

RACISM AND ETHNIC INEQUALITY IN A TIME OF CRISIS

Findings from the
Evidence for Equality National Survey

Edited by
Nissa Finney, James Nazroo, Laia Bécares,
Dharmi Kapadia and Natalie Shlomo



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Notes on contributors

Andrea Aparicio-Castro is a PhD candidate in Social Statistics at the University of Manchester (UoM) and a Fellow of the Higher Education Academy. She is also a scholar of the ESRC North West Social Science Doctoral Training Partnership and a Cathie Marsh Institute research member. She graduated as an MSc in Social Research Methods and Statistics from the UoM, and as a Specialist in Statistics and Sociologist from the National University of Colombia. Her career has focused on applying quantitative methodologies in social sciences, specialising in data integration, imputation of data, multilevel and hierarchical modelling, and forecast from a Bayesian perspective.

Laia Bécares is Professor of Social Science and Health in the Department of Global Health and Social Medicine, King's College London. Her research interests are in studying the pathways by which the discrimination and marginalisation of people and places lead to social and health inequalities across the life course, with a specific focus on racism and heteronormativity as systems of oppression. She is a member of the ESRC Centre on the Dynamics of Ethnicity (CoDE).

Neema Begum is Assistant Professor in British Politics at the University of Nottingham. Her research uses mixed-methods approaches to analysing British ethnic minority political attitudes, voting behaviour and political representation. She was formerly a research associate at CoDE, where she analysed ethnic minority representation in UK local government. She has also conducted research on ethnic minority voting behaviour and immigration attitudes in the 2016 EU referendum, decolonising the university curriculum and ethnic minority women's political activism.

Magda Borkowska is Senior Research Officer at the Institute for Social and Economic Research, University of Essex. She has conducted research on inequalities experienced by ethnic and immigrant minorities, social cohesion, civil society, neighbourhood effects and political attitudes. In her research she primarily uses quantitative, longitudinal approaches to study life course outcomes. She previously worked in the Policy Unit of Understanding Society (UK Household Longitudinal Study), where she frequently collaborated with government departments researching gender inequalities in labour market outcomes, immigrant integration and residential segregation.

Ken Clark is Senior Honorary Research Fellow at the Department of Economics and a member of the Centre on the Dynamics of Ethnicity at the University of Manchester. He is also an IZA Research Fellow. His published work is broadly in the area of labour economics, where he specialises in the analysis of employment and wage differentials between different ethnic and immigrant groups. As well as being published in academic journals, his work has contributed to considerations of the best policies to improve labour market equality for government and other policy makers.

Daniel Ellingworth is Researcher at CoDE at the University of Manchester, working on the design and analysis of EVENS. His previous work has focused on crime and criminal justice, addressing patterns of repeat victimisation and area crime rates, and the evaluation of a range of offender interventions.

Nissa Finney is Professor of Human Geography at the University of St Andrews. She has published and taught widely on ethnic inequalities, residential mobility and housing, neighbourhood change and segregation. She is a Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society, former Chair of the Royal Geographical Society (with the Institute of British Geographers) Population Geography Research Group, member of the ESRC Centre for Population Change (CPC) and a founding member of CoDE. On ethnic inequalities, her work has brought new understandings in population scholarship, evidencing differential opportunities and experiences of ethnic groups in residential choices, underlying processes of racism and discrimination, and policy narratives that marginalise groups and places.

Joseph Harrison is Research Associate at CoDE. Alongside this, he is studying for a PhD at the University of St Andrews. His research uses quantitative methods and longitudinal data to focus on Pakistani immigrants and their descendants in the UK and Norway, particularly relating to their family dynamics and health. Previously he has worked as a research assistant at Stockholm University Demography Unit (SUDA) from where he also graduated with an MSc in Demography. Before that, he studied Economics and International Development at the University of Birmingham.

Hannah Haycox is ESRC Postdoctoral Fellow at The University of Manchester where she is researching racial inequalities, refugee resettlement and multi-scalar policy governance. Her previous work as Research Assistant with CoDE at The University of St Andrews provided an intersectional approach to lived experiences of housing policy and practice, including its racialised, classed and gendered impacts. She has been the recipient of several prestigious prizes, including the Presidential Doctoral Scholar Award for future global leaders of research. She has disseminated policy

recommendations to high-quality academic journals, UNHCR, media outlets, cross-parliamentary groups and non-governmental organisations.

Emma Hill is Research Fellow in Geography and Sustainable Development at the University of St Andrews, where she is working on an ESRC-funded project on the racialised dynamics of post-pandemic housing practices in the UK. She was previously a Research Fellow on the JPI ERA Net/ Horizon 2020 Governance and Local Integration of Migrants and Europe's Refugees (GLIMER) Project in Sociology at the University of Edinburgh, and completed her PhD in Cultural Research at Heriot-Watt University, for which her doctoral thesis was awarded the 2017 MacFarlane Prize. She is an associate editor for the *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power* journal, a steering committee member for the Glasgow Refugee, Asylum and Migration Network (GRAMNet) and a Trustee for the Maryhill Integration Network (Glasgow). Her research interests include the postcolonial dynamics of South-North migration in former colonial centres.

Dharmi Kapadia is Senior Lecturer in Sociology at the University of Manchester and a member of CoDE. She is a mixed-methods researcher with interests in racism, mental health and illness, stigma and older people. She has also conducted research in ethnic inequalities in women's use of mental health services and socioeconomic inequalities in suicide, and has also undertaken work looking at ethnic inequalities in the labour market and the role of social networks in poverty for different ethnic groups.

Angelo Moretti is Assistant Professor in Statistics at the Department of Methodology and Statistics, Utrecht University. He is a survey statistician and an elected member of the International Statistical Institute (ISI). He has conducted research in small area estimation under multivariate generalised mixed models, survey calibration, mean squared error estimation based on bootstrap approaches, and data integration methods (statistical matching and probabilistic record linkage). He is also interested in applications related to understanding geographical differences in social exclusion, crime and public attitude indicators.

James Nazroo is Professor of Sociology at the University of Manchester. His work on ethnic inequalities in health has led the field in demonstrating the importance of both socioeconomic inequalities and experiences of racism and racial discrimination. It has also provided novel findings on early life effects, generational differences, ecological effects and the positive effects of ethnic density. His publications in relation to ageing have advanced our understanding of the patterns and determinants of social and health inequalities, as well as the health and wellbeing outcomes of retirement

and later life employment, and he has also developed and tested theoretical models of class that more accurately capture socioeconomic position in later life. He is a Fellow of the British Academy, a Fellow of the Academy of Social Sciences and the founding Director of the ESRC Centre on the Dynamics of Ethnicity.

Nico Ochmann received his PhD in Economics from the University of Manchester in February 2021 with the dissertation title ‘Essays in immigration economics’. His areas of interest are immigration, ethnicity, labour, micro-econometrics and causal inference. He has been with CoDE since September 2020. He holds an MSc in Applied Economics from Montana State University, Bozeman, and a BSc in Economics from the University of Washington, Seattle. He has worked as an economist in the US, Canada, Germany and the UK.

Natalie Shlomo is Professor of Social Statistics at the University of Manchester. She is a survey statistician with interests in adaptive survey designs, data linkage and integration, non-probability sampling designs, statistical disclosure control and small area estimation. She has written a diverse range of publications in both survey statistics and the social sciences. She is a Fellow of the Academy of Social Sciences in the UK, an elected member of the ISI and a Fellow of the Royal Statistical Society.

Michaela Štátná is Research Associate at CoDE. She is a PhD student at the University of St Andrews, researching family complexity and children’s outcomes in relation to family resources. Her research focuses on in-depth life-course measures of family complexity using advanced quantitative methods, and on early childhood outcomes, especially mental health. She holds an MSc in Attachment Studies from the University of Roehampton and a BSc Psychology from Birkbeck, University of London.

Harry Taylor is Research Associate in the Department of Global Health and Social Medicine, King’s College London, and formerly of CoDE. He received his PhD in Social Statistics from the University of Manchester in 2022. His primary research uses quantitative methods to explore ethnic inequalities in health. He has also conducted research into misinformation and vaccine hesitancy for the Alan Turing Institute. Prior to his doctoral study, he worked in spend analysis and logistics consultancy, investigating applications of AI techniques to business problems, among other projects.

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*Nissa Finney, James Nazroo, Natalie Shlomo,
Dharmi Kapadia, Laia Bécares
St Andrews, Manchester, London
November 2022*

Note on the figures

Table 2.3 and Figures 4.1, 4.3, 6.1 and 7.2 have been published in a font size smaller than our house style. To see full-sized versions of these figures, please visit <https://policy.bristoluniversitypress.co.uk/ethnic-inequalities-in-a-time-of-crisis>.

To find out more about CoDE, EVENS and how to access the EVENS data see www.ethnicity.ac.uk

Introduction: the need for Evidence for Equality

*Nissa Finney, James Nazroo, Laia Bécaries, Dharmi Kapadia
and Natalie Shlomo*

What would a racially just society look like?

How close is Britain to being a racially just society?

Has the COVID-19 pandemic taken Britain further away from racial justice and ethnic equality?

This book's examination of ethnic inequalities in life circumstances and experiences is motivated by these questions of racial justice. Its central premise is that understanding how and why people's experiences differ, and the nature of the disadvantage and inequality underpinning these experiences, is required for racial equality. What distinguishes this book is its use of a unique dataset to conduct a robust investigation of ethnic inequalities in Britain. The analyses in this book go further than previous studies – further in terms of the issues that are investigated and the granularity of ethnic groups that is considered. This has been made possible by the Evidence for Equality National Survey (EVENS) dataset.

This book provides the most comprehensive and up-to-date evidence on ethnic inequalities in Britain. This is highly pertinent to contemporary social and political race debates and policy agendas in the post-pandemic recovery context. The COVID-19 pandemic brought ethnic inequalities to the fore as it became evident that infection and mortality rates were higher among ethnic minorities than the population as a whole (ICNARC, 2020; Nazroo and Bécaries, 2020; ONS, 2020; Platt and Warwick, 2020). In May 2020, as the devastating and unequal impacts of the pandemic were being realised, the murder of George Floyd in Minnesota in the US saw a resurgence of Black Lives Matter (BLM) movements globally (Alexander and Byrne, 2020). In response, the UK government published the Sewell Report in 2021 which relayed the conclusions of the Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities (Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities, 2021), and, subsequently, the *Inclusive Britain* report in 2022 which laid

out policy recommendations ([Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, 2022](#)).

A fundamental critique of the Sewell Report is that its conclusion that racial inequalities are not an issue of deep concern for UK society is not borne out by the evidence ([Byrne et al, 2020](#)). Furthermore, the *Sewell Report* failed to take account of the considerable and longstanding body of knowledge that demonstrates how structural and institutional racism have shaped ethnic inequalities in the UK and elsewhere ([Byrne et al, 2020](#); [Nazroo et al, 2020](#); [Meer, 2022](#)). The impacts of the *Inclusive Britain* recommendations remain to be seen, but, as shown in *The Race Report* from the Stuart Hall Foundation, of the 589 recommendations made by UK race and inequality reports and commissions since the 1980s, many have yet to be implemented ([Ashe, 2021](#)).

Among the repeated recommendations of race and inequality reviews over the last 50 years has been the call for ‘regular, improved and standardised forms of data collection which measures and monitors the nature of racism, racial inequality and the effectiveness of policy interventions’ ([Ashe, 2021: 7](#)). The EVENS survey represents a step change in such data collection. As such, this book is a foundation for ideas, initiatives and actions to bring about equality and to ensure that addressing ethnic inequalities is at the fore in policy and practice. It also provides the evidence for this to be done with care, accuracy and robustness.

Ethnicity and ethnic categorisation

Three core concepts bind this book: ethnicity, inequality and racism. Here we elaborate our conceptualisation of ethnicity and the challenges in depicting it quantitatively. We then turn to inequality and racism. Ethnicity can be described as a form of (individual and collective) identity that draws on notions of ancestry, cultural commonality and geographical origins. The boundaries of ethnic groups are symbolic and marked by practices of, for example, language, religion or, more generally, ‘culture’. Ethnicity also often incorporates race, which invokes notions of shared physical features, most particularly represented through skin colour.

We understand ethnicity not as something essential, intrinsic or fixed, but as socially constructed; a way of labelling and grouping people that has been devised by society throughout long histories of social disaggregation. Through the discursive generation of racial and ethnic groups, differences are accorded social significance. This identification, rendering of meaning and value, and placement on a hierarchal scale is a process described as racialisation. Racial classification and racialisation have been central to historically determined colonial systems of domination that are ongoing and employ racial hierarchies as a rationale for exploitation, marginalisation

and exclusion of those considered to be inferior (Emirbayer and Desmond, 2015; Golash-Boza, 2016; Bhopal, 2018; Meer, 2022).

The recognition of ethnicity as socially constructed and of the potent power of discursive generation of racialised social order to marginalise and exclude brings a tension to this research. We want to take account of the richness of ethnic identities, but also want to make comparisons in order to characterise inequalities. Comparisons require categorisation. As you flick through these pages, you will see that all the evidence presented is based on ethnic categorisation, with ethnic groups represented by neat, delineated bars and dots that suggest cohesion and consistency. This belies what has just been discussed about the social production of categories and their associated meanings.

Categories are part of how we make sense of and are oriented to others, and thus shape our everyday social interactions (Ahmed, 2007). Yet the meanings of categories are often not voiced or directly expressed, and are almost never interrogated. Where categories carry differential value, which they almost always do, this has material consequences for both those included in and those excluded from particular categories. And when a category is stigmatised and has the potential to subsume other elements of a person's identity, the consequences for the individual may reach into all elements of their life in profound ways. In addition, social categories are no more than crude and inaccurate summaries of our personal experience and of a particular dimension of our identity. And this is the case even if the categorisation is relatively refined.

A crucial step is to acknowledge that the ethnic categories that come from attempts to summarise ethnicity are *not the cause* of differential risk between ethnic groups for a particular outcome. Rather, the ways in which the category is racialised, and the material consequences of this, are likely to be the cause. So, we use categories and consequently run the risk of fixing and essentialising the social meanings that drive the inequalities we care about. Thus, we use categories with care, precision and reflection in this book. It is our intention that the discussions that follow can contribute to critical debates about ethnic categorisation (and thus be of interest to critical decolonial scholarship) from the premise that ethnicity is meaningful for people's self-identities and, as a definer of ourselves and others, ethnic categorisation is central to how society is organised and works.

There is a long history of ethnic categorisation in official statistics in Britain (contrary to the approach in other nations – see, for example, Simon, 2008, 2017). This was motivated in the 1970s and 1980s by concerns about racism, discrimination and inequalities which were at the core of the Race Relations Act 1976. Ethnic groups routinely became categorised from the 1991 Census (Peach, 1994). This was the first time that ethnicity had been part of the census questionnaire and the approach – measuring ethnicity and the categories used – quickly became the standard (Finney and Simpson, 2009). The categories used in the 1991 Census were the outcome of extensive

• TABLE 1.1: ETHNIC GROUPS IN THE EVENS SURVEY •

White Irish
White Eastern European
Gypsy/Traveller
Roma
Jewish
Any other White background
Indian
Pakistani
Bangladeshi
Mixed White and Asian
Chinese
Any other Asian background
Black Caribbean
Mixed White and Black Caribbean
Black African
Mixed White and Black African
Any other Black background
Arab
Any other mixed/multiple background
Any other ethnic group
White British

discussions and consultations, and the ethnic categories used in official statistics have since been revised a number of times by the national statistical agencies.

The Office for National Statistics (ONS) Census 2021 ethnic groups are the basis for the categories in the analyses presented in this book. However, we have somewhat amended the standard list in the categories we use and the way we present (that is, label and order) them. We include two additional groups to the standard ONS categories: Jewish and White Eastern European ethnic groups are specified to enable evidence for groups who have distinct experiences, but are largely invisible in existing surveys. We present ethnic groups, consistently through the book, in the order in [Table 1.1](#); note that the mixed ethnic groups are not grouped consecutively. The ethnic groups in the EVENS survey are discussed further in [Chapter 2](#) and critical reflection on categories of ethnic identification is the focus of [Chapter 3](#). It is important from the outset to note that all those upon whom these analyses are based defined their own ethnicity, though within the limits of the categories that we offered them.

Inequality

Categorisation enables comparison and identification of inequality. We understand inequality as difference that is unjust and preventable. Inequalities

can be seen as the inevitable consequence of (imperialist, racist, capitalist and patriarchal) societies (Hooks, 1984) operating on the premise that one's security comes at the expense of other's insecurity; one's power and privilege comes at the expense of others' marginalisation (Harvey, 2017; Dorling, 2019). In presenting evidence for equality we are not arguing for sameness – people are at liberty to choose how they live – but for the identification of inequalities that represent racial injustice.

A common conceptual distinction on inequality with relevance to the contemporary political and policy context is between equality of outcome and equality of opportunity. Policy discussions and recommendations predominantly focus on equality of opportunity; in this book we focus on and emphasise equality of outcome. We do so partly because it is incredibly difficult to measure equality of opportunity, but, more importantly, from the premise that understanding differential outcomes is the starting point for understanding the mechanisms – processes of racial injustice – that cause them. In this book we take indicators of circumstance and experience in key life domains and compare these across ethnic groups. In the interpretations and discussions we consider the drivers and implications of ethnic inequalities.

The main question raised by this book is why we see ethnic inequalities. The book does not directly address this question empirically, but is theoretically motivated by a stance that racism is the key driver of ethnic inequalities in opportunity, circumstance and experience. What this novel evidence enables is questions about how racism produces and sustains ethnic inequalities.

Racism

Racism is central to the discussions in this book; we take the position that racism is the mechanism of racial injustice and a root cause of ethnic inequalities. Inequalities do not arise from the inherent properties of ethnic groupings; rather, they are a result of historically embedded and culturally and politically shaped meanings ascribed to ethnic identities which generate a racialised social order. Thus, the overarching theoretical framing of this book is that ethnic inequalities result from racism and racial injustice driven by historical and ongoing processes of colonialism (Bonnett, 2022; Byrne et al, 2020; Meer, 2022). The central argument is that racism and racialisation underpin the ethnic inequalities that are presented, which most often show disadvantage for ethnic minority groups.

Racism manifests on multiple levels, including structural, institutional and interpersonal levels (Jones, 2000; Nazroo et al, 2020). Structural racism leads to disadvantage in accessing economic, political, physical, social and cultural resources (Essed, 1991). This also has ideological dimensions that involve the denigration of ethnic minority groups, which serves to rationalise this uneven

distribution of resources (Emirbayer and Desmond, 2015). Within the UK, there are deep-rooted ethnic inequalities across almost all socioeconomic dimensions: income, employment, residential location, health, housing and education. These have persisted over time and across generations (Modood et al, 1997; Jivraj and Simpson, 2015; Byrne et al, 2020), despite the introduction of equality legislation, which has been in place in the UK for more than 50 years. This persistence of ethnic inequalities illustrates how difficult it is to address the processes associated with racism (Meer, 2022).

Interpersonal racism (ranging from discrimination to everyday slights and to verbal and physical aggression) is a form of violence that emphasises the devalued and fundamentally insecure status of both those who are directly targeted and those who have similarly racialised identities. It is through such interpersonal actions that the denigrated aspects of racialised identities come into being (Emirbayer and Desmond, 2015; Funnell, 2015). A range of studies has acutely demonstrated that interpersonal experiences of racism and discrimination are central to the lives of ethnic minority people, operating across, and impacting upon, their life courses, and resulting in significant harm (Karlsen and Nazroo, 2002a; Karlsen and Nazroo, 2004; Wallace et al, 2016).

Institutional racism refers to how the norms, policies and practices of institutions negatively shape the experiences of members of racialised groups within them (Carmichael and Hamilton, 1967). Institutional settings provide a context within which structural forms of disadvantage and interpersonal racism are concentrated and amplified (Phillips, 2010; Emirbayer and Desmond, 2015; Bailey et al, 2017). The outcomes of institutional racism can be seen in the greater likelihood of ethnic minority people to have more negative pathways through care, poorer access to effective services and interventions, and poorer outcomes. This is present in education (Alexander and Shankley, 2020), health and social care (Chouhan and Nazroo, 2020; Kapadia et al, 2022), housing (Shankley and Finney, 2020), arts and culture (Malik and Shankley, 2020), and politics (Sobolewska and Shankley, 2020). It is most striking in those institutions that have a regulatory or disciplinary function, such as criminal justice (Shankley and Williams, 2020) and mental health (Nazroo et al, 2020).

In this book we capture the outcomes of structural and institutional racism (in Chapters 5, 6, 7, 8 and 9) and present evidence on the everyday experiences of interpersonal racial discrimination (Chapter 4).

The need for EVENS

The story of EVENS – from an innovative starting point to an unrivalled dataset – has its roots in the frustration of the inadequacies of data on ethnicity and a consequent knowledge gap that became intensified during

the COVID-19 pandemic. When COVID-19 hit Britain in the early months of 2020 and inequalities across ethnic groups were immediately apparent, researchers at the Centre on the Dynamics of Ethnicity (CoDE) embarked on an intense endeavour to document and understand the experiences of ethnic minority people during this crisis. This programme of work built from CoDE's decade of experience in evidencing, understanding and addressing ethnic inequalities in the UK (Jivraj and Simpson, 2015; Byrne et al, 2020). It aimed to:

1. Document new and changing forms of racial and ethnic inequality in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic and responses to it.
2. Explore emergent forms of social, political and cultural mobilisation around racism and racial inequality during and following the resurgence of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement.
3. Examine responses within particular social arenas and from institutions (education, health, housing, welfare, culture, employment and businesses, and policing) to the COVID-19 pandemic and BLM.
4. Work with community, policy and third sector partners to understand how racial and ethnic inequality was being addressed during the pandemic, and to formulate future plans for addressing racial injustice.

It was clear that what was lacking in the evidence landscape was a robust, large-scale, quantitative dataset focusing on ethnic minorities and their experiences and centring racism as the root cause of the inequalities. Thus, EVENS was established as a core part of CoDE's programme of work. EVENS is the largest and most comprehensive survey to document the lives of ethnic and religious minorities in Britain during the pandemic. Moreover, it employs cutting-edge survey methods to ensure a uniquely robust dataset (see [Chapter 2](#)). EVENS has a number of distinctive features that make it a uniquely useful source for understanding contemporary ethnic inequalities:

- recognition and representation of more ethnic minority groups;
- larger samples of ethnic minority groups;
- use and development of innovative and robust survey methods;
- working in partnership with ethnic minority communities to ensure the relevance and quality of the data.

Concern about the ethnicity data gap (and, indeed, the value of producing ethnicity data) is by no means a new development. In a book collaboration in 1980, the Runnymede Trust and the Radical Statistics Race Group published *Britain's Black Population*. Motivated by the same quest for racial justice as this collection and having presented the best available evidence of the time, the book asserted that 'attention be paid to the collection of statistics about

the particular circumstances and needs of black people in the areas of health, housing, education, employment and the social services' (Runnymede Trust and the Radical Statistics Race Group, 1980: 129). In some ways the data landscape has improved for understanding the experiences of ethnic minority people: the UK censuses have included an ethnicity question since 1991, there is oversampling of ethnic minority participants in several large-scale social surveys (though this is not without methodological challenges – see Chapter 2) and ethnic monitoring has become routine in administrative data as a result of the 2010 Equalities Act. However, with the exception of Understanding Society (the UK Household Longitudinal Study), there has been a reluctance to design and resource new data about the experiences of ethnic minority people, and, indeed, some data initiatives from the early 2000s, such as the Citizenship Survey, have been jettisoned.

Although in a sense we are awash with ethnicity data and it has become normal to 'tick' ethnicity monitoring questions, there are some severe limitations to existing UK data on ethnicity. Administrative data, while having good coverage of the population, do not usually disaggregate ethnic groups beyond broad categories, which are both difficult to interpret and mask differences between ethnic groups subsumed into broader categories, and are limited in the nature of the information that is collected. In particular, these data do not tell us about experience, perception or opinion, and crucially they do not tell us about the reasons behind inequalities. So, for example, from administrative data we may know how many Bangladeshi people had a General Practitioner (GP) appointment in 2021, but we know nothing of the motivations for or experiences of that appointment, or other details about this person that may be relevant for understanding their health. Census data are unrivalled in their population coverage, geographical detail and (through the Longitudinal Studies) ability to evidence trends over five decades, but are restricted in terms of understanding the details and drivers of ethnic inequalities because of their necessary focus on demographic and socioeconomic indicators.

As for understanding experiences and impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, existing COVID-19-related data are severely limited for generating adequate understandings of the extent of ethnic inequalities or the mechanisms behind them. Such surveys conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic are often of poor quality (both in terms of topic coverage and sample design) or do not focus on the experiences that are particularly pertinent to ethnic and religious minority people.

EVENS and this book offer a unique and timely intervention to the ethnicity data gap and to debates about inequalities and racism in the post-COVID-19 context. EVENS is an unrivalled data source, as Chapter 2 will elaborate: it offers greater topic coverage than other sources, it is designed specifically to be relevant to the lives of ethnic and religious minority people, it represents a collaboration with 13 leading voluntary, community

and social enterprise (VCSE) organisations, and it uses innovative non-probability survey methods. EVENS has a sample of 14,200 participants, of whom 9,700 identify as members of ethnic and religious minority groups, uniquely allowing comparative analyses of their experiences.

The EVENS data, which are freely available for use in research, were collected during the COVID-19 pandemic and the chapters in this book give insight to the experiences of ethnic minority people during this unique period. Yet the potential of the data goes beyond an understanding of the pandemic specifically. The focus on this pivotal historical moment enables discussion about the history and persistence of racism and the resulting ethnic inequalities which have led to differential experiences. Evidencing ethnic inequalities during the pandemic reveals the workings of racism and racial injustice. The pandemic context exposes fragilities, insecurities, disruptions and destabilisation, and encourages reflection that can be a catalyst for regenerative change.

Reading this book

Following this introduction, [Chapter 2](#) relays the methods used to generate the unique data used in this book, emphasising the innovative approaches that were taken. Next, in [Chapter 3](#), we engage critically with ethnic categorisation through analysis of the various questions on ethnic identification that were part of EVENS, drawing out lessons on how people identify and on the measurement of ethnicity. The chapter illustrates the diversity within ethnic categorisations and the ways in which people describe their ethnic identities that are not well captured using current standard categorisations. It also demonstrates the salience of ethnic identification and the strength of belonging to British society across ethnic groups.

[Chapters 4 to 9](#) present findings from EVENS thematically: racism, health, housing, work, socioeconomics and politics. In each of these chapters, the results presented show inequalities between ethnic groups on key indicators. Each chapter has a summary at the start and a measures and methods box describing the analyses. The empirical chapters can be read in any order; the book can be dipped into as well as read sequentially.

Among the highlights of the book, we see the stark prevalence of experiences of racism and the worsening of experiences of racism during the pandemic (for Chinese and Eastern European groups in particular). Ethnic minority people in Britain were more likely to have poor physical health, experience COVID-19-related bereavement and have difficulty accessing health services than White British people. However, based on some indicators (including loneliness and depression), some ethnic minority groups fared better than the White British group. In housing, ethnic minority groups in Britain are subject to material deprivation in residential experience, yet

succeed in developing strong attachment to their local neighbourhoods and enriching this during this period of crisis. We see the persistence of ethnic inequalities in the labour market and, during the pandemic, particular risk of job precarity for some ethnic minority groups (notably Jewish and Chinese women). The detrimental financial impact of the pandemic has been greater for ethnic minority people than the White British majority; socioeconomic deprivation is particularly evident for Arab, Roma and Gypsy/Traveller groups, and people from Arab, Bangladeshi and Pakistani backgrounds have notably high levels of worry about financial circumstances. In general, ethnic minority people report relatively high levels of political trust (though greater towards the devolved parliaments than the UK Parliament) and continue to have high levels of political engagement indicated by interest in politics and political party affiliation. Overall, the chapters demonstrate the power of robust and innovative data to evidence ethnic inequalities.

The findings chapters ([Chapters 3 to 9](#)) have been written by experts in the thematic field; authors represent disciplines across the social sciences (geography, sociology, economics, demography, social statistics, population health and politics). The book is thus interdisciplinary in offering expert discipline-oriented empirical chapters within a framing that speaks across disciplines to vital questions of racism and ethnic inequality.