

Collaboratives on addressing
racial inequity in covid recovery



Employment

Briefing Paper

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Introduction

This briefing paper examines the employment and labour market inequalities that Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) communities experienced before the Covid-19 pandemic, in order to help identify challenges to be addressed during the recovery phase. It was commissioned as part of a series of collaborations, led by the Race Equality Foundation, that will develop an evidence-led narrative and make practical recommendations to ensure that the recovery phase from Covid-19 in the UK addresses racial inequality.

The briefing paper has four main sections:

1. Indicators of inequality: this looks at the employment rate by ethnic group and gender as well as over time.
2. Factors behind inequality: a summary of the main points from recent research about what lies behind the inequalities described in the first section. This is further divided into two sub-sections, one looking at unequal participation in labour markets and the other looking at barriers to progression within the labour market.
3. Possible impact of Covid-19: this section looks at research into groups that have been most affected by the pandemic to date.
4. Concluding remarks and some (among the many) possible questions for discussion.

1. Indicators of inequality

The working-age population in England has increased by 11% since 2002/03. More than three quarters of this increase is due to the growth of England's BAME population by over 2.5 million, to 5.5 million in 2018/19. Over the same period, the number of BAME people employed has risen from 1.7 million to 3.7 million. Despite this large change, there are still significant disparities in employment outcomes.

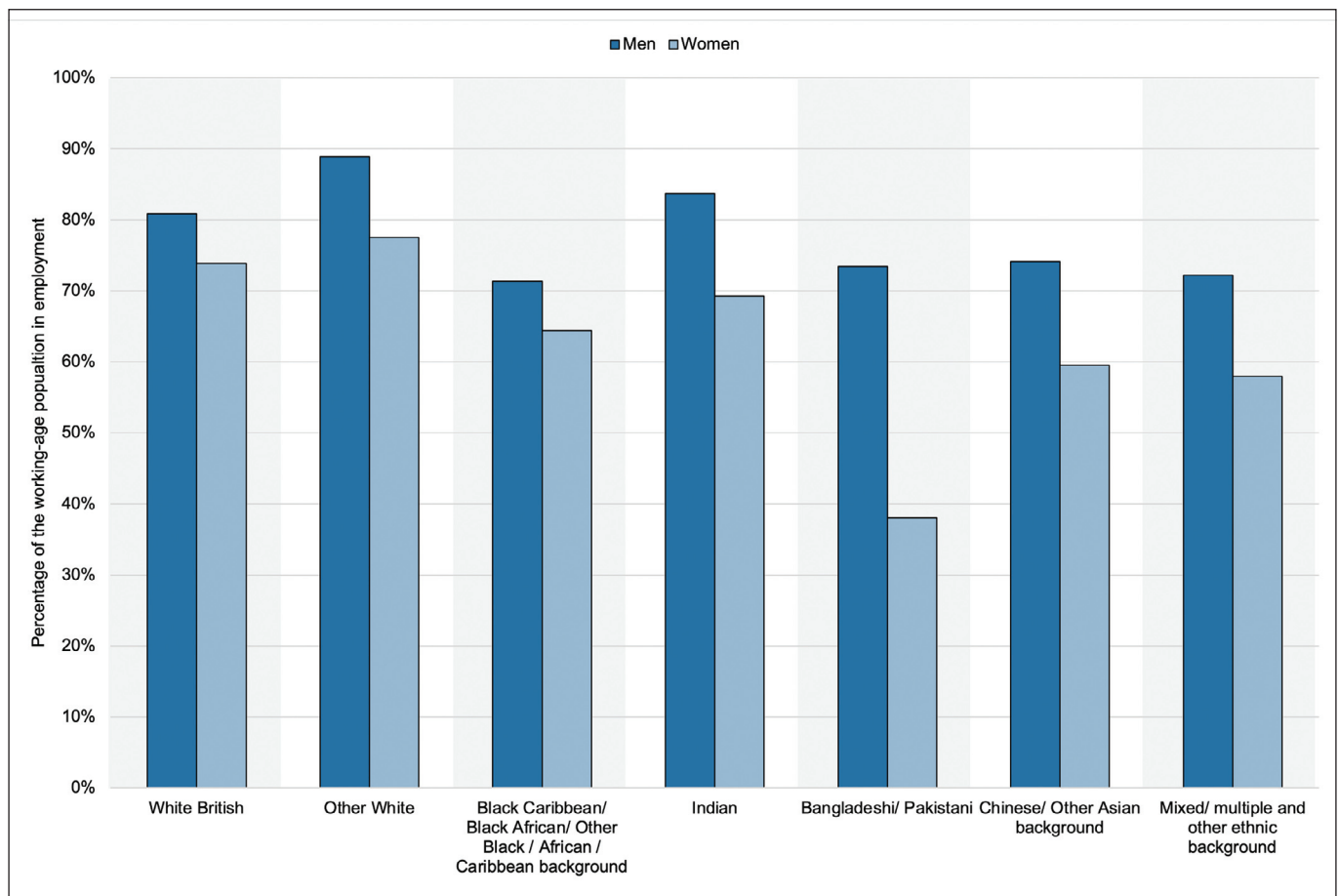
This section explores two themes, namely: employment rates by ethnicity, gender and age; disadvantage within employment, measured by overexposure in insecure work roles and occupational disparities, by ethnicity.

The evidence presented here is mainly from the official Labour Force Survey. The evidence refers to England only and is produced by taking two-year averages to ensure reliability. The outputs provided have been done to the greatest level of detail as possible, due to low sample counts, or where a greater level of detail does not provide greater understanding.*

Employment rates and change over the last 20 years

Figure 1 shows employment rates (that is, the proportion of those of working age who are employed) by ethnic group and gender. There is considerable variation between men and women and some variation by ethnic group.

Figure 1. Employment rates by ethnic group and gender, 2018/19



Source: NPI analysis of Labour Force Survey, data is a two-year average to 2018/19.

* Low sample counts are particularly an issue where multiple factors are assessed at once. The most detailed breakdown of ethnicity available can reliably identify 11 different groups. For more specific indicators such as women and men's employment rates, the most detailed breakdown is into seven groups.

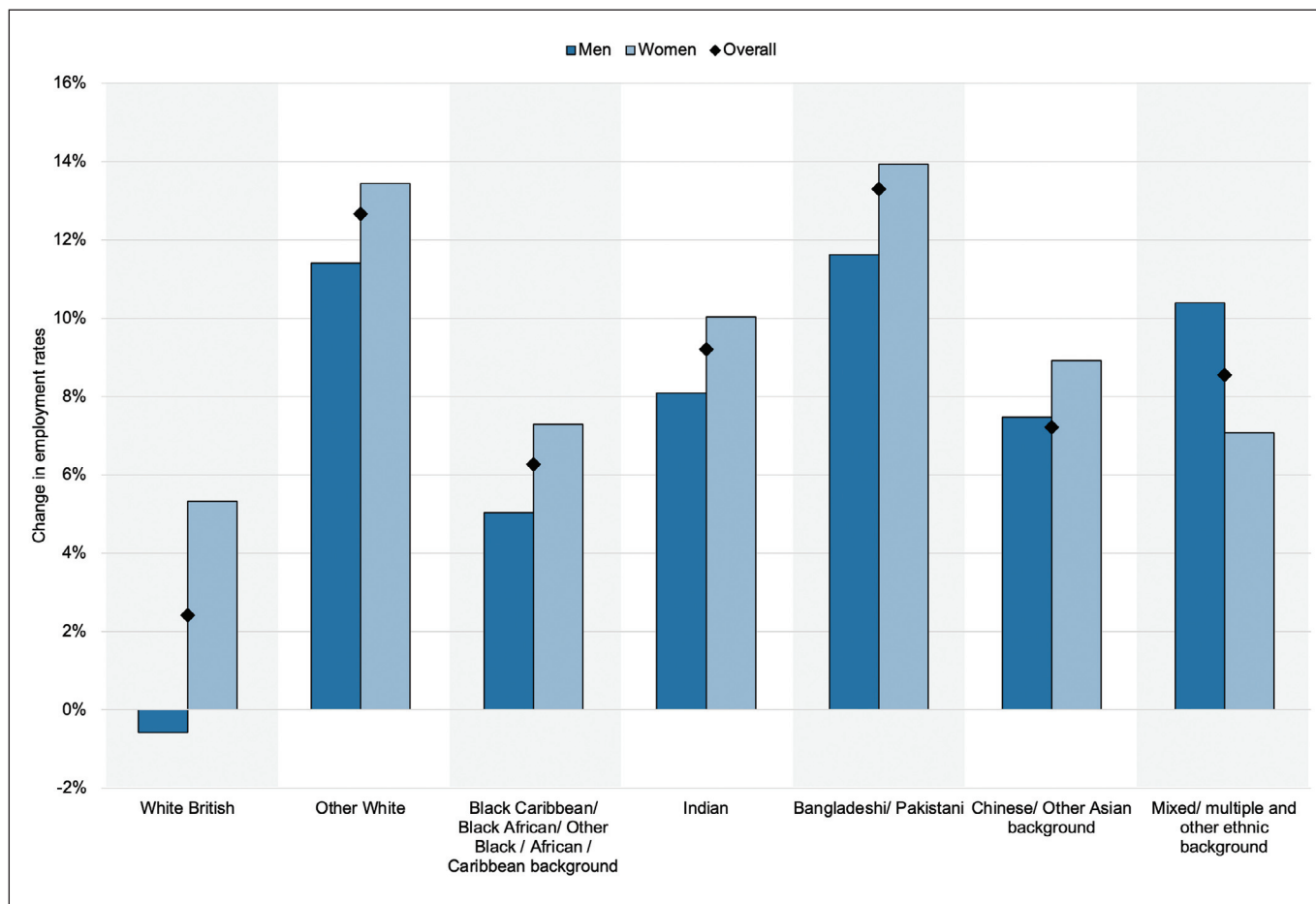
The largest difference for men, of 10 percentage points, is between the Black group* with an employment rate of 71% and the White British group with a rate of 81%. There is also a big difference (but in the opposite direction) between the Other White group (89%) and the White British group (81%) of eight percentage points.

The largest difference for women, of 36 percentage points, is between the Bangladeshi and Pakistani group with an employment rate of 38% and the White British group with a rate of 74%. Chinese and Other Asian women and women from the Mixed and Other ethnic background group also have much lower employment rates, at 60% and 58% respectively, than White British women.

The difference between employment rates for men and women in the same ethnic group is largest in the Bangladeshi and Pakistani group, at 35 percentage points, but is it also quite large for the Indian, Chinese, and Other Asian and Mixed and other ethnic groups.

Figure 2 shows the change in employment rates between 2002/03 to 2018/19 by gender and ethnic group. All ethnic groups have seen substantial increases in the employment rate for both men and women, apart from White British men. For all, apart from the Mixed and Other group, the growth has been greater for women than men.

Figure 2. The changes in employment rates from 2002/03 to 2018/19 for women, men and overall, by ethnic group



Source: NPI analysis of Labour Force Survey, data is a two-year average

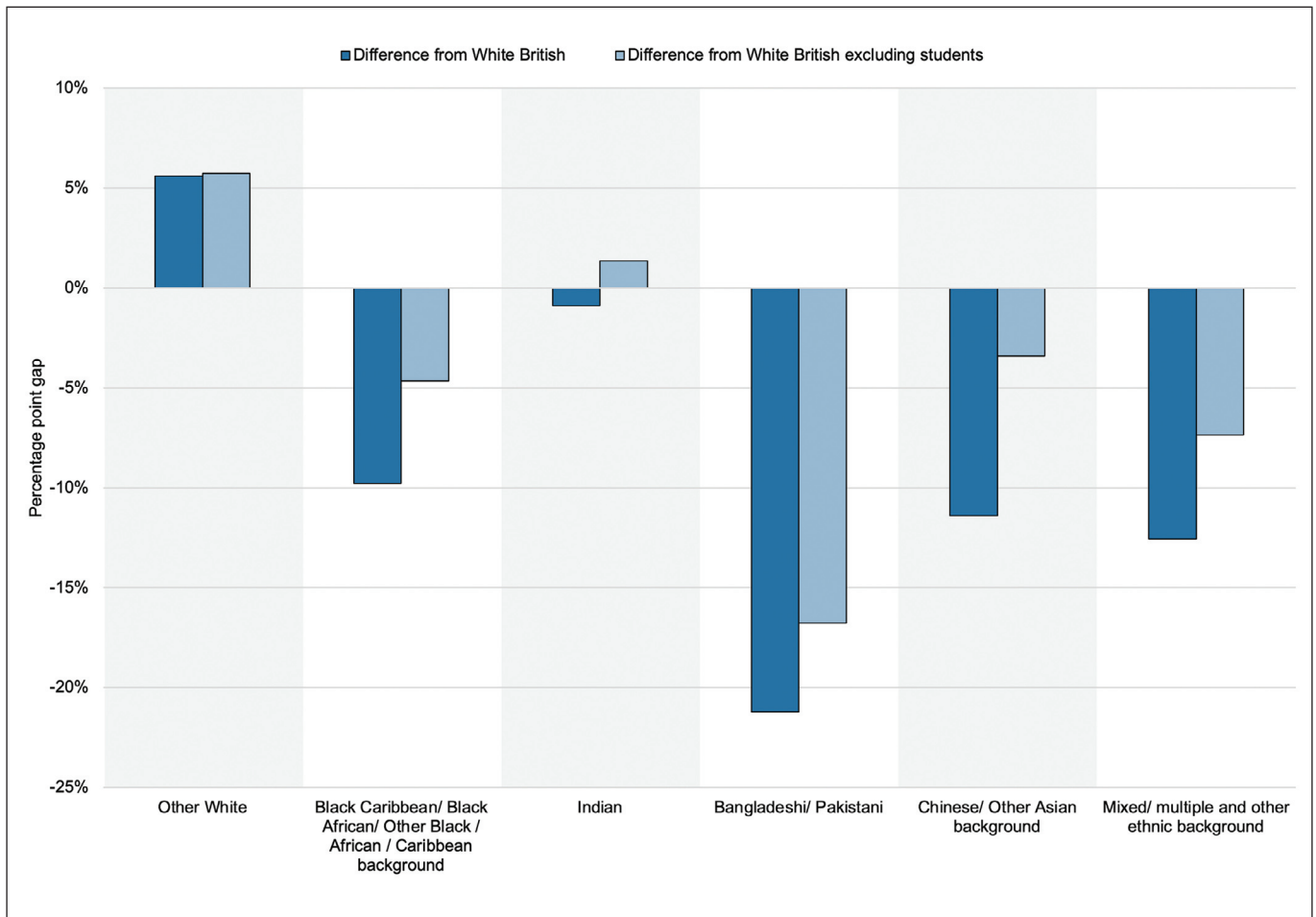
* The Black group refers to the Black Caribbean/ Black African/ Other Black/ African/ Caribbean background as shown in figure 1 throughout the text.

Although Bangladeshi and Pakistani communities remain the group with the lowest employment rates for both men and women, they have seen the greatest increases in employment and there has been a big increase in their employment rate.

One of the reasons why most BAME employment rates are lower than the White British rate is that a higher proportion are students (in turn partly reflecting a younger population). Figure 3 shows employment rates for each BAME group compared with the White British rate, first with and then without students. When this adjustment (to exclude students) is made, the gap with the White British employment rate falls, sometimes sharply.

The impact on the employment rate gap is biggest for the Chinese and Other Asian group (down by eight percentage points compared with White British) followed by the Black and the Mixed and Other groups (both down by five percentage points) and the Bangladeshi and Pakistani group (down by four points). After adjusting for students in this way, the Bangladeshi and Pakistani group is the only one whose employment rate gap compared with the White British group exceeds 10%.

Figure 3. Difference in employment rate between Black, Asian and minority ethnic groups and the White British group, including and excluding students, 2018/19



Source: NPI analysis of Labour Force Survey, data is a two-year average

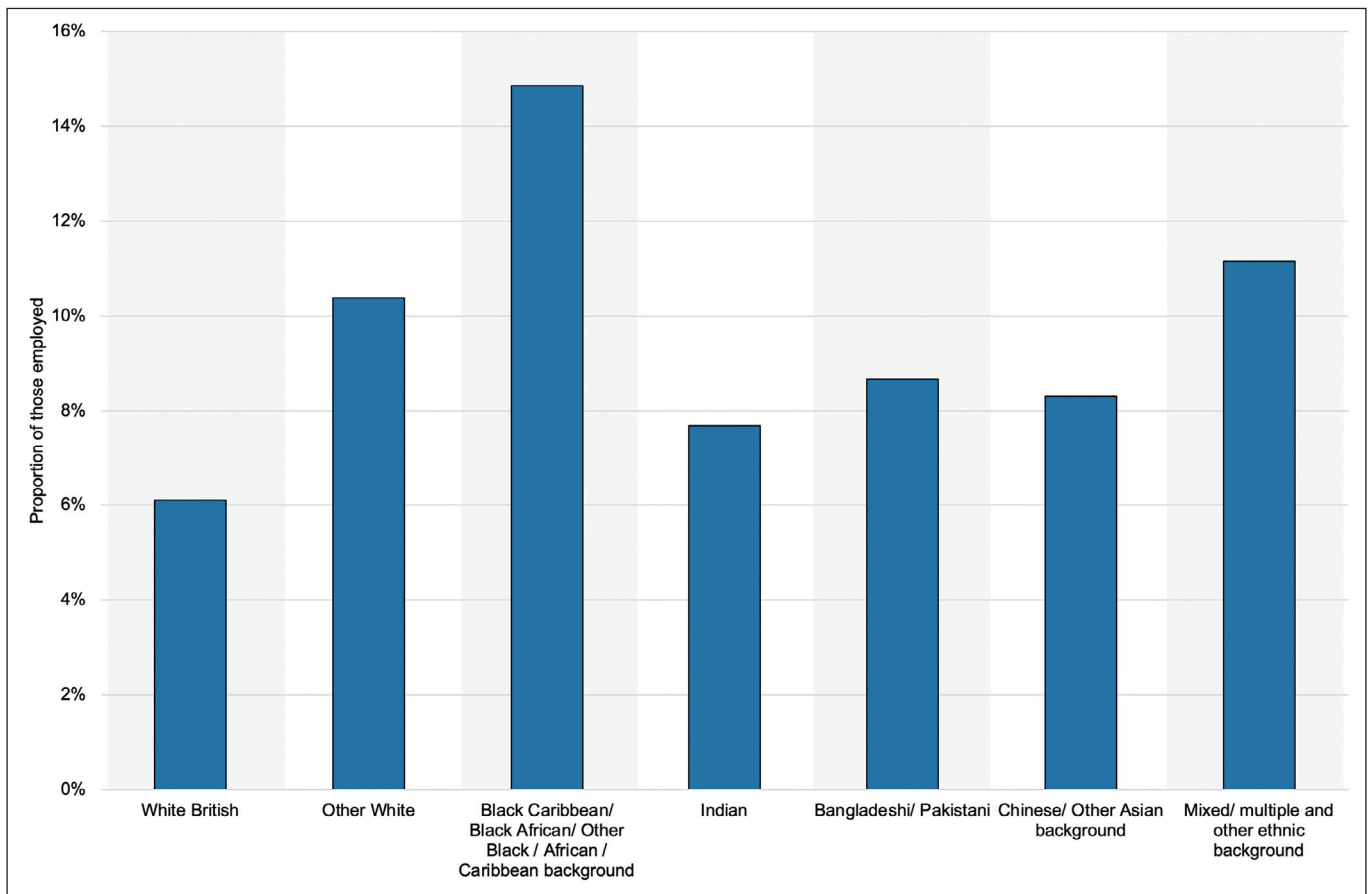
When students are excluded, there is also a large fall in the differences between the employment rates for younger adults (those under 35) between ethnic groups, the only groups with much lower rates than White British being the Black, Bangladeshi and Pakistani and Mixed and other ethnic groups.

Quality of employment: insecure work and occupational grouping

This section looks at the quality of employment for those who are employed. It covers ‘insecure employment’, which is defined as being on a zero hours contract, or where employment is not permanent and/or through an agency. It also covers occupation, used here as a proxy for low pay because direct evidence on the extent of low pay by ethnicity is not available.

Figure 4 shows the proportion of workers by ethnic group in insecure forms of employment. The White British group has the lowest proportion of workers in insecure work, at 6%, followed by those from an Indian, Chinese or other Asian background at 8%. By contrast, 15% of workers from a Black background are in insecure work.

Figure 4. Those in insecure work as a percentage of all those employed, by ethnic group, 2018/19

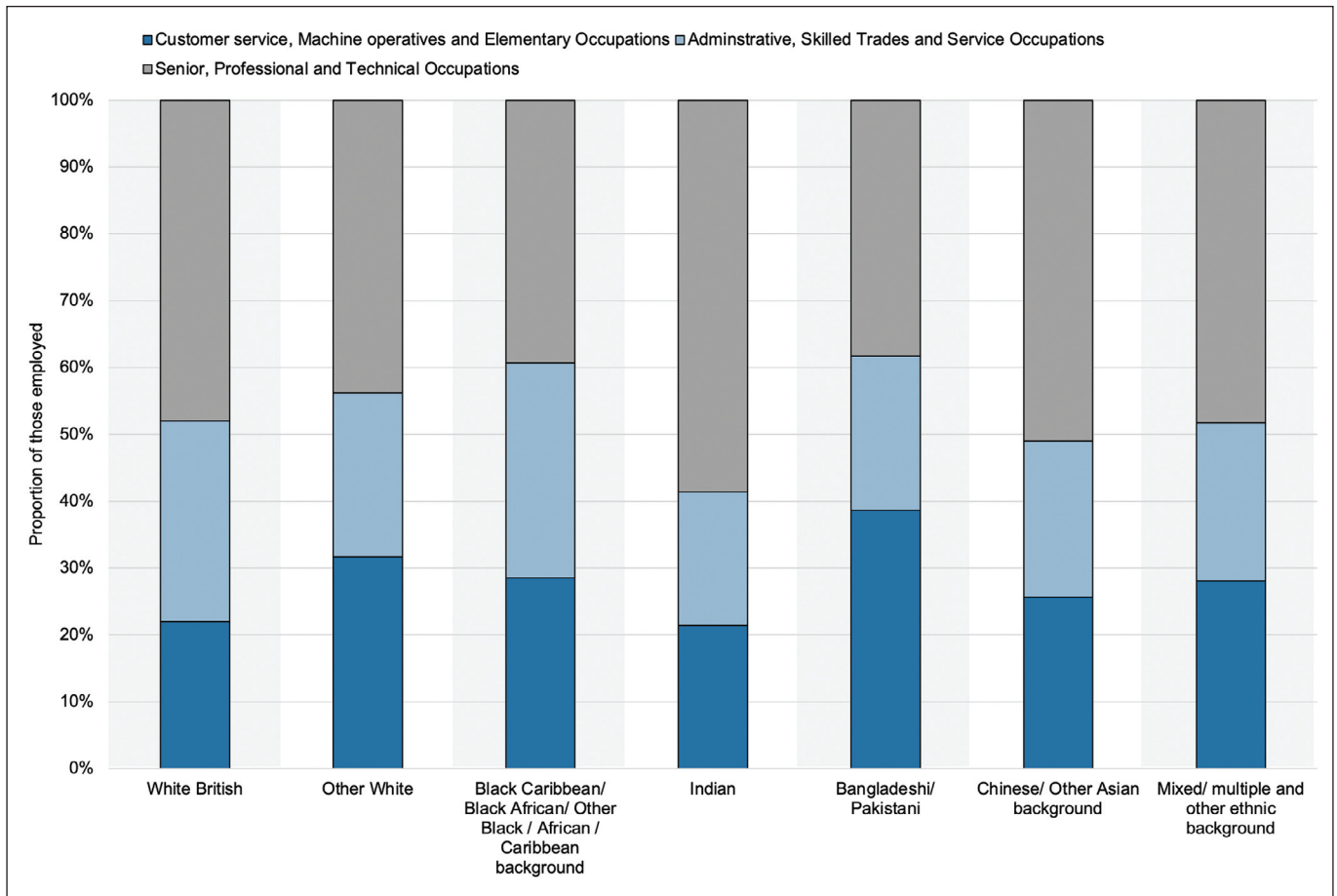


Source: NPI analysis of Labour Force Survey, data is a two-year average

Being in an insecure form of employment can be negative in itself, (if the person wants more permanent or reliable employment) but it is also associated with low pay. More than a third (36%) of temporary or casual work is low paid compared with just over a fifth (23%) of permanent work.

Figure 5 shows total employment by ethnicity, broken down into three occupational groupings based on the Standard Occupation Classification (SOC). The SOC groups jobs according to ‘skill level’, which is broadly the time required to learn how to do the job well (work-based training as well as formal qualifications). The three groupings are: customer service, plant and machine operatives and elementary occupations (requiring the lowest level of skills); administrative and secretarial, skilled trades and caring, leisure and other service occupations (requiring a good standard of general education or a substantial period of training or both); and directors and senior, professional and associate occupations (requiring a degree or equivalent, a high-level vocational qualification and/or a significant amount of knowledge and experience).

Figure 5. Occupational classification by ethnicity, 2018/19



Source: NPI analysis of Labour Force Survey, data is a two-year average

Figure 5 shows that workers from most BAME groups (apart from the Indian group) are more likely to be in a customer service, machine operative or elementary occupation compared with the White British group. This is especially true of Bangladeshi and Pakistani workers. At the other end of the occupation range, those in the Indian, Chinese and other Asian and Mixed or other ethnic groups are as, or more, likely to be in the director/senior, professional and associate occupations as those in the White British group. Those in the Black and Bangladeshi and Pakistani groups are much less likely to be in these occupations than those in the White British group.

These groups are also broadly aligned with pay rates, those in customer service, machine operatives and in elementary occupations having the lowest rates of pay while senior, professional and technical occupations have the highest rates of pay. Around 70% of those who are low paid are in the first occupational group.¹

In summary

The force of figures 1 to 3 is that when allowance is made for the number of students, some, but not all, BAME groups have markedly low rates of employment compared with the White British group. Although some gaps are still large, especially for Bangladeshi and Pakistani women, all gaps have narrowed and some have disappeared during the 20-year period in which the number of BAME employees in England more than doubled.

Figures 4 and 5 show that once in employment, all BAME groups are, in at least some respects, in lower quality employment than the White British group. The disadvantage compared with White British is least for the Indian group (which on some dimensions is better-placed than the White British group) and most for the Black, Bangladeshi and Pakistani, and Other White groups.

2. Factors behind inequalities

The first section looked at inequalities in the labour market between people from different ethnic groups in 2018/19 and over time. This section discusses some of the possible reasons that have been put forward by researchers and others to try to account for these inequalities. This section explores three themes, namely: some general observations on the labour market before Covid-19; unequal access to the labour market; and barriers to progression within employment.

The UK labour market pre-Covid-19

Immediately before the pandemic, the UK labour market had high levels of employment and low rates of unemployment and economic inactivity. Both unemployed and economically inactive people are working-age people who are out-of-work, but while unemployed people are looking for work (and are deemed 'active', along with those in work), those who are economically inactive are either not looking for work or unavailable to work. The main groups of economically inactive people of working-age are students, those looking after family and home, those who are sick and disabled and those described as 'discouraged' workers.

While full-time permanent work as an employee continued to make up the largest proportion of employment (63%), there has been a shift towards more flexible forms of working which in some cases have negatively impacted workers. There is also evidence of persistent under-employment meaning that people do not have the type or amount of employment that would suit them best.² More flexible working and under-employment have not impacted all workers equally. Those in 'insecure' forms of employment or self-employment are more likely to be low-paid. BAME workers (as well as women) in particular, are more likely to be low-paid or in insecure forms of work.³

There are two different types of barriers which prevent people from BAME groups participating fully in the labour market. The first is that they have unequal access to the labour market to begin with. The second is that once they do enter the labour market, progression within it is slower than their White counterparts.

Unequal labour market access

As discussed in the first section, the employment gap between BAME communities and the White British group has closed over time, but with variation by gender and by different ethnic group remaining.

The reasons for different levels of employment by BAME community vary, and there is no sole set of reasons which apply to all groups. Both BAME women and men are more likely to be unemployed than their White counterparts, even when qualifications are taken into account.⁴

There have been a number of studies that show that people from a BAME background need to send a much higher volume of applications to get a positive response from employers than a White British person.⁵ This implies that discrimination and racism continue to exclude BAME people from accessing the labour market, and the different levels of discrimination that different BAME groups face could contribute to their differing rates of employment.⁶ There is also a link between unemployment rates for BAME groups and recessions, with unemployment rates rising faster than the rate for the White majority during recessions, when there is a reduction in demand for labour.

A more pronounced 'scarring' effect of unemployment also exists for some BAME groups. This is when experiences of unemployment have longer-term consequences for the labour market outcomes of workers, as it can act as a negative signal to future employers and can lead to a loss of human capital – that is, the skills, education or other knowledge that people possess which are considered as economic assets. Bangladeshi and Black Caribbean men, as well as Pakistani and Black African women, experience greater scarring effects than their White peers.⁷ If people from a BAME background find it harder to enter the labour market because of discrimination and are more

likely to become unemployed during a recession, then a greater proportion of BAME workers will be negatively impacted by the long-term effect of unemployment.

Women remain disadvantaged in the labour market and are more likely to be low-paid, part-time (which is only negative if full-time work is wanted and as it is more likely to be low-paid) and in insecure types of employment.⁸ This means that BAME women face multiple disadvantages in the labour market both because they are women and because they are from a BAME background.

Research suggests women from South Asian groups (particularly Pakistani and Bangladeshi women) are more likely to be responsible for providing care (child and adult) in line with historical attitudes to gender roles.⁹ For some women, there are additional barriers in the form of a lack of English language and/or other skills that are valued in the labour market.¹⁰ Cuts to women only English language training as well as the sanction regime in Universal Credit (which can, for example, prevent women from going to courses to increase their employability because they will not actively be looking for work) both serve as a barrier to women gaining the skills they need to be viewed as employable.¹¹

Another group who are disadvantaged in the labour market are disabled people. Employment rates for disabled people in England are one third lower than they are for non-disabled people. This proportion is about the same for both White and BAME disabled people – that is, employment rates for disabled BAME people are lower than for disabled White people but only proportionally to the lower BAME employment rate overall.¹²

While the argument is not that everyone must be in work, for those who want to work or need to work, policies need to be put in place to remove any barriers that still exist, such as a lack of flexible and affordable childcare and the right training opportunities.

Barriers to progression

The previous section explored possible reasons that may explain why BAME people are more likely to be out of work. This section looks at the reasons that they are less likely to progress in the labour market.

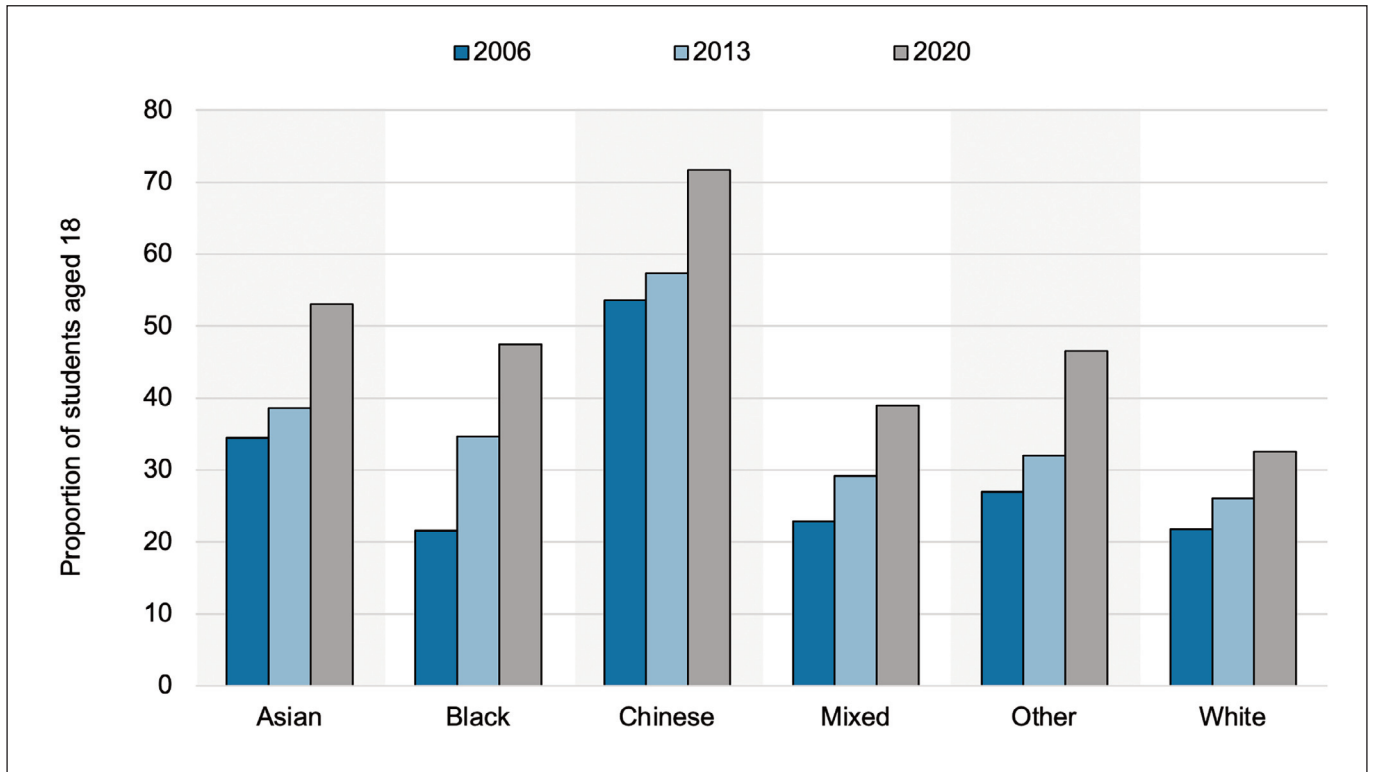
Inequalities in the labour market have not changed greatly despite the improved educational outcomes of most BAME groups.¹³ This means the answer to more and better employment for BAME communities is not just more and better education.

Indeed, figure 6 shows that since at least as long ago as 2006, a bigger proportion of state school pupils aged 18 from Asian, Chinese and Other backgrounds obtained a higher education place compared with White pupils. Since at least as long ago as 2013, that has also been true for pupils from Black and Mixed backgrounds too. Despite this, some groups – the Black, Bangladeshi and Pakistani and Mixed and other ethnic groups – still face lower levels of employment for those aged 16-34. Figure 6 only includes state school pupils aged 18 so it excludes students who leave education before then and those who are not in a state school.

Figure 7 shows, by ethnic group, the percentage of students going into sustained education, apprenticeships or employment after 16 to 18 study. This means it captures a larger number of young people than figure 6. It also includes a more detailed breakdown by ethnicity because the underlying data source is administrative rather than from a survey.

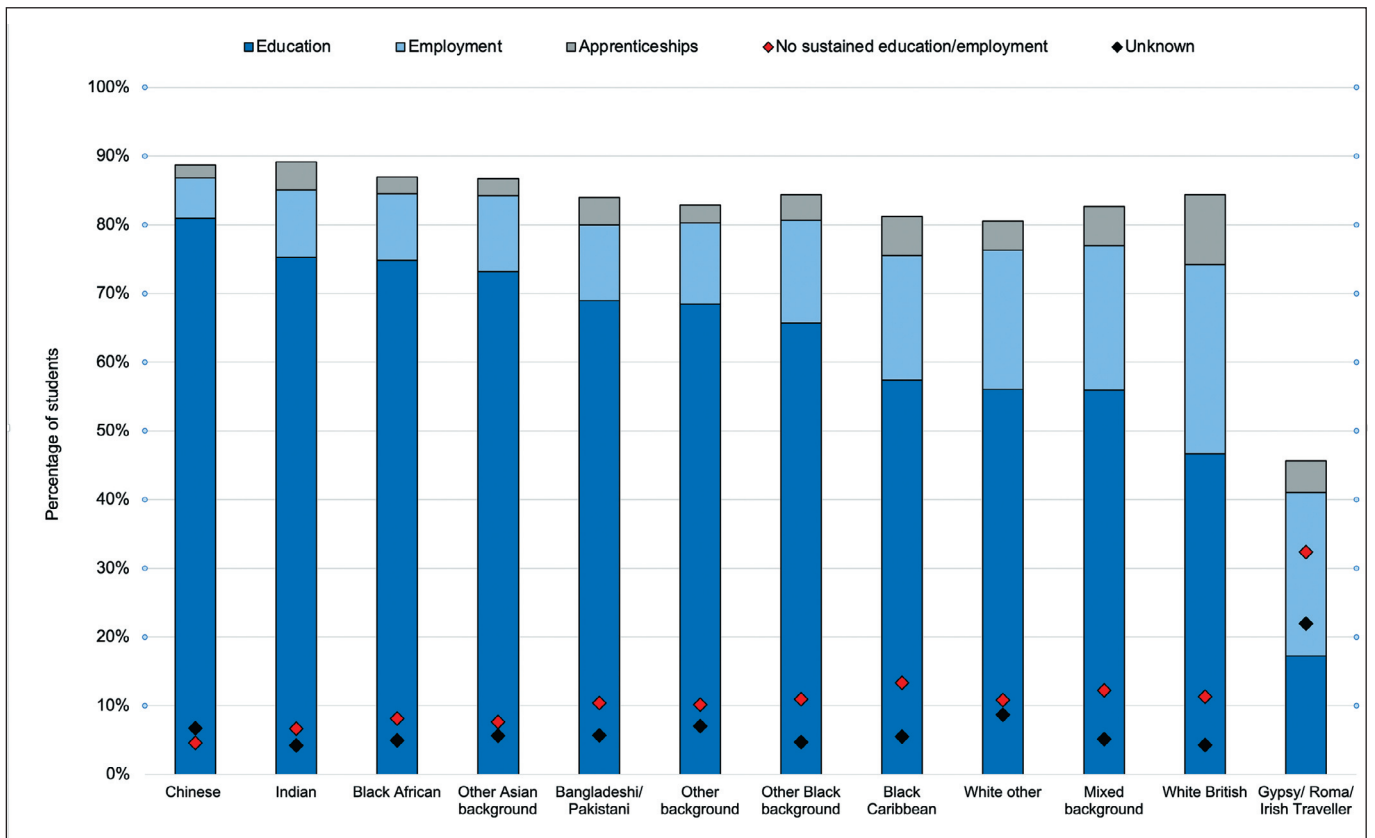
After 16 to 18 study (which includes A-levels) a higher proportion of BAME young people were in sustained education, apprenticeships or employment than White British young people, apart from the Black Caribbean group, the Other White group the mixed background group and the other background group, who were a few percentage points lower, and those from the Irish Traveller and Gypsy/Roma group, who were around half as likely to be in sustained education, apprenticeships or employment.

Figure 6. Percentage of state school pupils aged 18 getting a higher education place, by ethnicity over time.



Source: Ethnicity facts and figures from gov.uk, Entry rates into higher education.

Figure 7. Percentage of students going into sustained education, apprenticeships or employment after 16 to 18 study, by ethnicity



Source: Ethnicity facts and figures, gov.uk, Destination of students after 16 to 18 study, 2018

Taken together, figures 6 and 7 show that educational and after school outcomes for BAME young people continue to improve and are now as good as or better than outcomes for White or White British people. They also show that this varies by ethnic group, and there are still concerns about the level of young people out of education or employment from certain groups such as those from the Black Caribbean group and the Gypsy, Roma and Irish Traveller group.

There are a few other points of note. White British young people are much more likely to go into an apprenticeship than any other group, so BAME young people are under-represented in the apprenticeship system. Although BAME students are more likely to enter higher education, research has shown that they are less likely to attend one of the 24 Russell Group universities across the UK, which could have an impact on their employment outcomes.¹⁴

In summary

The impact on type of employment and progression, from the evidence discussed above, is not straightforward. More BAME students are entering higher education; however, a smaller proportion go to Russell group universities. There is also a great deal of variation in educational attainment between BAME groups themselves which makes a single narrative for all BAME students difficult. There is also the evidence showing that both individuals and employers/organisations think that BAME workers face discrimination. Taken together, it is clear that the barriers that prevent BAME people from progressing in the labour market in the same way that their White counterparts are not to be overcome simply by improving the educational qualifications earned by young BAME adults.

3. Impact of Covid-19

This section looks at research into groups that have been most affected by the pandemic to date. Although it is too soon to tell what the long-term impacts might be, there is some research which might help us think about what these might be, identify groups most at risk and find targeted solutions.

The pandemic has not affected everybody economically in the same way because peoples' employment and living situations are different – and in several respects, those from ethnic minorities are disproportionately disadvantaged.

Working-age Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Black African and Black Caribbean people are more likely to live in families where only one person is in paid work meaning the family is more dependent on that income – and on that one job.¹⁵

Men in all BAME groups are more likely than White British men to work in shut-down sectors which include hospitality, leisure and transport.* This difference is particularly pronounced for men from Bangladeshi and Pakistani groups, the former being due in large part to their concentration in the restaurant sector, while the latter is in large part due to their concentration in taxi-driving.¹⁶ With the exception of Other White, women in BAME groups are less likely than White British women to work in a shut-down sector.

In May 2020, just over 20% of employees had been furloughed, lost their job, or lost hours and pay due to Covid-19. This proportion was much higher for lower earners: 33% of the lowest paid fifth of employees had been furloughed, lost their job, or lost hours compared with 16% of the highest paid fifth. People from a BAME background are more likely to be low paid and so are more likely to have been furloughed, lost their job, or lost hours and pay due. For employees in insecure work the proportions who had been furloughed, lost their job, or lost hours and pay were higher than for those not in insecure work.¹⁷

People from a BAME background were more likely to be in a job with a high risk of infection (classified according to its proximity to other people and its exposure to disease). 56% of Bangladeshi workers, 54% of Black/African/ Caribbean and Black British workers, 47% of workers from the 'any other Asian background' group¹⁸, and 42% of Pakistani workers and workers from the 'other ethnic group' were in a high-risk occupation compared with 30% of White workers.¹⁹ Although this research was specifically for London, it is not unreasonable to expect that it applies more widely.

BAME workers as a group are both more at risk of working in a shut-down sector and more at risk of being in a key worker role with a heightened risk of exposure to Covid-19 at work. This does vary significantly between ethnic groups. For example, the proportion of employment earnings from key worker roles was 45% for Black African workers, 35% for Black Caribbean workers, 33% for Pakistani workers and 25% for White British workers. Just under 25% of employment earnings of Bangladeshi workers were from shut-down industries and 15% of Pakistani workers, compared with 10% of employment earnings for White British workers.²⁰

In summary

This section has made three points. First, some BAME groups are more likely to live in a family where only one person is in work, leaving them more dependent on that one income – and more exposed to the fact that the level of help a family can expect from the social security system is not enough to keep them out of poverty. Second, workers from some BAME groups are more at risk of working in a shut-down sector, meaning that the impact on BAME employment rates is especially dependent on how well those sectors recover. Third, workers from some BAME groups are more likely to be in a key worker role with a heightened risk of exposure to Covid-19. Leaving aside the direct health effects of Covid-19 (which are the subject of a different paper), many of these workers will have experienced a year with high levels of stress at work – even though their employment itself was likely protected.

* Shut-down sectors includes hospitality, leisure and transport. For example, restaurants, pubs, non-essential shops, arts and leisure facilities have been closed or had to offer a reduced service for the past year and air travel and some public transport has been reduced.

4. Conclusion

What stands out from both sections 1 and 2 is that there are questions about the ‘quality’ of employment that BAME people may find themselves in and the potential difficulty of moving into better employment – that is, employment which is more secure, better paid and with the possibility of progression.

All BAME groups are more likely to be in an insecure form of work than the White British majority, and for the Black group the proportion is more than double. All BAME groups apart from the Indian group are also over-represented in customer service, skilled trades and elementary occupations, which are more likely to be low-paid, compared with the White British group. Evidence around educational attainment does not really explain these disparities. Any simple answer about more BAME young people needing to get degrees misses the point that there are already more BAME 18-year-olds going on to higher education than White 18-year-olds.

This raises questions about the possible way forward, which are heightened by the way the Covid-19 pandemic has had an impact on some sectors but not others. Lower earners, those in insecure forms of work and those in certain sectors, where BAME workers are concentrated, have been more likely to lose their job or see a fall in their earnings. At the same time, BAME workers are over-represented in key worker roles where they have been more exposed to the virus and there are questions about whether the right policies have been put in place to protect them.

While there are a number of reviews and reports such as the Taylor review and the McGregor-Smith review which try to deal with some of these issues and offer a wide selection of policies, from companies having diverse interview panels to publishing publicly available data about employee ethnicity and pay band, these were written before the pandemic when employment level across the UK were high.^{21,22} Given what we know about BAME employment rates during a recession (especially for young people) and the very specific effects of certain sectors being shut-down, there could be an argument for much more targeted policies than those suggested to date.

Some questions for discussion

The pandemic is still ongoing and of unknown duration. It is accompanied by an economic recession which has been skewed in its effects, both between different employment sectors, between those who can and cannot work from at home, and between men and women and, for example, the care and support roles they take on as schools and formal services are closed down. This prompts a number of questions.

First, regarding employment rates and employment rate gaps:

1. The most positive aspect of the employment picture prior to the pandemic was the across-the-board reduction, between ethnic groups and between men and women, in employment rate gaps (figure 2). What are the most important things to do now to stop these gaps now widening sharply?
2. If workers from BAME groups are hit harder by job loss, what can be done to prevent the ‘scarring’ which in the past has left them likely to be unemployed for longer and at a greater disadvantage when looking for a new job?
3. There were calls long before the pandemic for policies to support BAME women’s employment (for example, funding good, affordable childcare and developing a ‘national care service’ alongside the NHS).²³ If the pandemic has increased the need for such policies, what can be done to reflect that?
4. With certain sectors in which BAME workers are disproportionately employed having been hit hard by the pandemic, what sector-specific measures – aimed either at the businesses or employees – can aid recovery?
5. The biggest employment rate gap prior to the pandemic concerned the still much lower rates for Bangladeshi and Pakistani women (figure 1). What is being done and what more can be done to address this?

Second, regarding the quality of employment and barriers to progression:

6. What impact have the higher rates of entry to higher education among BAME groups had on employment outcomes, what can be done now to improve that impact and what can be done to ensure that these higher rates persist?
7. What can be done to improve the employment prospects of those BAME young adults who are not going into higher education? Is an approach focused on specific BAME groups now required?
8. The McGregor-Smith Review made recommendations aimed at ensuring that people from BAME groups were not held back by discrimination or a lack of 'human capital'.²⁴ Which of these measures (broadly to do with promoting transparency, mentoring and sponsorship, and diversity) have become more important as a result of the pandemic and how can they now be advanced?

Third, regarding the health risks of employment revealed by the pandemic:

9. The pandemic has shown a new side to the precariousness of certain jobs, to do with heightened risks of infection, a shortage of proper protections and the fact that some jobs cannot be done from home. Most BAME groups are over-represented in some of these jobs. What sorts of general measures (to improve protection for all) and what sorts of specific ones (to improve protection for BAME workers) are needed?

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