



Pandemic Stories: Headline Report

March 2021

Thrive LDN 

TOYNBEE
HALL



About Pandemic Stories

In June 2020 Toynbee Hall began working in collaboration with Londoners who have been disproportionately affected by the COVID-19 crisis as part of the Pandemic Stories project. 17 peer researchers aged between 20–70 years old, speaking 13 languages between them, conducted Participatory Action Research to investigate the impact of the crisis and co-design effective solutions to improve financial resilience and wellbeing. We have been generously supported by Thrive LDN, who have worked closely with the peer research team throughout each stage of the project. We are now sharing our findings, recommendations and initial actions as part of this summary. We will publish the full report in May 2021.

Pandemic Stories is about community-led action by people with lived experience of surviving the pandemic in the hardest of circumstances. We invite you to get involved in the mission to use the learning from the pandemic to build a fairer and happier society. If you, either as an individual or an organisation, are able to help us progress the community recommendations in this report, please get in touch.

Whose Stories?

50 interviews have been conducted by the peer researchers with family, friends and neighbours, over the phone, face-to-face or via online platforms. All interviewees also completed an online survey about the impact of the crisis on their financial circumstances. The interviewees come from diverse backgrounds:

- Aged between 18–80;
- Three out of four come from a Black or other ethnic minority background;
- Over half have a long term disability;
- Over half live in Tower Hamlets; the rest live in nine different London boroughs.

Findings

Financial Health and Employment

- **Earning less but needing to spend more:** 51% of people surveyed said their income had reduced due to COVID-19. Yet expenditure also increased, with households paying more on energy bills, internet and food. To keep afloat during the crisis, some found extra work, others used savings or borrowed, and many described “going without”.
- **Insecure workers have taken the hardest hit:** Freelancers, gig economy workers and other self-employed workers have taken the worst financial hit and some have fallen through gaps in government support for part or all of the crisis.
- **Young private renters are struggling:** Many young private renters experienced income loss through furlough, loss of freelance work, zero-hours employment, or redundancy. Income has at times been lost across all rent-payers in a household, creating shortfalls for the overall rent.
- **Certain communities are under extra pressure to support friends, family and wider networks:** Some people from Black, Caribbean and Bangladeshi backgrounds told us that they were providing financial support to worse-off family members or friends, either in their local communities or to relatives who were struggling abroad. As friends and families lost income, people with no recourse to public funds found their community could no longer support them and they faced hunger or destitution without access to the welfare safety net.
- **Access to the internet has been a deciding factor in whether families can cope:** Those who have had to purchase better internet connection during the lockdown have had a significant additional expense at a time of financial strain. Yet in spite of the cost, internet connection was clearly beneficial for financial health through improving the ability to manage finances online.
- **Employment worries are impacting on mental health:** Anxiety about future employment prospects is driving poor mental health in both young and older interviewees.



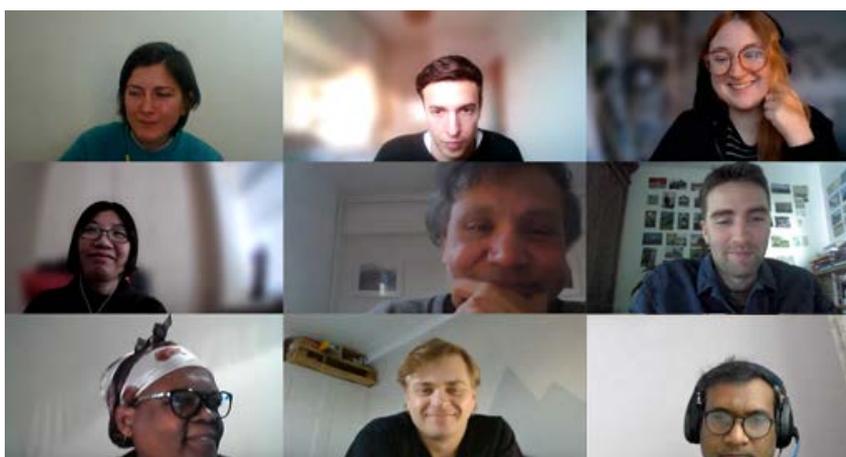
“Financially, I don’t know how I am going to cope, because I have bought (got) things off food banks, I’ve taken handouts from my friends and my family, and I just don’t know... where I’m gonna end up, and how my kids are gonna be shaped by all these difficulties, financially, emotionally, how their life is gonna pan out because their start to life is not brilliant, so I can only hope for the best.”

- Pandemic Stories interviewee

Findings

Advice and Information

- **Barriers to internet use have stopped people being able to access advice and support:** Barriers to advice and support caused by digital exclusion have worsened the mental wellbeing of some, particularly older people. Complicated website design has also created barriers for some interviewees in getting advice and support.
- **Past experience of discrimination from health services has deterred some BAME groups from following health advice:** The historic lack of trust in mainstream health services had affected Black people's willingness to seek help and follow guidance. Our community insights suggest that culturally-specific services for the Bangladeshi community generally could be of lower quality than mainstream services.
- **Ineffective public health messaging:** Lack of clear information about COVID-19 has exacerbated people's sense of fear.



“I think I’m headed for a nervous breakdown! This is exacerbated by the fact that there are no agencies open due to the virus that could have helped me otherwise like the [advice provider] etc. I can’t get through on the phone so can’t get telephone help, either.”

- Pandemic Stories interviewee

Findings

Power of Community Support and Collective Voice

- **Formal volunteering and informal neighbour-to-neighbour support was highly valued by people from all age groups:** Community support provided essentials like food and prescriptions, but it was also a powerful way to improve mental wellbeing and connection with others.
- **Building a voice through everyday connection:** Small, everyday acts of kindness really mattered to people during the crisis, and this was key to building a community with a collective voice.
- **It was more difficult for some people to access community support:** Language barriers, digital exclusion and a tendency to stick in close family or friendship circles during the pandemic were identified as barriers to better community support.
- **Sustaining community connection post-pandemic:** People wanted more opportunities to get involved in community initiatives, and to be able to carry forward a sense of community beyond COVID-19.
- **The need for community-owned spaces:** During the pandemic and moving forward, people want more physical and virtual spaces to participate in community life and decision-making.



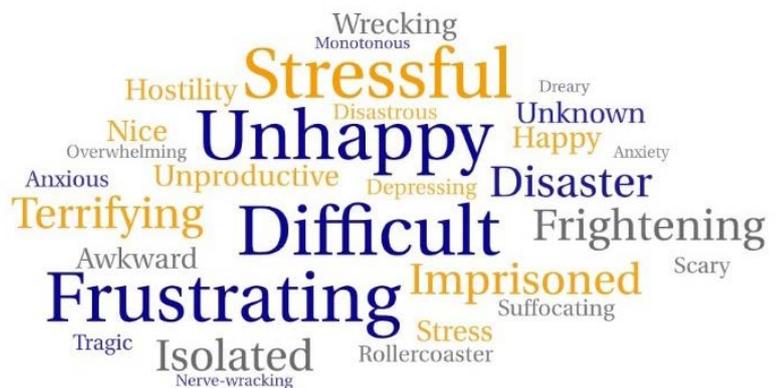
“It’s really hard for one person to be heard properly right and if the community got together, if they all expressed the same concerns and the same worries, I think they’re most likely to be heard, the change is most likely to happen.”

- Pandemic Stories interviewee

Findings

Mental Health

- **Low-income households are recovering from multiple traumas caused by COVID-19:** These range from grief to financial shock to mental breakdown.
- **A period of fear:** Fear has been a prevalent emotion, from fear of infection to fear of infecting loved ones, combined with uncertainty about the future.
- **The internet as a resource to support mental health:** The internet has played an important role in maintaining good mental health, providing connection, learning and access to support.



Above: How interviewees described their experience of COVID-19



If you're not in a good community it would obviously act on your mental health. If you're... from, like a low social economic background and you're in lockdown and... you've removed all... from your... day to day routine, ...all distractions that could distract you from perhaps like the toxic elements of your community; then your mental health might deteriorate because you're constantly faced with hardships.

- Pandemic Stories interviewee

Recommendations and Actions

Taking action is essential to community empowerment, and we are working with the peer researchers and a wide range of stakeholders to honour our commitment to co-design and co-production. If you are interested in helping us progress the recommendations, we would love to hear from you.

Pandemic Stories Recommendations



Toynbee Hall's Actions so far



The government should make sure that **no resident in the UK receives below a minimum level of liveable income** after they have paid their housing costs.

The peer researchers presented to MPs and peers at the joint meeting of the All Party Parliamentary Groups (APPG) on Universal Credit and Ending the Need for Food Banks to argue that the government should maintain the £20 increase to Universal Credit and extend the uplift to legacy benefits.

Peer Researchers also wrote blogs and recorded a podcast as part of an online campaign for a liveable income, beginning with maintaining the £20 increase to Universal Credit and extending to legacy benefits.

We shared findings and early recommendations during Challenge Poverty Week 2020 with representatives from the Mayor of London's team, national government, regulators like the FCA, local councils and healthcare representatives.

We launched the Pandemic Stories report with an event hosted by the peer researchers in March 2021.

Employment support needs to be provided that is good for wellbeing. Jobs need to be created in key sectors.

The peer researchers held a community conversation to inform the Greater London Authority's (GLA) recovery missions about employment support. We are also seeking funding for a participatory action research project to design good employment support with people who face barriers to moving into work.

Low income households must have affordable internet access at home. Clinical Commissioning Groups and health providers should consider the social prescription of internet access.

We facilitated workshops to discuss possible solutions to digital exclusion to support the nationwide #OperationWifi campaign.

We are working with the GLA as part of the engagement collaborative to feed our findings into London's digital inclusion work.

<p>Advice providers need to reach the most marginalised and public information needs to be effectively cascaded from government to grassroots.</p>	<p>Pandemic Stories research and recommendations are being fed into Toynbee Hall's advice services, collaborative work and discussions with local and national organisations, including our work on the London's Recovery Board safety net mission, co-chaired Toynbee Hall's CEO.</p>
<p>Local authorities should work with local communities to design the coordination of different types of community provision. Every Londoner should be able to take part in accessible and programmed opportunities to meet with their neighbours and to speak to decision-makers. On key issues related to equality and community rights, councils should require contractors to agree to principles co-designed with residents.</p>	<p>Our Trust for London-funded 'Safer Homes and Neighbourhoods' participatory action research project will take action on these findings over the course of the next year.</p>
<p>Include disproportionately impacted communities in designing the public health response to COVID-19.</p>	<p>Peer researchers and Toynbee Hall staff from BAME communities helped us to write our response to the Women and Equalities' committee's call for evidence on the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on these groups.</p>
<p>Thrive LDN could coordinate a co-designed programme of online workshops and online support for young people.</p>	<p>Toynbee Hall, in partnership with the GLA, are co-designing Thrive LDN's programme of online workshops and online support for young people.</p>

If you would like to know more or discuss about this project, please get in touch by emailing Research@toynbeehall.org.uk.

 **Toynbee Hall:** www.toynbeehall.org.uk

 **Thrive LDN:** www.thriveldn.co.uk

Join the conversation on social media using #PandemicStories