the income gap between white people and ethnic minorities grew. And even more (29 per cent) say they’d be unconcerned about widening income inequality between men and women.

There is a very similar pattern with concern about differences in life expectancy – again, inequalities across area-based and economic divides are seen as bigger problems than inequalities between ethnic groups and genders.

Figure 6: Concern about widening inequalities between different groups

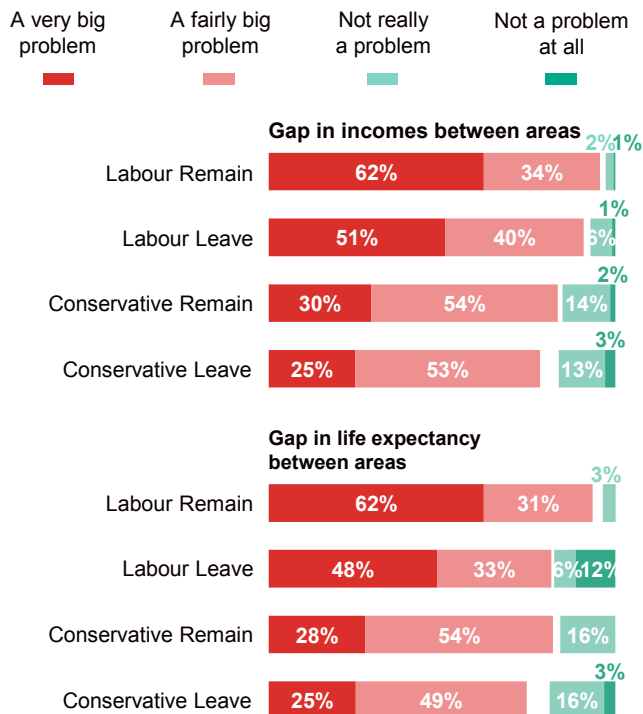
If the gap between the [] of the following groups increases, would you consider this...



While the prioritisation of area-based inequality over other types cuts across political groups, this does not mean that it is seen as an equally important issue among all groups. Indeed, there are large differences in how serious a problem growing differences in incomes and life expectancies between areas are perceived to be. In particular, the proportions who see such disparities as a “very big problem” run in a steep gradient from six in 10 Labour Remainers to a quarter of Conservative Leavers (see Figure 7).

Figure 7: Concern about widening inequalities between more and less deprived areas, by combination of vote in the 2019 general election and EU referendum


If the gap between the [] of the following groups increases, would you consider this...



2.3. Public perceptions of the extent of economic inequality often diverge from reality

It is important to recognise, however, that our attitudes towards inequalities are often based on a very shaky understanding of the true size of the inequality in question. We tested these misperceptions of economic inequality in a split-sample experiment by asking people about the distribution of household wealth: one half of the sample was asked about the share of wealth held by the richest 10 per cent, and the other half of the sample was asked about the richest 1 per cent of households.

What is immediately noticeable is how many people say that they don't know: over four in 10 of both halves of the sample. The tendency among the remaining respondents



was to significantly overestimate the concentration of wealth. Among those asked about the wealthiest 10 per cent of people in Britain, the average guess was that they own 66 per cent of the country's wealth – much higher than the actual figure, which the Office for National Statistics puts at 45 per cent.⁸

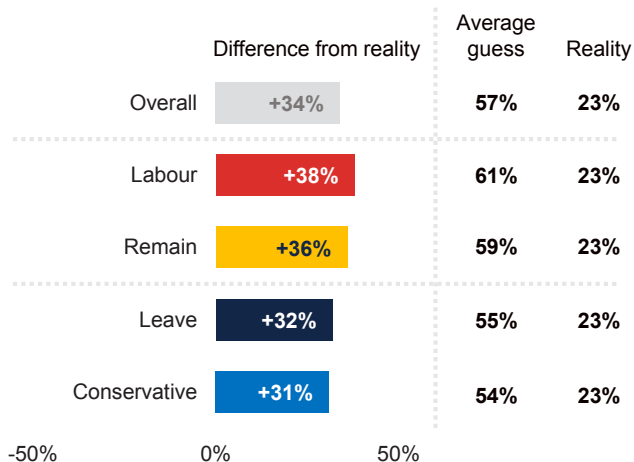
But, even more strikingly, the average guess for the wealthiest 1 per cent in the country was 57 per cent, significantly more than the actual proportion of wealth held by this top group – 23 per cent⁹ – and not very different from the guess for the wealthiest 10 per cent.

This suggests that the public only have a general, “ordinal” sense of the extent of wealth inequalities: that top groups have “a lot” of the wealth, and they are relatively insensitive to how that top group is defined.

These misperceptions do seem to be related to levels of concern about inequality, although all groups overestimate wealth concentration. For example, Labour and Remain voters have slightly higher estimates of the wealth owned by the top 1 per cent than do Conservative and Leave voters (Figure 8).

Figure 8: Average estimates of wealth held by top 1% in Britain, by vote in the 2019 general election and EU referendum (split sample: n=1,126)

In the following question, we ask about total household wealth in Britain. By this, we mean the total value of everything a household owns, including their bank accounts, savings, property, stocks and shares etc., minus any debt that they owe (for example loans and mortgages). What percentage of Britain's total household wealth do you think the wealthiest 1% own?



2.4. The public believes that discrimination underlies economic inequalities between ethnic groups in Britain, but there are big differences by political views, age and ethnicity

Inequalities between racial or ethnic groups are considered one of the most serious forms of inequality in Britain, after those between more and less deprived areas and disparities in income and wealth.

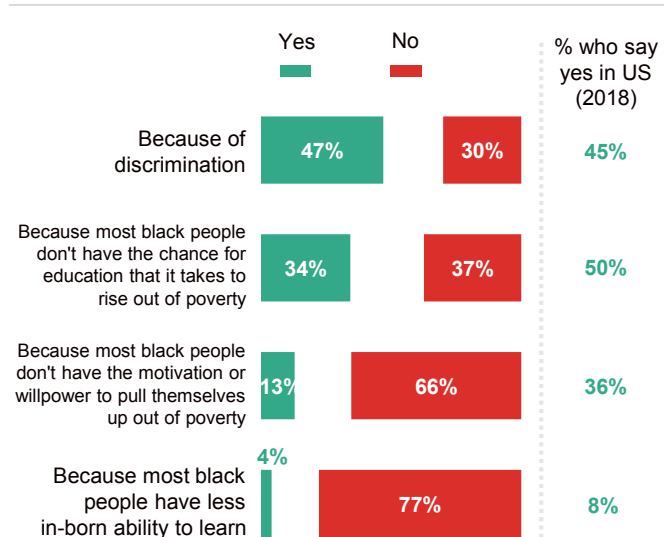
Since 1977, the General Social Survey (GSS) in the US has explored why people think these inequalities exist¹⁰ – but this has rarely been looked at in the UK. The GSS asks respondents whether they attribute the unequal distribution of good-quality jobs, income and housing between black and white people to factors relating to either discrimination, motivation and willpower, access to education, or an innate ability to learn. When we asked this question in Britain, the wording was adapted to reflect evidence that, on average,

black people in Britain have lower earnings and are more likely to be unemployed than white people.¹¹

The British public most commonly identify structural factors such as discrimination (47 per cent) or unequal access to education (34 per cent) as causes of economic inequalities between ethnic groups – far ahead of factors related to personal traits (see Figure 9). However, one in eight Britons (13 per cent) still think black people do not have the motivation or willpower to pull themselves out of poverty, and that’s why they are more likely to earn less or be unemployed than white people. Just 4 per cent of Britons cite a lower in-born ability to learn as the explanation.

Figure 9: Perceived explanations for unequal economic outcomes between ethnic groups, compared to the US (GSS, 2018)¹²

On average black people in Britain have lower earnings and are more likely to be unemployed than white people. Do you think these differences are...



Comparing these findings with those from the US points to both similarities and differences, though it is important to note that the most recent year for which US data is available is 2018, and attitudes may have shifted since. Similar proportions in each country pick out discrimination (47 per cent in Britain in 2020, 45 per cent in the US in 2018) as an



important factor in explaining differences in outcomes. The belief that these differences are due to a lower ability to learn among most black people is rare in each country, although it is twice as high in the US in 2018 (8 per cent) as it is today in Britain (4 per cent).

However, there are large differences in the perceived role of access to education between the two countries. In 2018, half of Americans attributed the unequal distribution of income, jobs and housing between black and white people to differential access to education. In Britain, however, only one in three people (34 per cent) see this as important in explaining inequalities in earnings and job opportunities.

Belief that economic inequalities between black and white people are the product of different character traits is also far less common in Britain than it is in the US. The view that black people don't have motivation or willpower to pull themselves out of poverty has declined in the US since the question was first asked to the full population in 1985, falling from 55 per cent to 36 per cent in 2018 – however, it is still a belief shared by almost three times as many people in America as it is in Britain.

While structural reasons are generally seen as the primary factor causing inequalities between racial or ethnic groups in Britain, there are big differences by political views, age and the ethnicity of the respondent.

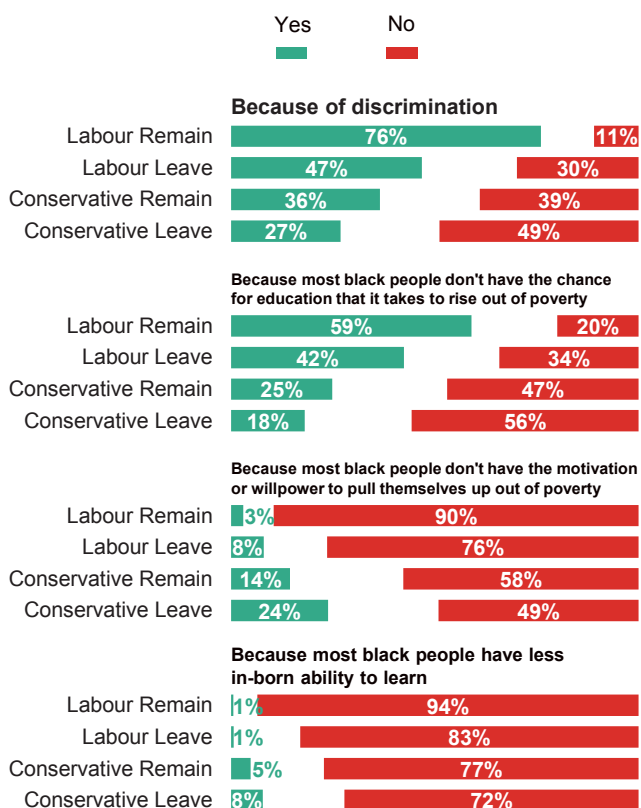
Conservative voters (29 per cent) are considerably less likely than Labour voters (71 per cent) to attribute income inequalities between black and white people to discrimination. The same is true for unequal access to education (20 per cent vs 56 per cent). Conversely, Labour voters (4 per cent) are far less likely than Conservatives (21 per cent) to cite motivation or willpower as a factor.

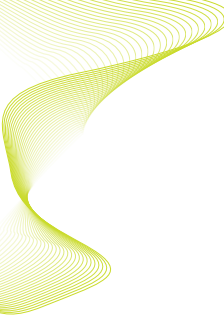
But it is, again, specifically Labour Remainers who stand out on this measure of perceived explanations for racial

inequalities. 76 per cent view discrimination as a factor that explains differences in earnings and unemployment levels between black and white people – far higher than the 47 per cent of Labour Leavers who feel the same, and more than double the proportion of Conservative Remainers (36 per cent) (see Figure 10). A similar pattern is also clear in relation to education, though with fewer people – including Labour Remainers (59 per cent) – seeing it as a factor.

Figure 10:
Perceived explanations for unequal economic outcomes between ethnic groups, by combination of vote in the 2019 general election and EU referendum

On average black people in Britain have lower earnings and are more likely to be unemployed than white people. Do you think these differences are...

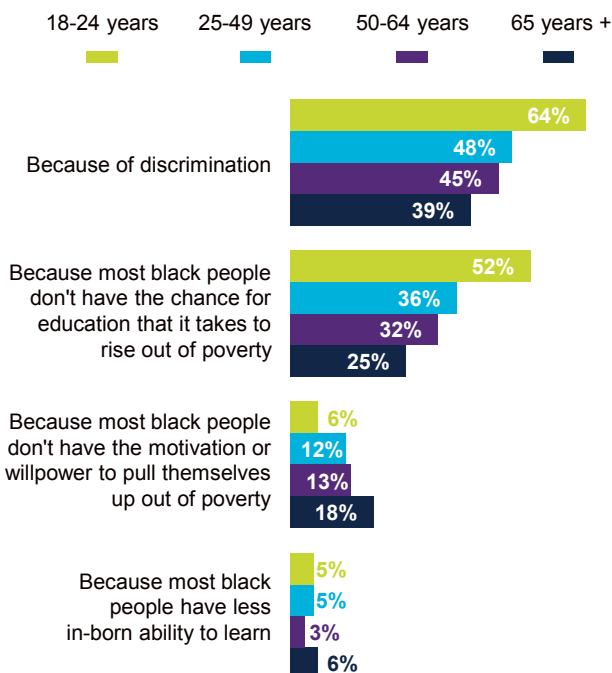





Labour Remainers are also strongly averse to the idea that innate characteristics account for inequalities between ethnic groups. The overwhelming majority of Labour Remainers (94 per cent) actively disagree that a lesser in-born ability to learn explains the economic disadvantages experienced by black people, or that a deficiency in motivation or willpower is stopping them from “pulling themselves up out of poverty” (90 per cent).

Figure 11:
Perceived
explanations for
unequal economic
outcomes between
ethnic groups
among political
affiliations, by age

On average black people in Britain have lower earnings and are more likely to be unemployed than white people. Do you think these differences are...



Belief that discrimination underlies economic inequalities between ethnic groups in Britain is also stronger among people from ethnic minorities (63 per cent) than it is among white people (46 per cent),¹³ as well as among younger people and those with higher levels of education. In particular, people aged 18 to 24 come far ahead of any other age group in believing that discrimination (64 per cent)



and unequal access to education (52 per cent) contribute to economic inequalities between black and white people in Britain (see Figure 11).

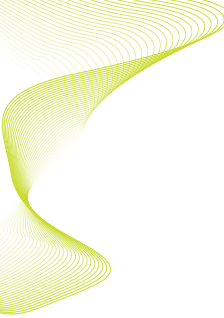
2.5. The public link economic inequalities to worse health outcomes, but there is no clear view on the extent of inequalities in education

As shown at the start of this chapter, concern about health inequalities is relatively low compared with concern about inequalities in other areas, which is perhaps surprising given how the Covid-19 pandemic has highlighted the scale of health disparities in the UK. However, people do nonetheless recognise the existence of these inequalities, and their association with differences in income and wealth.

Four in five people (81 per cent) believe that those with more money are better able to live healthy lives. In fact, of those people, roughly two-thirds (55 per cent) say that being well-off financially makes people a lot better able to live healthy lives (see Figure 12). 13 per cent of people believe money makes no difference to health, and only a tiny minority (2 per cent) believe that the effect runs in the opposite direction, where having more money means people are less able to live a healthy life.

The extent to which people link inequalities in health and income is, again, associated with voting behaviour. Labour voters (72 per cent) are considerably more likely than Conservative voters (45 per cent) to say that people with more money are a lot better able to live healthy lives, while Conservative voters (21 per cent) are more than three times as likely as Labour voters (6 per cent) to say that it makes no difference. However, on the whole, a clear majority in both groups acknowledge a link between health and income inequalities.

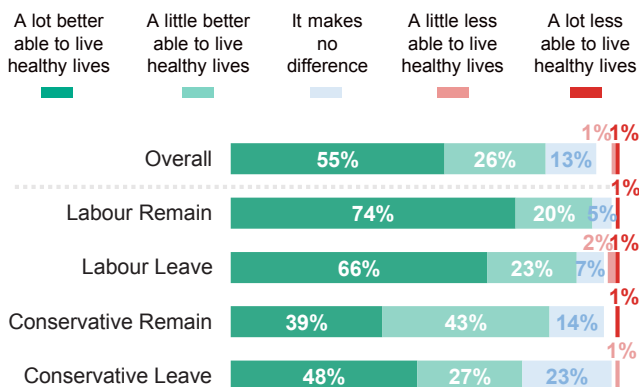
The same is also true across the Brexit divide. Almost two-thirds of Remain voters believe that having more money makes people a lot better able to live healthy lives (63 per



cent), compared to just over half of Leave voters (51 per cent). Like Conservative voters, only one in five Leave voters (20 per cent) believe money makes no difference to living a healthy life – though this view is stronger among Conservative Leavers (23 per cent) than it is among Conservative Remainers (14 per cent) (see Figure 12).

Figure 12:
Perceptions of the link between health and income inequalities, by combination of vote in the 2019 general election and EU referendum

Some people think that those in Britain with more money are better able than those in Britain with less money to live healthy lives. Others disagree. How about you? Would you say that people with more money are..



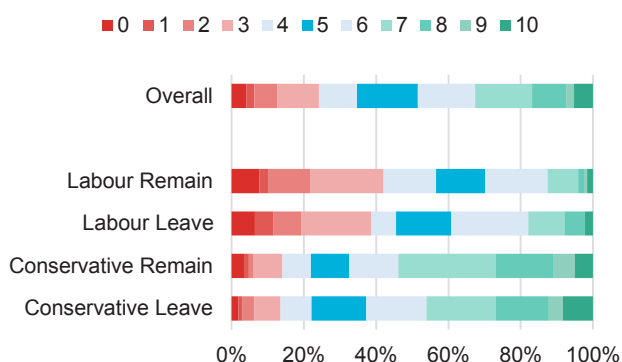
On education inequalities, people were asked the extent to which they thought the following statement applies: “Overall, everyone in Britain has a fair chance of achieving the level of education they seek”. Answers were recorded on an 11-point scale: 0 meaning “does not apply at all” and 10 meaning “applies completely” (see Figure 13). Most responses sit around the middle of the scale, with 41 per cent of responses between 4 and 6. While the remaining responses are skewed slightly towards the view that people in Britain have a fair chance of accessing education than not (31 per cent of responses were between 7 and 10 on the scale, compared with 23 per cent between 0 and 3), there is clearly no dominant view.

There are, however, large differences by political affiliation on this question, and it seems that party-political identities,

rather than Brexit identities, are more strongly related to people's views. Labour supporters are the least likely to believe that people have a fair chance to achieve the level of education they seek, with similar proportions of Labour Remainers and Labour Leavers clustering around the lower end of the scale. Conservatives are more likely to think everyone has a fair chance of achieving the level of education they seek – with support for this view marginally higher among Conservative Remainers than Conservative Leavers.

Figure 13: Belief in fair access to education, by combination of vote in the 2019 general election and EU referendum

To what extent do you think the following statement applies in Britain? “Overall, everyone in Britain has a fair chance of achieving the level of education they seek”. Please indicate the extent to which you think this applies on a scale of 0 to 10, where 0 means “does not apply at all” and 10 means “applies completely”



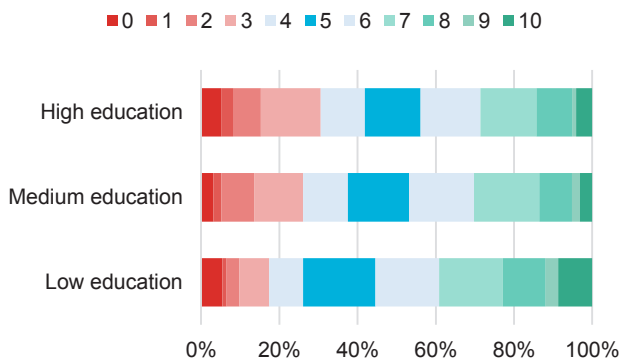
Many other factors play into our perceptions of educational inequalities, besides politics. For example, people's own education level is a clear predictor of concern about educational inequalities. Among respondents who studied at university, 49 per cent include unequal educational outcomes between children as one of the most serious forms of inequality in Britain today, compared with a third of people who left school after taking GCSEs. Similarly, people who have studied at university (“high education”) tend to have a stronger belief that opportunities for accessing education are unfairly distributed in Britain, compared to



people who left school after GCSEs (“low education”) (see Figure 14).

Figure 14: Belief in fair access to education, by respondent's education level (see technical note for classification of education level)

To what extent do you think the following statement applies in Britain? “Overall, everyone in Britain has a fair chance of achieving the level of education they seek”. Please indicate the extent to which you think this applies on a scale of 0 to 10, where 0 means “does not apply at all” and 10 means “applies completely”

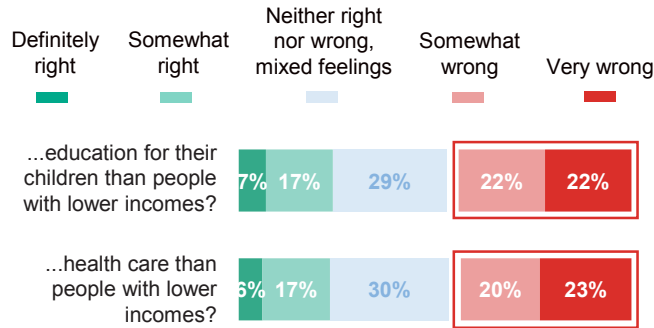


Despite these differing perceptions, there is clear discomfort with the idea that better educational outcomes can be bought – even though people are less likely to see this as inherently “wrong” than they are to see it as “unfair”.

In another split-sample experiment, we asked roughly half of our respondents to tell us the extent to which they considered it right or wrong for people with higher incomes to be able to buy a better education for their children, and to be able to buy better healthcare. Across both, respondents were relatively split (see Figure 15). The dominant view was that being able to buy a better education or better healthcare was wrong (44 per cent education; 43 per cent health). However, a sizeable group still said they felt it was neither right nor wrong (29 per cent education; 30 per cent health), and roughly a quarter believe it is right for people with higher incomes to have the option of being able to buy better education (24 per cent) and healthcare (23 per cent).

Figure 15:
Unequal access
to education and
healthcare: right
or wrong? (split
sample: n=1,126)

Is it right or wrong that people with higher incomes can buy better...

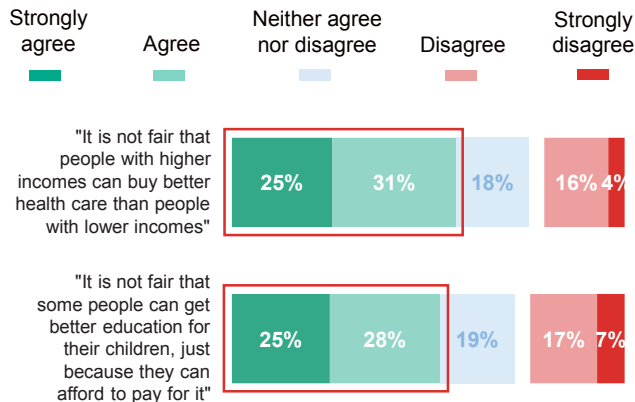


However, when the question is reframed for the second split-sample group in terms of what is “fair”, there is much clearer discomfort about the relationship between income inequalities and unequal outcomes in health and education.

Again, the response is similar on healthcare and education inequalities (see Figure 16) – but there are notable differences from the results in the chart above. For example, 56 per cent agree it is “not fair” that people with higher incomes can buy better healthcare, compared with 43 per cent who think that people with higher incomes buying better healthcare is “wrong”. This suggests that how we frame inequality questions and discussions may have an important impact on how the public respond.

Figure 16:
Unequal access
to education and
healthcare: fair
or unfair? (split
sample: n=1,100)

Please say how much you agree or disagree with the following statement...



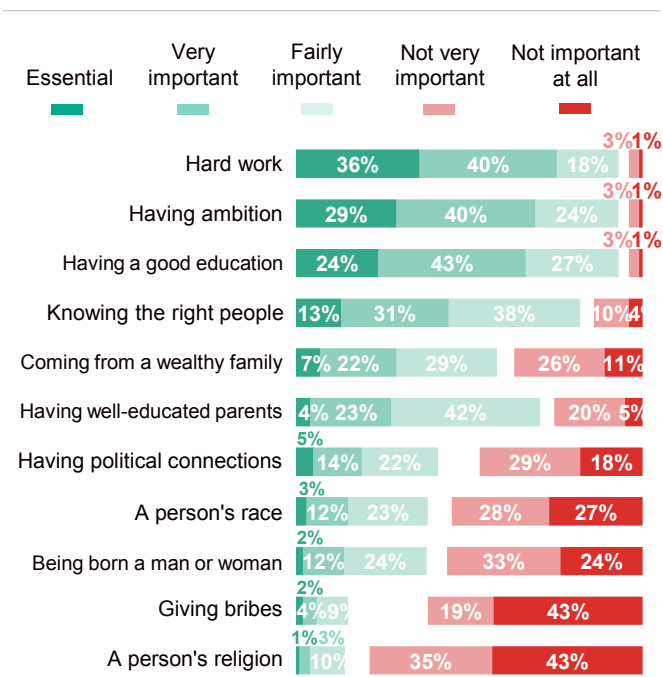
2.6. Most people in Britain believe we live in a society that rewards hard work, but they also see structural or demographic factors as contributing to inequalities in areas such as health

There is a general belief among the British public that our own efforts are key to getting ahead in life, while fewer think that our background is relevant. Hard work is seen by a large majority of people (76 per cent) as being essential or very important in determining success (see Figure 17).

Elements of social capital and financial means, such as knowing the right people or coming from a wealthy family, are seen as rather less important, and demographic factors, such as race, gender or religion, are considered least important.

Figure 17: Factors perceived to be important for getting ahead in life

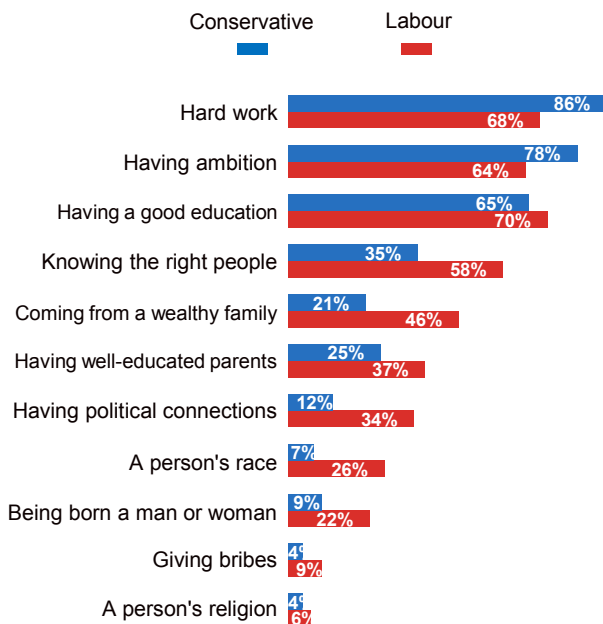
Please tick one box for each of these to show how important you think it is for getting ahead in life. How important is...



But there are large differences between voters on which factors people associate with someone's ability to get ahead in life. For example, Conservative voters are much more likely to attribute success to meritocratic factors such as hard work and ambition. Labour voters, on the other hand, are comparatively more likely to consider it more important to know the right people, come from a wealthy family, have well-educated parents or have political connections (see Figure 18). They also place greater importance on demographic traits, particularly an individual's race or gender.

Figure 18: Factors perceived to be important for getting ahead in life, by vote in the 2019 general election

Please tick one box for each of these to show how important you think it is for getting ahead in life. How important is... % saying essential or very important



Belief in the importance of being driven in order to achieve success is shared by virtually identical proportions of Conservative Leavers and Conservative Remainers. But on the other side of the political divide, there is a much bigger difference in opinion on the importance of ambition for getting ahead, with Labour Leavers' views much closer to those of Conservative voters, and Labour Remainers much less likely to see this as relevant (see Figure 19).

What unites Labour voters are their views on the importance of family background for getting ahead, such as coming from a wealthy family or having well-educated parents. However, Labour Remainers are more likely to prioritise other aspects of social capital beyond family connections, such as knowing the right people – and, in line with the findings discussed in Section 2.4 – are more

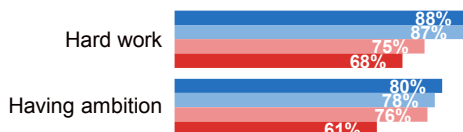
likely to view demographic traits, especially race, as being important for getting ahead (see Figure 19).

Figure 19: Factors perceived to be associated with getting ahead in life, by combination of vote in the 2019 general election and EU referendum

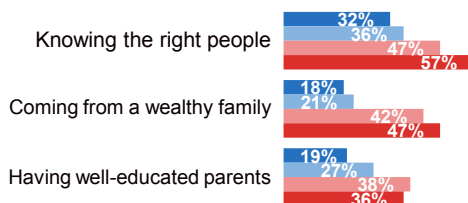
Please tick one box for each of these to show how important you think it is for getting ahead in life. How important is... % saying essential or very important

■ Labour Remain ■ Conservative Remain
■ Labour Leave ■ Conservative Leave

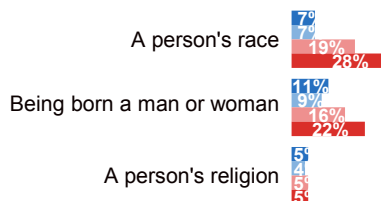
Meritocratic factors



Social capital



Demographic traits



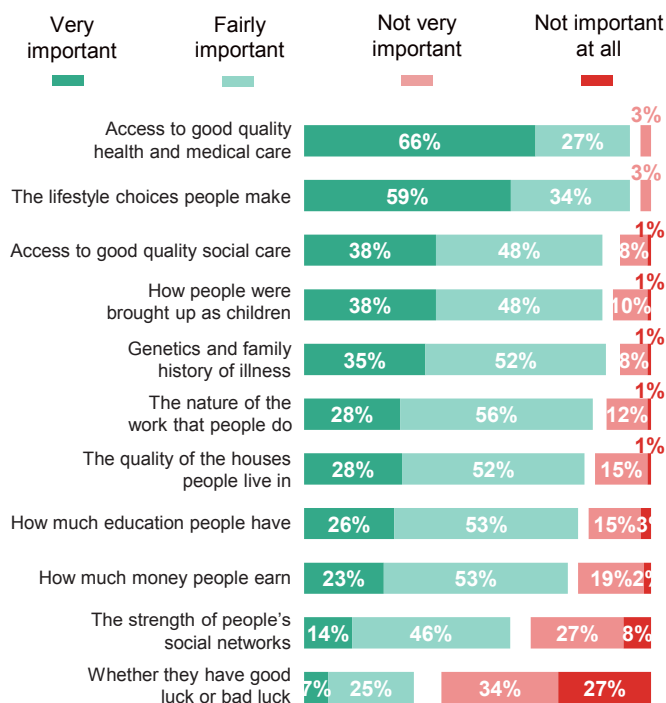
With non-economic forms of inequality, however, systemic factors such as access to good-quality health, medical or social care are more prominent in what the public see as producing unequal outcomes (see Figure 20). Meritocratic ideas of personal choice and effort are also seen as important determinants of health and life expectancy, with 59 per cent of people seeing lifestyle choices as very important for determining how healthy people are. However, socio-

economic factors, such as earnings, education, work and housing, are seen as comparatively less important – and very few people say they believe luck is very important.

Views on what determines people's health vary much less between political groups. Indeed, the public are united in a belief in the importance of both good healthcare and personal responsibility. For example, 94 per cent of Conservative voters and 97 per cent of Labour voters consider access to high-quality healthcare to be very or fairly important in determining how healthy people are, and similar proportions believe that individual lifestyle choices also play a key role (both 95 per cent).

Figure 20: Factors perceived to be associated with unequal health outcomes

In Britain, people's health and life expectancy varies a lot. Please say how important you think each of the following explanations is in determining how healthy people are





3. Public attitudes to the impact of Covid-19 on inequalities

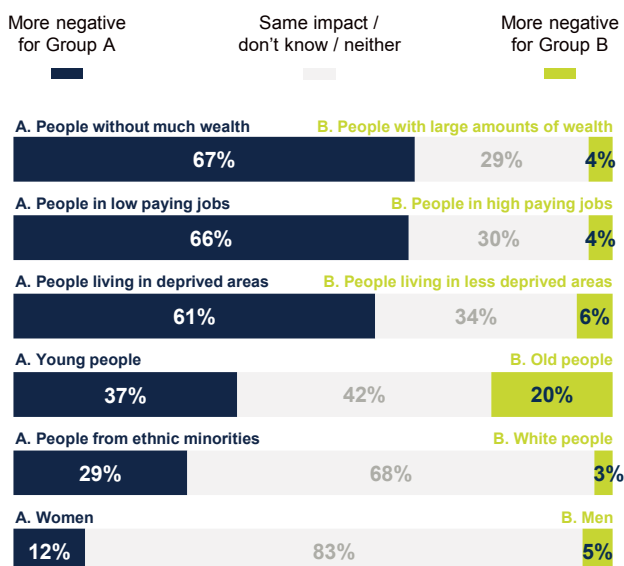
3.1. People recognise that the economic and health impacts of the coronavirus crisis have been borne by less affluent groups in society

The preceding chapter shows how nuanced and varied attitudes are when it comes to different types of inequality and different sections of the public. This section focuses on attitudes to the specific impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on various inequalities – and, once again, shows how different perspectives are across the population.

As with inequalities in general, there are some impacts of the pandemic that clear majorities of the population agree on. For example, around two-thirds believe that those in low-paying jobs, those without much wealth and those living in deprived areas have been more negatively affected from an economic standpoint than their better-off counterparts. By contrast, only very small minorities believe that the economically advantaged have been worst affected (see Figure 21).

Figure 21:
Perceptions of groups most affected by the economic impacts of the coronavirus crisis

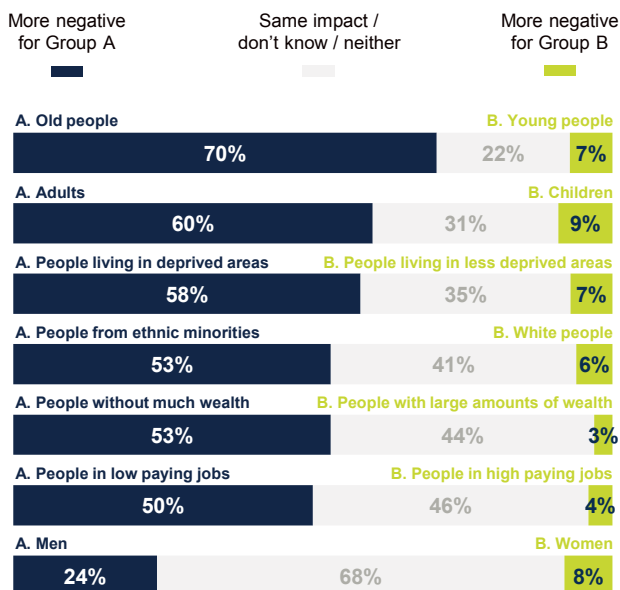
Thinking about the **economic impacts** of the coronavirus crisis so far (eg loss of income or wealth, job losses), which of **GROUP A** or **GROUP B** do you believe has been more negatively affected?



People are more divided on whether the young or old have borne the brunt of the economic fallout from the crisis, with 37 per cent believing the former have been more negatively affected, 20 per cent saying the latter, and 31 per cent saying that different age groups have been similarly affected. There is much less of a sense that the economic impact of the crisis has varied according to gender or ethnicity. Majorities believe that white and ethnic minority groups have been equally affected, and that men and women have experienced the same economic impact.

Figure 22:
Perceptions of groups most affected by the immediate physical health impacts of the coronavirus crisis

Thinking specifically about the immediate physical health impacts of coronavirus (in terms of catching the disease and experiencing a serious form of the disease), which of GROUP A or GROUP B do you believe has been more negatively affected?



There is an understandable consensus that old people have experienced more negative health impacts from the pandemic than young people, and that the physical health of adults has been worse affected than children. Majorities also believe that less affluent groups (in particular, people living in deprived areas and with low wealth) and people from



ethnic minority groups have been more negatively affected in health terms than more affluent groups and white groups respectively (see Figure 22).

We also asked people *why* they thought some groups had experienced more negative health effects from Covid-19 than others. Socio-economic circumstances were most likely to be cited by respondents as explaining higher rates of infection with, and mortality from, coronavirus among black and Asian ethnic groups,¹⁴ followed by difficulties socially distancing in the community or at work (see Figure 23).

Opinions vary by a range of factors, including age, political views and ethnicity on whether racism and discrimination in the health and care system are behind unequal health outcomes during the pandemic. While 41 per cent of black and ethnic minority respondents consider discrimination to be an important factor, this falls to just 19 per cent of white respondents (see Figure 24). Looking at views according to political affiliation, Labour and Remain voters are much more likely than Conservative and Leave voters to believe discrimination plays an important role. Younger people are also much more likely than older people to cite racism and discrimination as factors: 46 per cent of 18-24-year-olds feel this way, falling to 11 per cent of those aged 65 and above.

Looking at views according to political affiliation, Labour and Remain voters are more likely than Conservative and Leave voters to believe discrimination plays an important role. Very few Conservative voters, regardless of whether they voted to Leave or Remain in the EU, believe that racism and discrimination in the health and care system play a role in unequal health outcomes between ethnic groups in Britain during the pandemic. This belief is more widespread among Labour voters – albeit held by far more Labour Remainers (40 per cent) than Labour Leavers (25 per cent) (see Figure 24).

Figure 23:
Perceived causes
of higher rates of
Covid-19 infection
and mortality
among black
and Asian ethnic
groups

Emerging evidence indicates that rates of infection and death from coronavirus are higher for members of black and Asian ethnic groups than for white ethnic groups. Which of the following reasons, if any, do you think are important in explaining why this might be the case? Tick all that apply. People from black and Asian ethnic groups are...

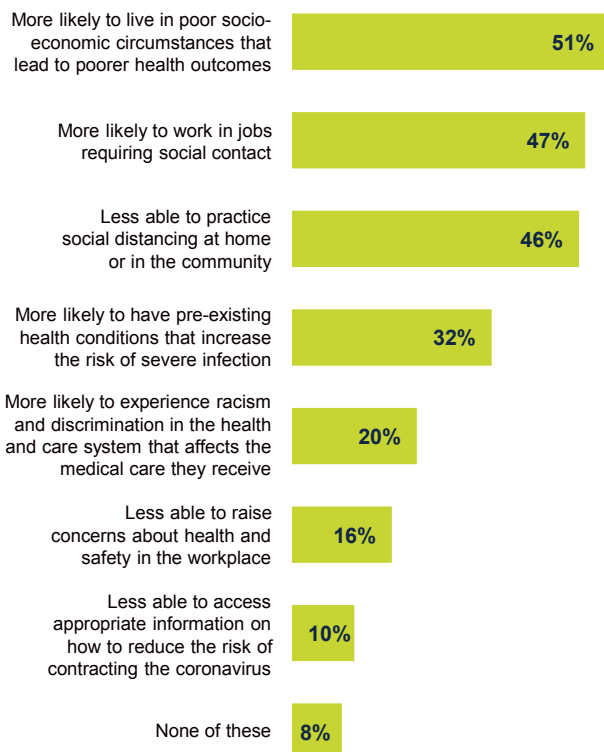
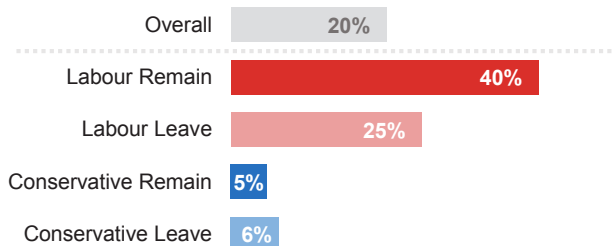


Figure 24: Belief in racism and discrimination in the health and care system as a cause of unequal health outcomes during the coronavirus crisis, by combination of vote in the 2019 general election and EU referendum

Emerging evidence indicates that rates of infection and death from coronavirus are higher for members of black and Asian ethnic groups than for white ethnic groups. Which of the following reasons, if any, do you think are important in explaining why this might be the case? Tick all that apply. % choosing “More likely to experience racism and discrimination in the health and care system”



When it comes to perceptions of why people in deprived areas have experienced worse health effects,¹⁵ the public emphasise obstacles to social distancing, either because of the jobs people do or circumstances in their home life (see Figure 25). The greater prevalence of pre-existing health conditions is also seen as important by a majority of people. But there are substantial minorities who attribute some degree of personal responsibility to those living in deprived areas: 26 per cent believe people in these areas are less concerned about the virus and its impact, while 23 per cent believe they are less well-informed about it.

There is also a party-political split in terms of who holds these views: more than twice as many Conservative voters (36 per cent) as Labour voters (15 per cent) believe those living in deprived areas are less concerned about the virus and its impact. There is less of a divide in views according to Brexit identity, with 23 per cent of Remain voters thinking this is part of the explanation, compared with 30 per cent of Leave voters.

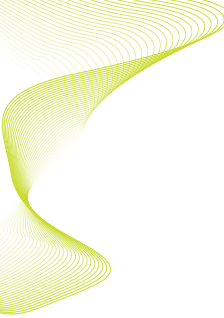
Figure 25:
Perceived causes
of higher rates of
Covid-19 mortality
in deprived areas

Data indicates that death rates from coronavirus are significantly higher among people living in the most deprived areas than those living in the least deprived areas. Which of the following reasons, if any, do you think are important in explaining why this might be the case? Tick all that apply. People in more deprived areas are...



3.2. People are divided on whether the Covid-19 crisis will make inequality in Britain worse, with views differing by political affiliation, age and education level

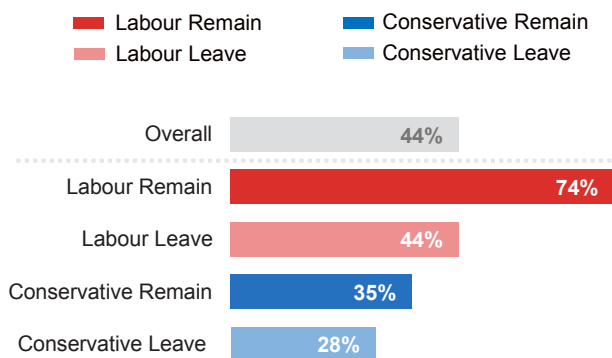
Overall, 44 per cent of people believe the Covid-19 crisis will increase the level of inequality in Britain, while 39 per cent believe it will make no difference (see Figure 26). This is perhaps surprising given the incredible disruption caused by the pandemic, the predictions for long-lasting economic effects and the public’s awareness that the impacts to date have been borne disproportionately by less advantaged groups.



However, this overall opinion contains a mix of very different beliefs between political groups: 66 per cent of Labour voters believe inequality will increase as a result of the coronavirus crisis, more than double the proportion of Conservative voters (30 per cent). Similarly, 60 per cent of Remainers expect inequality to increase, compared with 30 per cent of Leavers. Looking at the interaction between these political identities, Labour Remainers (74 per cent) are again most likely to believe that inequality will increase because of the pandemic, while Conservative Leavers (28 per cent) are least likely to (see Figure 26).

Figure 26: Expectations of how the coronavirus crisis will affect inequality in Britain, by combination of vote in the 2019 general election and EU referendum

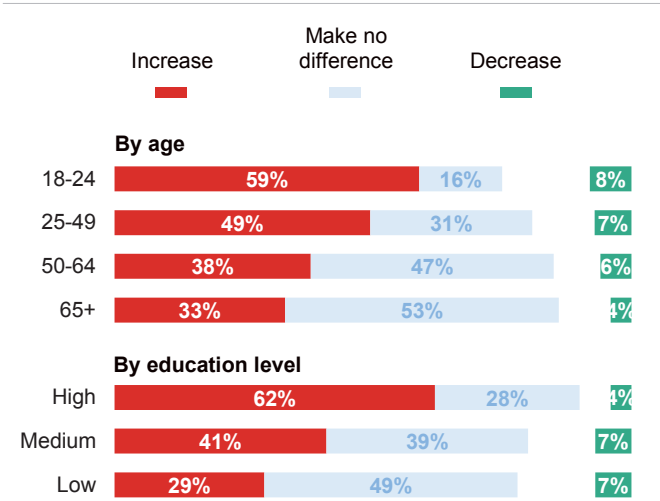
Do you think the coronavirus crisis will increase or decrease the level of inequality in Britain compared with before the pandemic, or will it make no difference? % who say increase



Age and education are also associated with differing perceptions of the impact of the coronavirus crisis on inequalities. 59 per cent of people aged 18 to 24 say they believe inequality will increase due to the pandemic, compared with a third of those aged 65 and above. And 62 per cent of people with a high level of formal education think inequality will rise – more than double the 29 per cent of people with low levels of formal education who think the same (see Figure 27).

Figure 27:
Expectations
of how the
coronavirus
crisis will affect
inequality in
Britain, by age
and education level

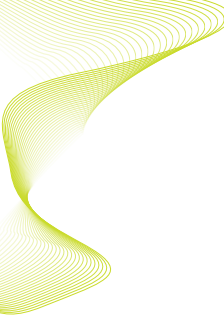
Do you think the coronavirus crisis will increase or decrease the level of inequality in Britain compared with before the pandemic, or will it make no difference?



3.3. Where people expect inequality to change as a result of the coronavirus crisis, they predict Britain will change from an unequal to a very unequal society – but overall people don’t expect a big shift

While we might have expected higher proportions of the public to think Covid-19 would exacerbate inequalities, further questions and analysis suggest that people are expecting even less change than the results above imply.

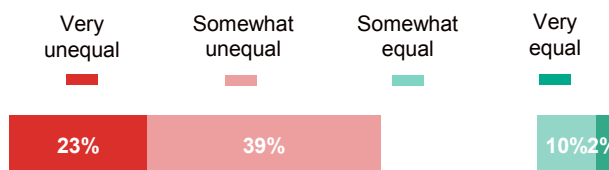
For example, we get a different view on the change in inequality expected among the public by asking people for their perceptions of inequality in Britain before the crisis and their expectations of inequality after we have recovered from it. As we saw earlier, most people thought Britain to be an unequal society prior to the pandemic – and our results show that the same proportion expect it to be unequal once the crisis has passed: 62 per cent say Britain was somewhat or very unequal before the crisis, while 63 per cent expect it to be somewhat or very unequal after (see Figure 28).



However, while 23 per cent of people thought Britain was very unequal prior to the crisis, this rises to 32 per cent when people consider the country post-pandemic. Similarly, a greater proportion (39 per cent) describe Britain as somewhat unequal before the crisis than expect a somewhat unequal society after it (31 per cent). These findings suggest there is a small proportion who expect us to move from a somewhat unequal society to a very unequal one.

Figure 28:
Perceptions of Britain as equal or unequal before and after the coronavirus outbreak

How equal or unequal do you think Britain was *before* the coronavirus outbreak?

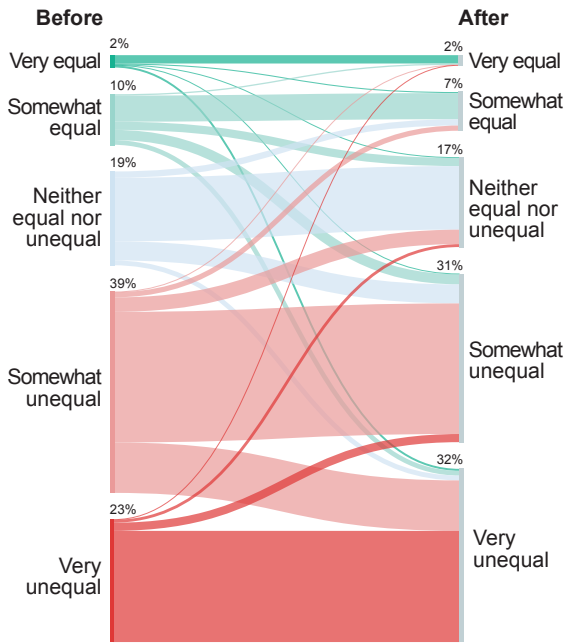


How equal or unequal do you think Britain will be *after we have recovered* from the coronavirus outbreak?



Analysis of these responses within-individuals confirms this. Comparing perceptions of inequality before the pandemic with expectations of the situation afterwards, around 70 per cent of people predict Britain will remain the same. Among those who do anticipate a change, this is overwhelmingly towards a more unequal society – with around 16 per cent anticipating this will happen (see Figure 29).

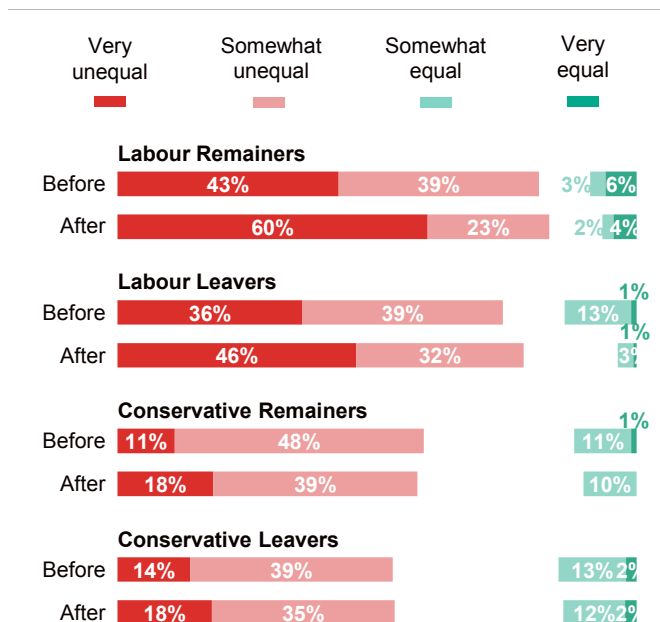
Figure 29:
Expected changes
in the level of
inequality in Britain
as a result of the
coronavirus crisis



Again, our expectations for future levels of inequality depend greatly on our political identities. Labour voters, irrespective of their position on Brexit, are much more likely than Conservative voters to see Britain as an unequal society before and after the coronavirus crisis (see Figure 30). They are also much more likely to think the country will be very unequal after the crisis (54 per cent) than to think it was that way before (41 per cent). Labour Remainers, in particular, have very different expectations than Conservative voters in anticipating more severe inequality after the pandemic.

Figure 30:
Perceptions of
Britain as equal
or unequal
before and after
the coronavirus
outbreak, by
combination
of vote in the
2019 general
election and EU
referendum

Q1: How equal or unequal do you think Britain was before the coronavirus outbreak?
Q2: How equal or unequal do you think Britain will be after we have recovered from the coronavirus outbreak? ["Neither equal nor unequal" and "don't knows" not shown]



3.4. Among those who expect inequality to rise as a result of Covid-19, area-based inequalities are seen as most likely to increase, and gender inequalities least likely

Asking those who expect inequality to rise as a result of the pandemic what types of inequality they expect to worsen further illustrates the public's concern with place-based disadvantage. 84 per cent of this group believe inequality between more and less deprived areas in the UK will increase, while 81 per cent also expect inequalities in income and wealth to widen.

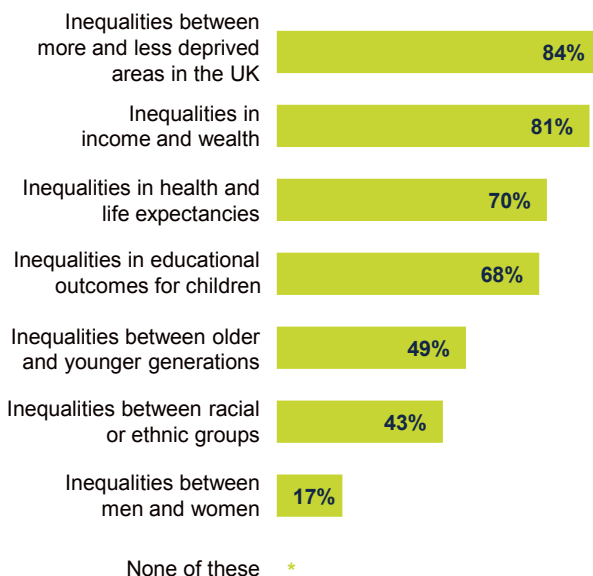
There is much less expectation of an increase in intergenerational inequality, gender inequality or inequalities between racial or ethnic groups (see Figure 31). In particular, just 17 per cent of those who think inequality

will increase as a result of the crisis expect inequalities between men and women to rise. This is in spite of evidence of adverse labour market consequences for women in Britain resulting from the pandemic, including higher rates of job loss,¹⁶ slower exit from furlough and more time spent on childcare and home-schooling than men.¹⁷

Figure 31:
Expectations
of the types of
inequality that
will increase as
a result of the
coronavirus crisis
(n=1,005)

Which of these types of inequality, if any, do you think will increase as a result of the coronavirus crisis? Please tick all that apply

[Asked only to those who answered that they thought that the coronavirus crisis will increase levels of inequality in Britain]



Looking at responses by political affiliation shows that Labour voters are typically more likely than Conservative voters to believe that any given type of inequality will increase as a result of the Covid-19 crisis (see Figure 32). This difference is particularly stark for inequalities between racial or ethnic groups, which 50 per cent of Labour voters believe will increase, compared to 30 per cent of Conservative voters. This difference is also present when comparing views by Brexit vote: 51 per cent of Remainers who believe inequality will increase as a result of Covid-19 think that disparities between racial or ethnic groups

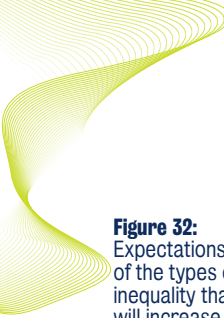
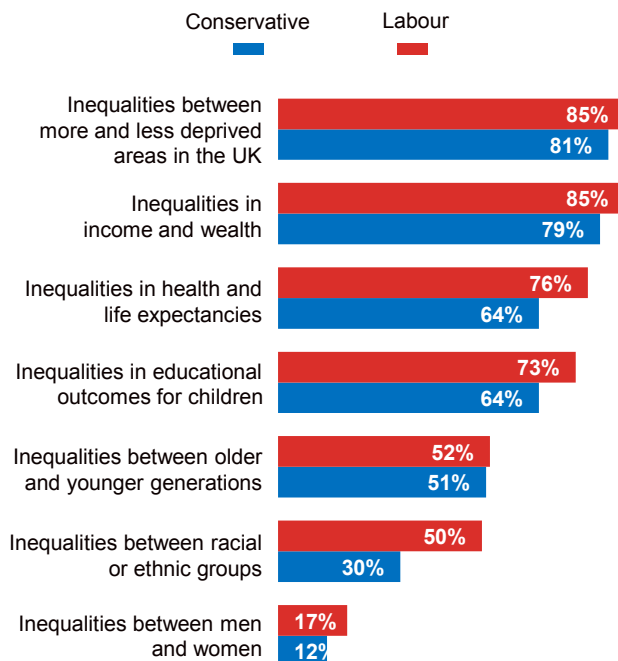


Figure 32: Expectations of the types of inequality that will increase as a result of the coronavirus crisis, by vote in the 2019 general election (n=1,005)

will grow, far higher than the 28 per cent of their Leave-supporting counterparts.

Which of these types of inequality, if any, do you think will increase as a result of the coronavirus crisis? Please tick all that apply

[Asked only to those who answered that they thought that the coronavirus crisis will increase levels of inequality in Britain]



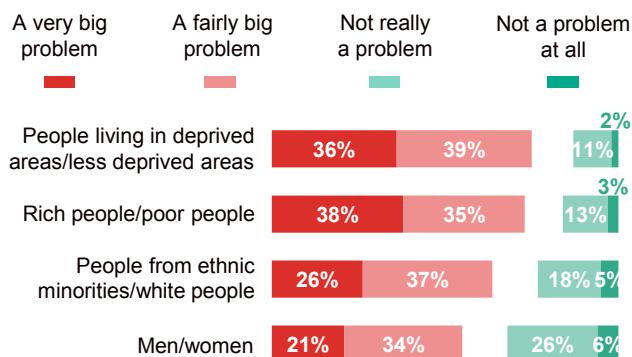
3.5. People in Britain consider rising income and health inequalities as a result of the Covid-19 crisis to be a problem, but the level of concern varies according to who these inequalities are between

Majorities of the population consider the prospect of rising income inequality because of the Covid-19 crisis to be a cause for worry. Concern is greatest about income gaps between rich and poor, and between more and less deprived areas, with around three-quarters of the public considering increases in both to be a big problem, including over a third who see them as a very big problem (see Figure 33).

There is less concern, however, about increasing income inequality between genders and ethnic groups. Around six in 10 consider an increase in the income gap between white people and people from ethnic minority groups to be a problem, with only 26 per cent considering it a very big problem, and almost the same proportion (23 per cent) saying it wouldn't actually be a problem if this gap grew. Concern about gender inequality is even lower: just over half say widening income inequality between men and women would be a problem – but a third (32 per cent) say they wouldn't consider it a problem.

Figure 33: Concern about income gaps between different groups potentially widening as a result of the coronavirus crisis

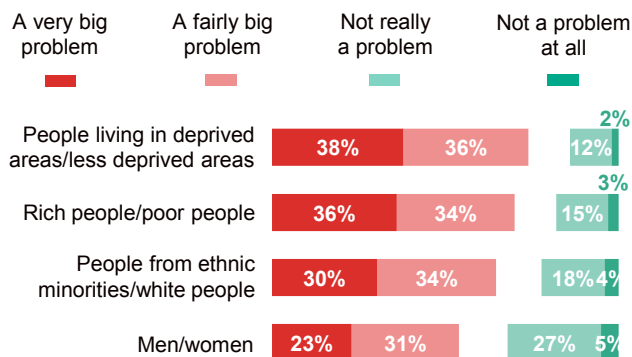
If the gap between the incomes of the following groups increases as a result of the coronavirus crisis, would you consider this...



People express similar levels of concern about rising health inequalities as a result of the pandemic. Once again, this concern is highest with respect to place-based inequalities: 74 per cent say it would be a big problem if the gap between the life expectancies of people living in better-off areas and people living in deprived areas increased (see Figure 34). Widening gender differences in life expectancy are again seen as relatively less of a concern, with 54 per cent saying they would consider them a problem and 32 per cent saying they wouldn't.

Figure 34: Concern about gaps in life expectancy between different groups potentially widening as a result of the coronavirus crisis

If the gap between the **life expectancy** of the following groups increases as a result of the coronavirus crisis, would you consider this...



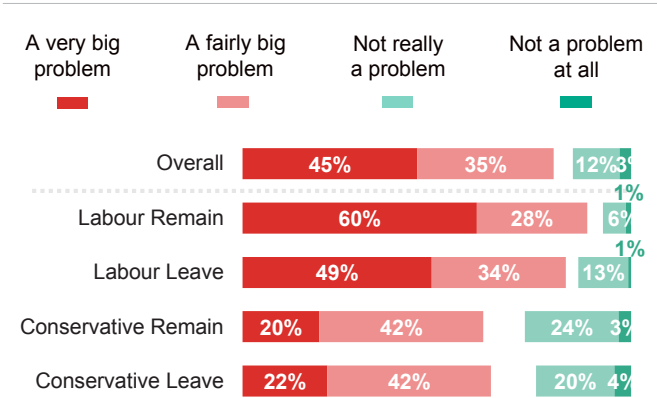
3.6. Looking at attitudes towards rising income inequality, concern differs across political and demographic groups

When it comes to income inequality rising because of Covid-19, levels of concern vary according to political identity – along similar lines to those explored in Section 2. Labour voters from both sides of the Brexit divide are much more likely than Conservative voters to consider growing income inequality between rich and poor to be a big problem, with 89 per cent of Labour Remainers and 83 per cent of Labour Leavers expressing this view (see Figure 35). In contrast, 62 per cent of Conservative Remainers and 64 per cent of Conservative Leavers feel the same.

The gap between Labour and Conservative voters is larger still when focusing on those who consider growing income inequality between rich and poor to be a very big problem – three times as many Labour Remainers (60 per cent) as Conservatives from either side on Brexit (20-22 per cent) consider it such a cause for concern.

Figure 35: Concern about income inequality between rich and poor potentially widening as a result of the coronavirus crisis, by combination of vote in the 2019 general election and EU referendum

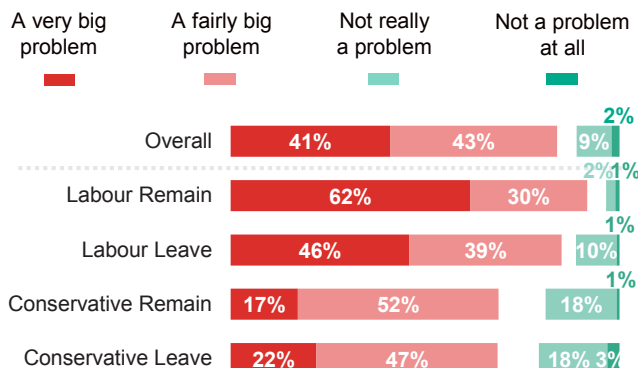
If the gap between the incomes of rich people and poor people increases as a result of the coronavirus crisis, would you consider this...



Looking at growing income inequality between deprived areas and more affluent areas, Labour voters (89 per cent) are again more likely than Conservative voters (70 per cent) to be concerned. But there is a clear split among supporters of the Labour party in terms of the degree of concern, with 62 per cent of Labour Remainers and 46 per cent of Labour Leavers considering widening income disparities between areas to be a very big problem. By contrast, 17 per cent of Conservative Remainers and 22 per cent of Conservative Leavers share this view (see Figure 36).

Figure 36: Concern about income inequality between affluent and deprived areas potentially widening as a result of the coronavirus crisis, by combination of vote in the 2019 general election and EU referendum

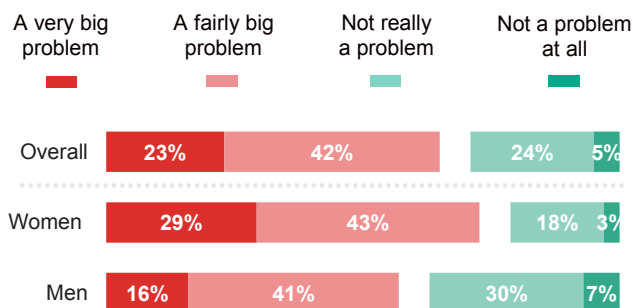
If the gap between the incomes of people living in deprived areas and people living in less deprived areas increases as a result of the coronavirus crisis, would you consider this...



The group perceived to be most disadvantaged by certain inequalities is also, perhaps unsurprisingly, more likely to be concerned about it. For example, women (72 per cent) are more likely than men (57 per cent) to say it would be a big problem if the gender pay gap grew. Correspondingly, a much higher proportion of men (37 per cent) than women (21 per cent) say they wouldn't be concerned if this gap in incomes widened (see Figure 37).

Figure 37: Concern about income inequality between men and women potentially widening as a result of the coronavirus crisis, by gender

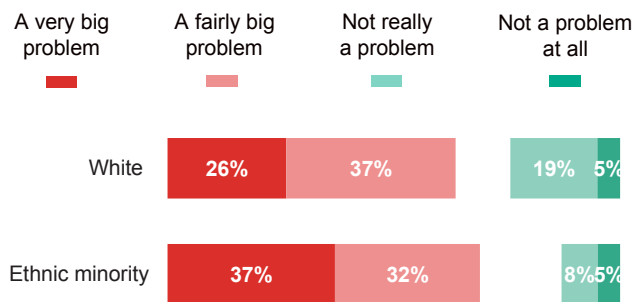
If the gap between the incomes of men and women increases as a result of the coronavirus crisis, would you consider this...



Similarly, people from black, Asian and ethnic minority groups are more likely than white people to be concerned about a growing ethnicity pay gap, particularly when focusing on the proportion who consider the prospect of this to be a very big problem: 26 per cent of white people see it this way, compared with 37 per cent of people from ethnic minorities¹⁸ (see Figure 38).

Figure 38: Concern about income inequality between white people and ethnic minorities potentially widening as a result of the coronavirus crisis, by ethnicity

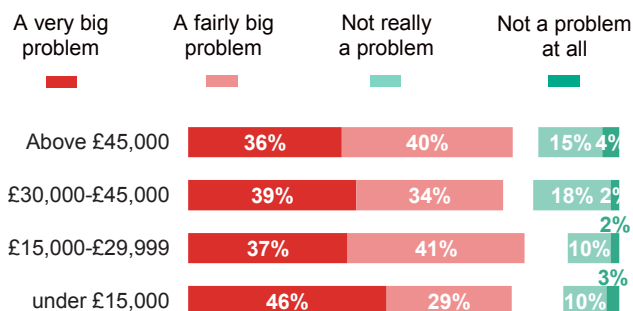
If the gap between the incomes of people from ethnic minorities and white people increases as a result of the coronavirus crisis, would you consider this...



There is less variation in views on rising income inequality between people on lower and higher salaries. Three-quarters of people from households earning more than £45,000 per year (76 per cent) and from households earning less than £15,000 per year (75 per cent) say it would be a big or very big problem if this type of inequality worsened (see Figure 39). People on the lowest incomes are, however, more likely to consider rising income inequality between rich and poor people to be a very big problem, with 46 per cent of people from households earning £15,000 or less giving this response, compared with 36 per cent of people from households earning more than £45,000.


Figure 39:
Concern about
income inequality
between rich and
poor potentially
widening as a
result of the
coronavirus crisis,
by household
income

If the gap between the incomes of rich and poor people increases as a result of the coronavirus crisis, would you consider this...

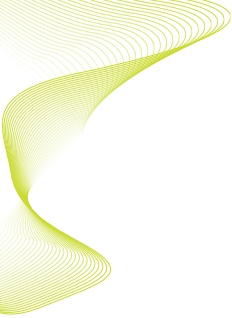


Overall, the findings in this chapter suggest that the coronavirus crisis hasn't prompted a decisive shift in our attitudes to inequality. People are divided over whether inequality will increase as a result of the pandemic, and views on this are strongly related to political affiliation, and so likely link to prior beliefs about inequality.

What is also clear is that, in the context of the pandemic, some inequalities are more salient than others. Disparities between rich and poor, and between affluent and deprived areas, are considered most likely to increase as a result of the crisis, and it's these inequalities that people also see as the greatest cause for concern. Gender inequalities and inequalities between ethnic groups are less likely to attract public attention and concern.



4. Covid-19 and attitudes to the role of the state in reducing inequalities



Concern about inequality often tends to exceed support for government action to address it: for example, while eight in 10 people believe income gaps are too large (81 per cent), only five in 10 (48 per cent) say the government should redistribute income from the rich to the poor. It is conceivable, though, that the exceptional circumstances of the coronavirus crisis could lead to a more general shift in people's attitudes towards government intervention to tackle inequality, given the unprecedented role the state has played in protecting living standards, particularly via the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme or "furlough" scheme.

The following sections explore whether there has been a shift in public attitudes to government intervention and redistribution in light of the pandemic.

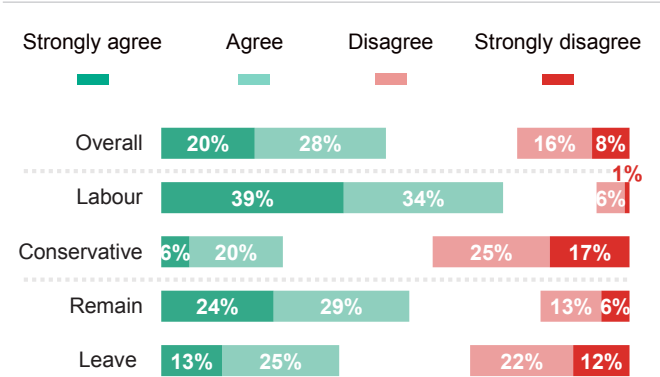
4.1. There is general support for the government to address economic inequalities, but how this intervention is presented matters, particularly to Conservative voters

Around half of people (48 per cent) agree or strongly agree that government should redistribute income from the better-off to the less well-off, while a quarter (24 per cent) disagree or strongly disagree (see Figure 40).¹⁹

Breaking down the results by party affiliation and Brexit vote shows the former to be the major dividing line in opinion. Almost three times as many Labour voters (73 per cent) as Conservative voters (26 per cent) agree or strongly agree that the government should redistribute income (see Figure 40). And this split is even greater when looking at rates of strong agreement. 39 per cent of Labour voters strongly agree with redistribution, compared with 6 per cent of Conservative voters. Differences in views are less pronounced, although still sizeable, between Leavers (13 per cent strongly agree) and Remainers (24 per cent strongly agree).

Figure 40: Support for government redistribution to address income inequalities, by vote in 2019 general election and EU referendum (split sample: n=1,126)

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement: “government should redistribute income from the better off to those who are less well off” [“Neither agree nor disagree” and “don’t knows” not shown]

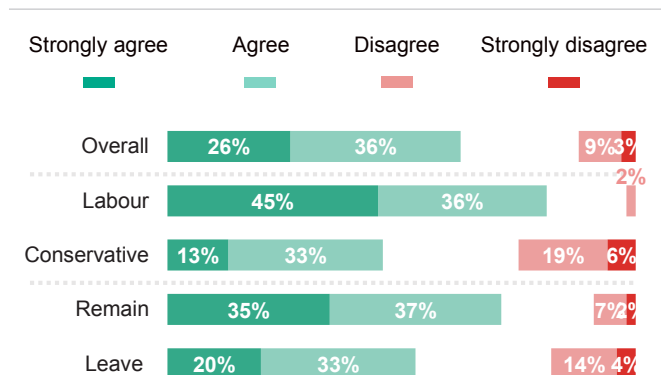


However, the way in which the public respond to questions about government action to address inequalities also seems to depend on how the issue is framed. Through a split sample question design, we omitted the word “redistribution” and instead asked about agreement with the statement “Government should take measures to reduce differences in income levels”. When the question is asked in this way, support is markedly higher: 62 per cent agree or strongly agree, compared with 48 per cent who respond the same when asked whether government should redistribute income (see Figure 41).

Once again, support for this view divides along party lines, with Labour voters more likely than Conservatives to agree that the government should take measures to reduce income differences. Importantly, however, support among Conservatives is much higher when the question is asked without mentioning redistribution: 46 per cent of Conservative voters agree or strongly agree with government taking measures to “reduce differences” in income levels, compared with 26 per cent who agree with government “redistributing” income.

Figure 41: Support for government measures to reduce income inequalities, by vote in 2019 general election and EU referendum (split sample: n=1,100)

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement: “government should take measures to reduce differences in income levels” [“Neither agree nor disagree” and “don’t knows” not shown]



There is widespread belief that the pandemic strengthens the case for government action to address income inequalities. Half of the public (51 per cent) think the coronavirus crisis means there is more of a need for government to redistribute income, compared with 18 per cent who disagree (see Figure 42). This time, when the question is reframed as taking measures to reduce differences in income levels, there is hardly any change in views, with 55 per cent agreeing and 15 per cent disagreeing (see Figure 43).

Looking at the results by political party and Brexit vote again shows that Labour voters (78 per cent) are considerably more likely than Conservatives (29 per cent) to think the coronavirus crisis strengthens the case for government to redistribute income. Similarly, 77 per cent of Labour voters think the crisis creates more of a need for government to take measures to reduce income differences, compared with 41 per cent of Conservatives. Once again, Conservative support for such measures increases greatly when they are not presented as a form of redistribution.

Figure 42: Belief that the coronavirus crisis increases the need for government redistribution to address income inequalities, by vote in the 2019 general election and EU referendum (split sample: n=1,126)

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement: “the coronavirus crisis means there is more of a need for government to **redistribute income** from the better off to those who are less well-off” [“Neither agree nor disagree” and “don’t knows” not shown]

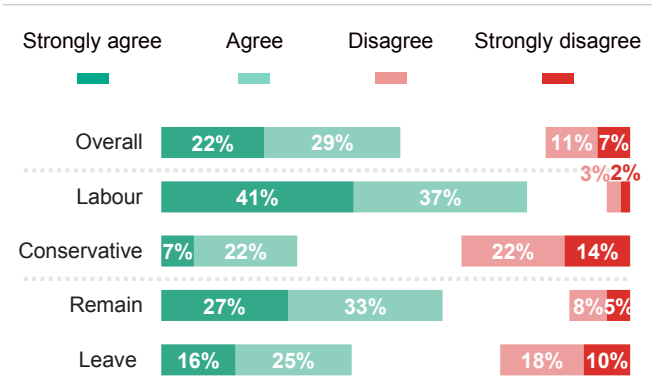
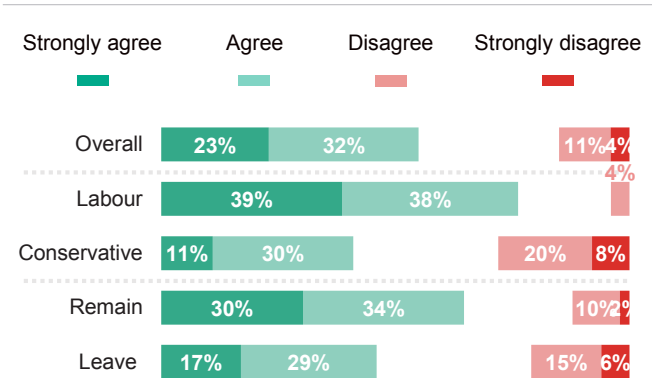


Figure 43: Belief that the coronavirus crisis increases the need for government measures to reduce income inequalities, by vote in the 2019 general election and EU referendum (split sample: n=1,100)

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement: “government should **take measures to reduce differences in income levels**” [“Neither agree nor disagree” and “don’t knows” not shown]

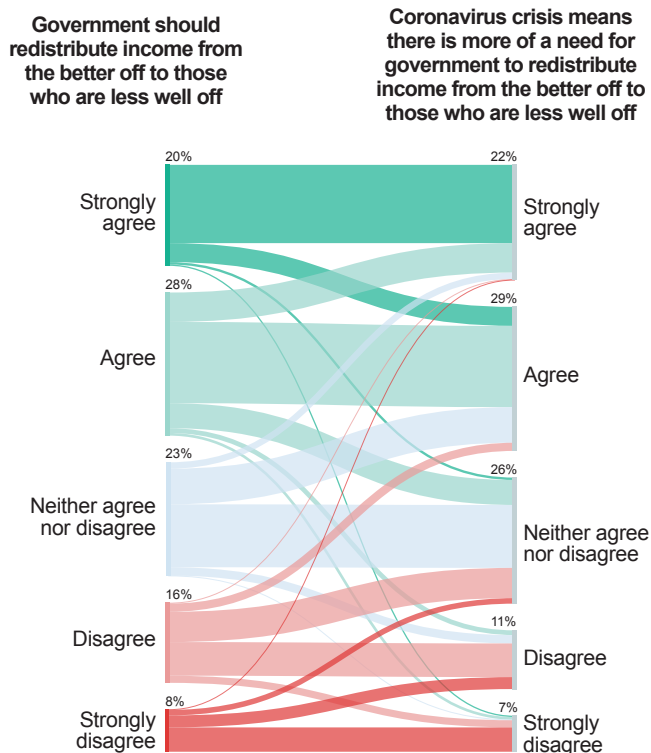


Linking the case for redistribution or reducing differences in income levels to the coronavirus crisis appears to have little impact on support for either. We can see this by comparing support for government actions on inequality generally and support for such actions in the specific context of the pandemic (see Figure 44). For example, only 8 per cent of those who disagree with government redistributing income

in general go on to agree that there is more need for it now in light of the coronavirus crisis.

Figure 44: Views on whether government should redistribute income: support because of the coronavirus crisis by support generally

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement: “government should take measures to reduce differences in income levels” / “the coronavirus crisis means there is more of a need for government to redistribute income from the better off to those who are less well-off”

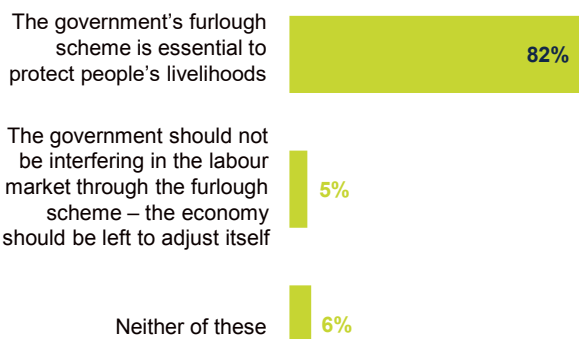


4.2. There is near-universal support for the furlough scheme, and people associate it with very positive outcomes

In contrast to the very varied feelings that different groups have about interventions to address income inequality, there is near-universal support for the government's furlough scheme. Eight in 10 people (82 per cent) agree that the scheme is essential to protect people's livelihoods, while just 5 per cent believe the government should not be interfering in the labour market and should allow the economy to adjust by itself (see Figure 45).

Figure 45: Support for the furlough scheme

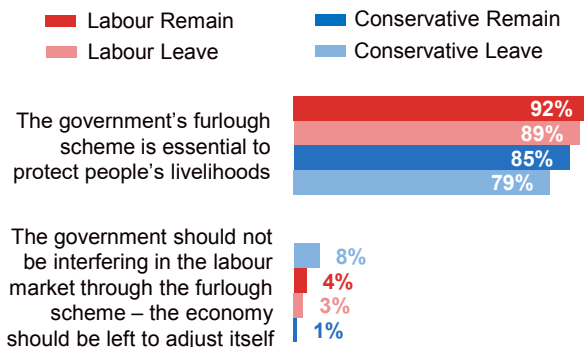
Many people who have been unable to work due to the coronavirus crisis have had most of their wages paid by government under the Job Retention Scheme, or “furlough” scheme. Which of the following statements comes closest to your view?



This support is observed across political lines, as well as between age groups and social grades. Even when breaking down responses according to the interaction between party support and Brexit vote, we find high levels of support for the scheme across groups. Belief that the furlough scheme is essential to protect livelihoods is lowest among Conservative Leavers – although four in five (79 per cent) still hold this view – while Labour Remainers are most likely to believe the scheme is essential, with 92 per cent sharing this opinion.

Figure 46: Support for the furlough scheme, by combination of vote in the 2019 general election and EU referendum

Many people who have been unable to work due to the coronavirus crisis have had most of their wages paid by government under the Job Retention Scheme, or “furlough” scheme. Which of the following statements comes closest to your view? % who agree or strongly agree



Large majorities of respondents credit the furlough scheme with positive outcomes, although relatively small minorities also associate it with potential negative effects. For example, 90 per cent agree the furlough scheme is helping people who are facing difficult times through no fault of their own, and 77 per cent say it helps prevent child hunger. On the other hand, 25 per cent believe the furlough scheme encourages reliance on the state, while 21 per cent believe it discourages people from looking for new and more secure jobs (see Figure 47).

Belief in the positive impacts of the furlough scheme appears to cut across party lines – but Conservative voters are more likely to believe that the scheme also has negative effects. For example, 35 per cent of Conservative Leavers and 29 per cent of Conservative Remainers believe that furlough encourages reliance on the state, compared with 14 per cent of Labour Leavers and 11 per cent of Labour Remainers (see Figure 48). Conservative voters and Labour Leavers are also more likely than Labour Remainers to be concerned about the scheme discouraging people from looking for new jobs.

Figure 47: Attitudes towards the furlough scheme

Here are some statements of opinion about the furlough scheme. For each statement, please say to what extent you agree or disagree with it ["Neither agree nor disagree" and "don't knows" not shown]

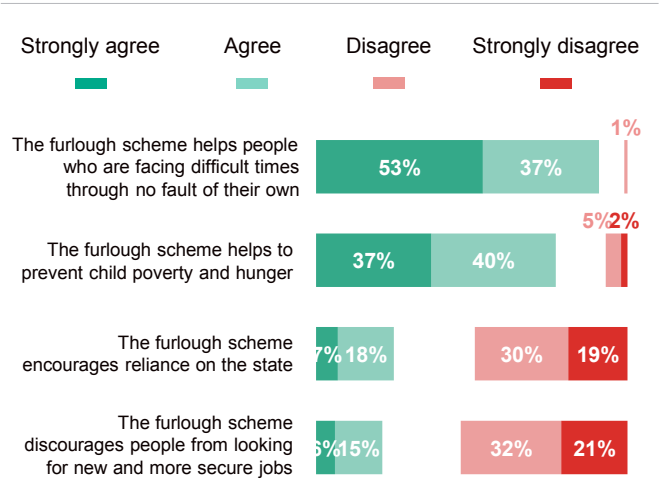
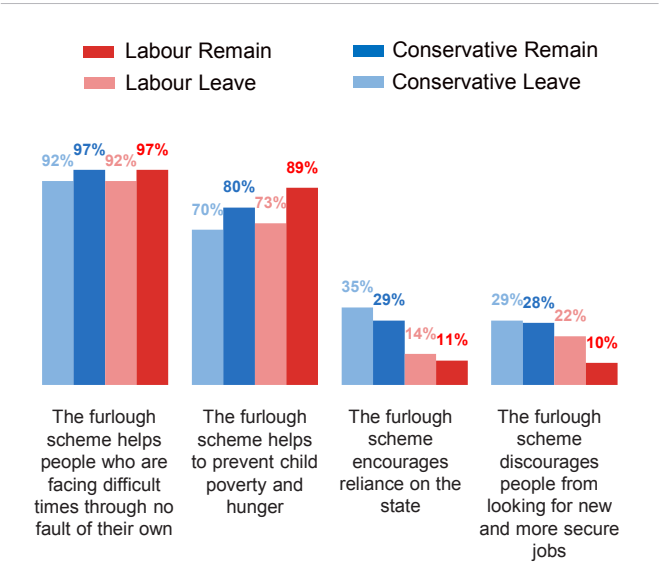


Figure 48: Attitudes towards the furlough scheme, by combination of vote in the 2019 general election and the EU referendum

Here are some statements of opinion about the furlough scheme. For each statement, please say to what extent you agree or disagree with it. % who agree or strongly agree





4.3. Support for furlough does not appear to translate into support for other forms of state support – people view the scheme as distinct

The government has been explicit in its presentation of the furlough scheme as a temporary, emergency response to an unprecedented crisis, rather than a more fundamental change of sentiment towards social security. However, as others have speculated, the pandemic could provide a new context that accelerates an existing trend towards a less hostile view of welfare support that we've seen in Britain in recent years.²⁰

The indications from this research are that people seem to view the furlough scheme quite differently to the government's established form of income support for those who have lost their jobs, namely unemployment benefits. When people are asked for their views about unemployment benefits along the same four dimensions used to elicit views about furlough, they are less likely to associate these benefits with positive outcomes and more likely to believe they have negative effects.

Specifically, 83 per cent agree unemployment benefits help people who are facing difficult times through no fault of their own, and 65 per cent agree they help to prevent child poverty and hunger (see Figure 49). This compares with 90 per cent and 77 per cent respectively who think the same about the furlough scheme (see Figure 47).

The differences are more marked when considering the potential for the two schemes to result in perverse incentives: almost twice as many people (46 per cent) believe that unemployment benefits encourage reliance on the state than believe the same about the furlough scheme (25 per cent). Similarly, 39 per cent believe unemployment benefits discourage people from looking for work, while 21 per cent say that furlough discourages people from looking for new and more secure jobs.

Figure 49:
Attitudes towards
unemployment
benefits

Here are some opinions people have expressed about unemployment benefits. For each of the following statements, please say to what extent you agree or disagree with it ["Neither agree nor disagree" and "don't knows" not shown]

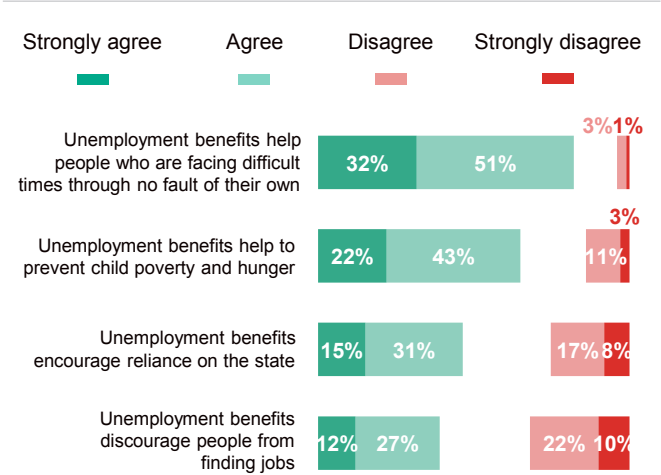
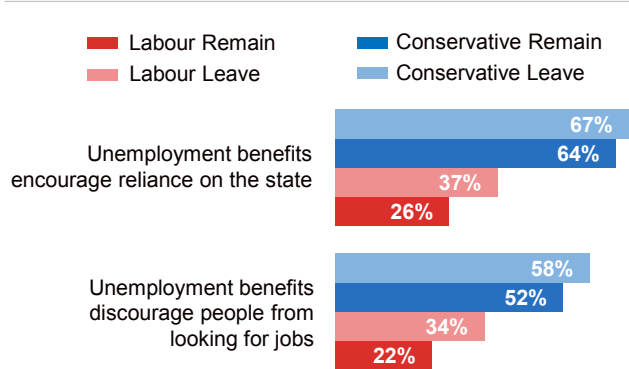


Figure 50:
Belief that
unemployment
benefits create
perverse
incentives, by
combination
of vote in the
2019 general
election and EU
referendum

Here are some opinions people have expressed about unemployment benefits. For each of the following statements, please say to what extent you agree or disagree with it % who agree or strongly agree



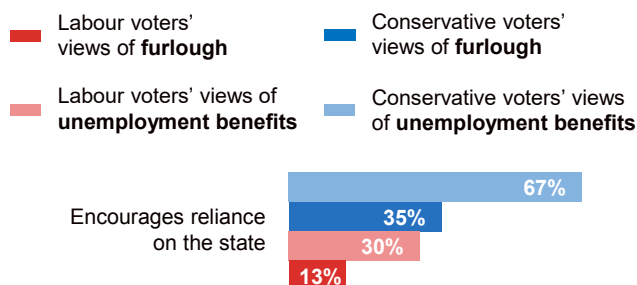
Conservative voters are more likely than Labour voters to associate unemployment benefits with perverse incentives. Again, there is also a spectrum of support from Labour Remainers to Conservative Leavers: a quarter (26 per cent) of the former believe unemployment benefits encourage

reliance on the state, while two-thirds (67 per cent) of the latter feel this way. Similarly, while 22 per cent of Labour Remainers believe unemployment benefits discourage job searching, this is true of 58 per cent of Conservative Leavers (see Figure 50).

The very large differences in opinion between voters of the two main parties and in attitudes towards unemployment benefits versus the furlough scheme are clear in Figure 51, which breaks down views on whether these interventions encourage reliance on the state. It also shows the symmetry in opinion: Conservatives are more than twice as likely as Labour voters to believe both schemes increase dependence on the state, while both sets of voters are twice as likely to say unemployment benefits increase state reliance than does the furlough scheme.

Figure 51: Attitudes towards the furlough scheme compared to attitudes towards unemployment benefits, by vote in the 2019 general election

Here are some opinions people have expressed about the furlough scheme/unemployment benefits. For each of the following statements, please say to what extent you agree or disagree with it. % who agree or strongly agree



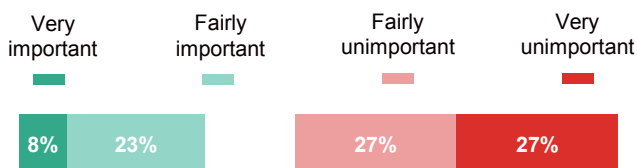
4.4. The public are more likely to see job losses during the pandemic as a personal failing than something that's largely beyond people's control

The strong sense in Britain, highlighted earlier in this report, that personal responsibility and hard work determine success in life is also evident in perceptions of the employment impact of Covid-19. Even in the extraordinary circumstances of the pandemic and the restrictions introduced to control it, the public are more

likely to say job losses caused by the coronavirus crisis are the result of personal failure than chance. Nearly half – 47 per cent – think people’s performance at work is important in determining whether they lose their jobs at this time, compared with 31 per cent who believe luck to be an important factor (see Figure 52).

Figure 52:
Perceptions of the role of luck vs personal performance in explaining job losses caused by the coronavirus crisis

Some people have already lost their jobs as a result of the coronavirus crisis, and others are likely to in the coming months. How important do you think **luck is in determining whether people lose their jobs at this time?**

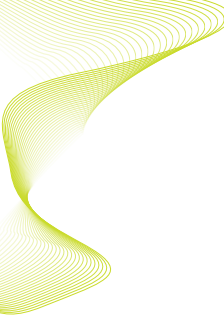


And how important do you think **how well people are performing at their jobs is in determining whether people lose their jobs at this time?**



Belief in the role of luck varies relatively little according to political views. Labour Leavers are most likely to believe that luck plays a very or fairly important role in explaining job losses in the context of the crisis, with 37 per cent expressing this opinion. This compares with 30 per cent of Labour Remainers, 33 per cent of Conservative Remainers and 29 per cent of Conservative Leavers.

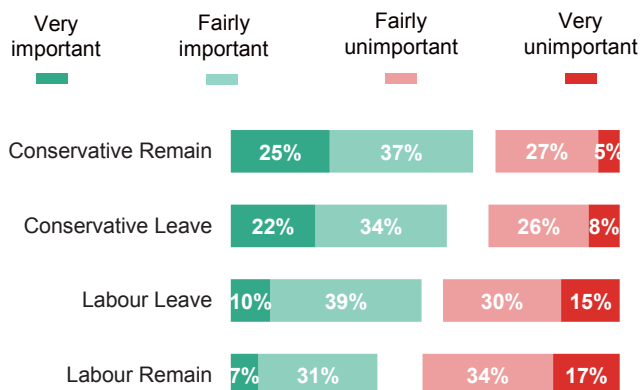
Political differences are slightly more apparent when considering the role of performance at work in explaining job losses, with Conservative voters (57 per cent) more likely than Labour voters (39 per cent) to believe in the importance of individual performance. Majorities of both Conservative Remainers (62 per cent) and Conservative Leavers (56 per cent) believe that individual performance plays a very or fairly important role in determining whether



people lose their jobs at this time, compared with 38 per cent of Labour Remainers and 49 per cent of Labour Leavers (see Figure 53). Perhaps more strikingly, one in five Conservative voters (22 per cent) consider performance at work to be very important in explaining job loss, more than double the proportion of Labour voters who think this (8 per cent).

Figure 53:
Perceptions of the role of performance at work in explaining job losses caused by the coronavirus crisis, by combination of vote in the 2019 general election and EU referendum

And how important do you think performance at work is in determining whether people lose their jobs at this time?



4.5. Despite high levels of support for the furlough scheme, the public are split on whether the crisis justifies the government playing a more active role in the economy in the future

The public are relatively divided on whether the government's support for workers and businesses during the Covid-19 crisis strengthens the case for more intervention in the economy in the future: 45 per cent believe it does, while 36 per cent believe this kind of intervention should just be a one-off (see Figure 54). Younger people are considerably more likely to believe the case for greater intervention has been strengthened, with 63 per cent of 18-24-year-olds agreeing with this idea. This compares with 39 per cent of those aged 50 and over who feel the same (see Figure 55).

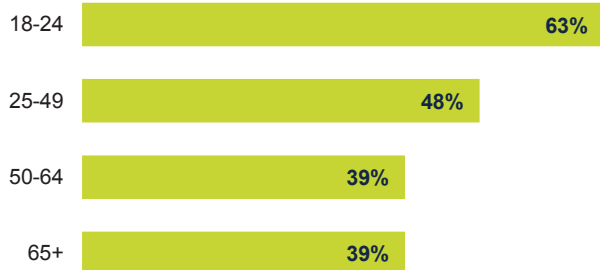
Figure 54:
Attitudes towards
the government's
future role in the
economy

Which of the following statements comes closest to your view?



Figure 55: Support
for the idea that
the coronavirus
crisis strengthens
the case for
government
intervention in the
economy, by age

Which of the following statements comes closest to your view?

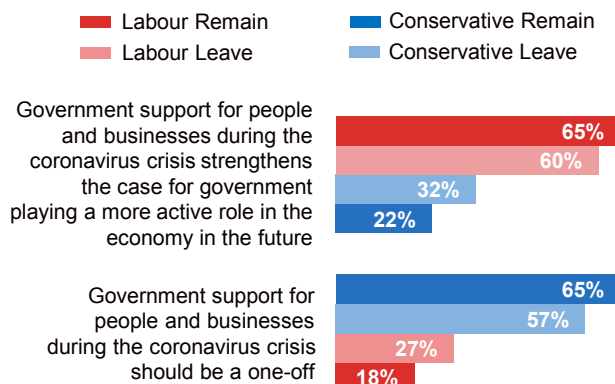


When we look at the interaction between party and Brexit affiliation, there is a pronounced difference in the views of Labour and Conservative voters. While clear majorities of both Labour Remainers (65 per cent) and Labour Leavers (60 per cent) believe the case has been made for a more interventionist government in the future, Conservative Leavers (32 per cent) are half as likely to agree, and Conservative Remainers (22 per cent) even less likely still (see Figure 56). Importantly, it is the majority view among Conservatives (57 per cent) that the government's intervention in the economy in response to the coronavirus crisis should be a one-off, while the majority view among Labour voters (63 per cent) is that the crisis has strengthened the case for government to play a more active role in the economy.

Figure 56:

Attitudes towards the government's future role in the economy, by combination of vote in the 2019 general election and EU referendum

Which of the following statements comes closest to your view?



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5. Concluding thoughts




5.1. The public are likely to support a “levelling up” agenda, regardless of political views

- The public are very focused on area-based inequality, which fits with the government’s “levelling up” agenda. There are many possible reasons for this focus, from our unusually centralised state and London-dominated economy, to recent political outcomes – both Brexit and the focus on “red wall” constituencies in the 2019 general election emphasised the importance of geography, and focused attention on areas that have been left or kept behind.
- Whatever the causes, there is clear potential for that geographic emphasis to receive broad support, including across political groups. This could be a central plank for the government in broadening its own appeal, if they see it as an inclusive project, not solely a case of rebalancing from South to North. All regions have deprived areas, and this study shows it’s not just those living in such places who think we should be supporting them better.
- Of course, area-based life chances are incredibly difficult to shift in practice, as numerous previous attempts have shown. If geography is to become a key aspect of the government’s “fight for fairness”, expectations will be very difficult to meet, and will take more than a few targeted funds.
- But it still provides a vital unifying opportunity – it’s a rare consensus on typically very divisive issues.

5.2. In most other domains views are divided, often along political lines

- There is a clear sense that people felt inequality was too high before the pandemic. But despite the expectation in the early months of the crisis that Covid-19 may help to establish a shared awareness and concern about inequalities in Britain,²¹ splits in views across issues and between political groups are a clearer theme than unity.



Racial inequalities in particular are a divisive issue, but more generally levels of concern about inequalities and perceptions of their causes are hugely dependent on political views and demographic characteristics.

- Beliefs about whether the coronavirus crisis will increase inequalities and whether it justifies more government action also split the population, again varying strongly along political lines. That said, there is at least something resembling a shared diagnosis – even if the need for solutions or a desire for fundamental change has not been triggered by Covid-19. People generally agree that income inequality is too high, and the perception that the poorest have been hit hardest by the crisis has relatively universal support.

5.3. These divisions mean there is no widespread appetite for change

- There is less call for change than headline findings might suggest, with only small proportions of individuals changing their views on the extent of inequality in Britain in the context of the coronavirus crisis. And support for greater government intervention beyond one-off measures is hugely affected by existing political views.
- There are, however, indications of the importance of how we frame and talk about inequality with different groups. Talking about reducing income differences has more widespread appeal than mentioning redistribution, while values-based appeals to fairness are more powerful than moral judgements on what is right or wrong.
- But a more general call for more action is constrained by the overall context of a strong belief in meritocracy in Britain, where large segments of the country believe that individual characteristics and effort determine life chances.



5.4. Covid-19 has mostly reinforced existing views

- ♦ Rather than radically altering public perspectives, the coronavirus crisis (as in so many other ways) has accentuated existing perceptions and identities.
- ♦ We should not expect a widespread reappraisal of the case for greater government intervention in the economy, despite the economic hardship wrought by the pandemic. Of course, it is still very early days in assessing the economic impact of the crisis, and as the extraordinary emergency measures are phased out the direct impact may be more keenly felt.
- ♦ But to date, the risk appears to be less about universal loss of faith in the fairness of the system, and more about a further reinforcement of different perspectives among different groups. The exposure of these fragmented views, and potential for further polarisation, means that a key task for the government and others is to focus on connecting with the public, and emphasising areas of common ground.

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Technical note



Sample & fieldwork dates

All figures, unless otherwise stated, are from YouGov Plc. Total sample size was 2,226 adults. Fieldwork was undertaken between 11th - 12th November 2020. The survey was carried out online. The figures have been weighted and are representative of GB adults (aged 18+) with respect to vote in the 2019 general election and EU referendum, age, gender, education level, attention paid to politics and region. The sample is not representative of the population with respect to ethnic composition. All charts in this report do not show Don't Know responses, unless otherwise stated.

Methodology: This survey has been conducted using an online interview administered members of the YouGov Plc GB panel of 185,000+ individuals who have agreed to take part in surveys. An email was sent to panellists selected at random from the base sample according to the sample definition, inviting them to take part in the survey and providing a link to the survey. (The sample definition could be "GB adult population" or a subset such as "GB adult females"). YouGov Plc normally achieves a response rate of between 35 per cent and 50 per cent to surveys however this does vary dependent upon the subject matter, complexity and length of the questionnaire. The responding sample is weighted to the profile of the sample definition to provide a representative reporting sample. The profile is normally derived from census data or, if not available from the census, from industry accepted data.

Sample sizes for the subgroups included in the analysis in this report are as follows:

	Subgroup	Unweighted
Vote in 2019 GE	Conservative	738
	Labour	560
Vote in 2016 EU Referendum	Leave	908
	Remain	864
Party/Brexit interaction	Conservative Leave	555
	Conservative Remain	140
	Labour Leave	104
	Labour Remain	373
Red Wall*	Red Wall	235
	Rest of Britain	1991
Gender	Male	1022
	Female	1204
Age	18-24	178
	25-49	948
	50-64	549
	65+	551
Ethnicity	White	2079
	Black and minority ethnic	121
Education level**	Low	613
	Medium	937
	High	676

Some of these subgroups, especially the “Labour Leave” group defined by the interaction of 2019 general election vote and 2016 EU Referendum vote, are small. As a result, estimates for this group presented throughout this report should be considered to have low precision and correspondingly wide margins of error




*** Red wall**

“Red wall” is a colloquialism referring to constituencies in the North/Midlands and Wales that had been considered safe Labour seats since the mid-twentieth century but were won by the Conservative party in the 2017 or 2019 general elections. Our data did not capture political constituencies; instead, geography was captured in terms of local authorities. We mapped local authorities onto “red wall” seats by marking any local authorities where we estimated that 50 per cent or more of the electorate were in a constituency in the North/Midlands or Wales and turned from Labour to Conservative in 2017 or 2019. It should, however, be noted that this does not map precisely onto constituencies, but is our best estimate of “red wall” areas.

**** Education level**

Education Level	Highest qualification level
Low	No Formal Qualifications
	Youth training certificate / skillseeker
	Clerical and commercial
	City and guilds certificate
	CSE grades 2-5
	CSE grades 1, GCE O level, GCSE, Schools Certificate
	Scottish Ordinary / Lower Certificate
Medium	Recognised trade apprenticeship completed
	City and guilds certificate - advanced
	ONC
	GCE A level or Higher Certificate
	Scottish Higher Certificate
	Nursing qualification (e.g. SEN, SRN, SCM, RGN)
	Teaching qualification (not degree)
	University diploma
	Other technical, professional or higher qualification



	Don't know
	Prefer not to say
High	University or CNAAB first degree (e.g. BA, BSc, B.Ed)
	University or CNAAB higher degree (e.g. MSc, PhD)

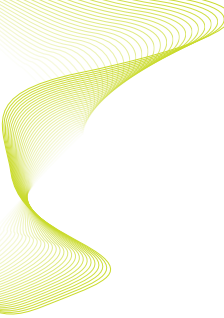
Development of the survey instrument

The survey questionnaire was informed, as far as was possible, by existing questions taken from large-scale longitudinal surveys such as the British Social Attitudes Survey, the European Social Survey, the International Social Survey Program and the British Household Panel Survey. This provided some assurance as to the validity of the questions, and also provided a comparison for the responses we obtained, allowing any that were far out of line with existing trends to be readily identified. In developing questions referencing the coronavirus pandemic, we also drew where possible on existing surveys, such as the Office for National Statistics' Opinions and Lifestyle Survey, and polling by King's College London in partnership with Ipsos MORI. Where questions did not already exist on the issues we wished to explore, we developed new questions with the input of YouGov and other external advisors.

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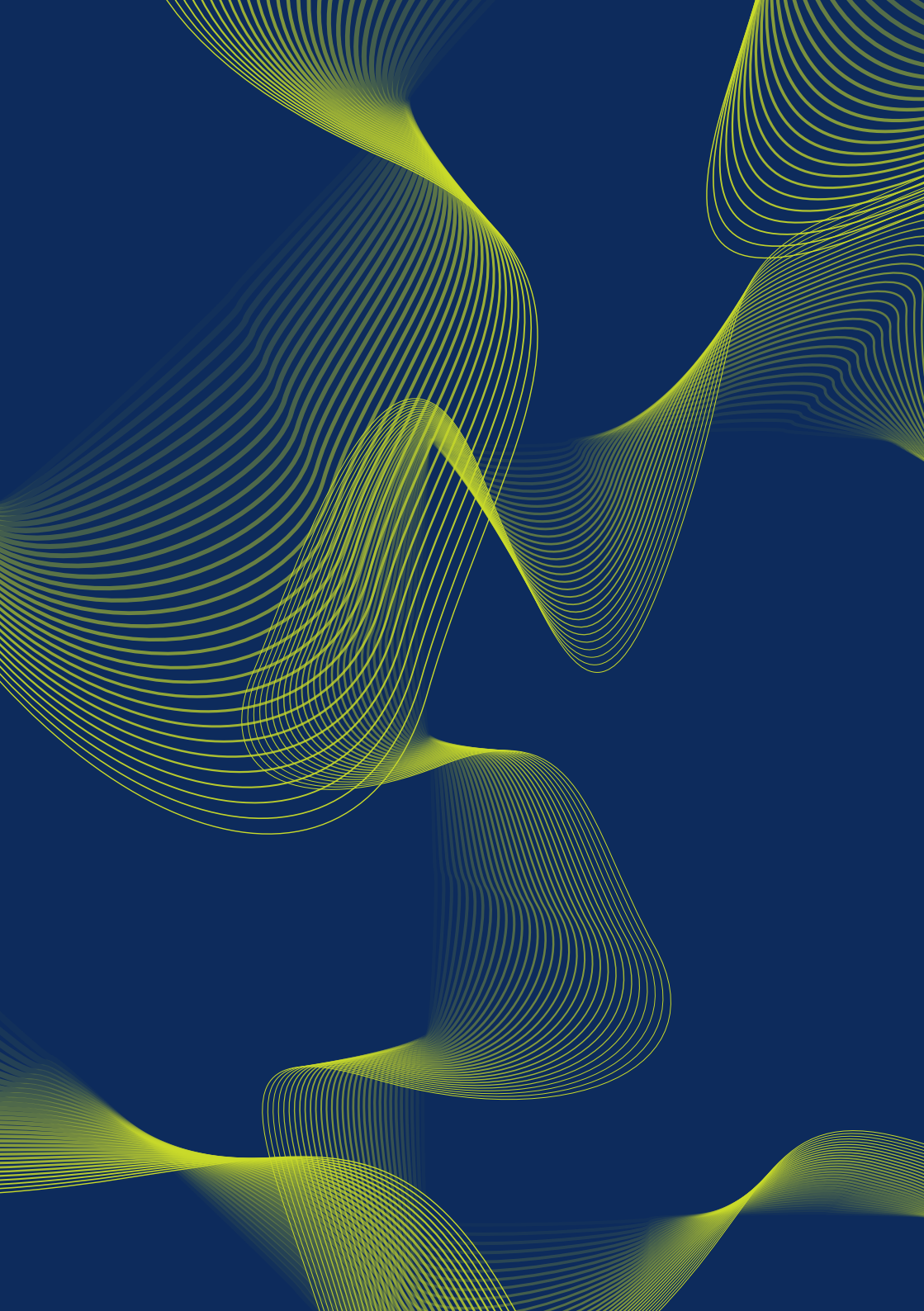
The background of the page is a solid dark blue. It is decorated with several sets of thin, bright yellow lines that form a series of overlapping, wavy, and concentric patterns. These patterns originate from the corners and edges, creating a sense of movement and depth. The lines are most dense in the bottom right and top right corners, where they form more complex, grid-like intersections, and become sparser as they move towards the center and left side.

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11. Data on ethnicity pay gaps in Britain was taken from the Office for National Statistics (2020), *Ethnicity pay gaps: 2019*, <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/earningsandworkinghours/articles/ethnicitypaygapsingreatbritain/2019>. Data on unemployment by ethnicity was also taken from Office for National Statistics figures: see Gov.UK (2021), Ethnicity facts and figures: Unemployment, <https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/work-pay-and-benefits/unemployment-and-economic-inactivity/unemployment/latest#main-facts-and-figures>
 12. US comparison last asked in 2018 in the General Social Survey. The question wording is as follows: “On the average (Negroes/Blacks/African-Americans) have worse jobs, income, and housing than white people. Do you think these differences are...”
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