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Collaborating with people from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic Backgrounds in Prison: Covid-19 and Beyond

**A Report of Findings from
Consultations in Custody**

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About the Project:

The Background

Belong works in prisons and the community to provide hope, rehabilitation and recovery for victims of crime. We are committed to inspiring change by providing long term, individualised responses to conflict and crime. We aim to increase justice within our criminal justice system.

People from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic backgrounds are more likely than others to be impacted by crime, face systemic disadvantages, suffer police brutality and experience discrimination within the criminal justice system¹. People from Black and Minority Ethnic backgrounds are significantly over represented in our prisons. Despite making up just 14% of the population, over 40% of young people in custody are from these backgrounds². Prisoners from Black and Minority Ethnic backgrounds are more likely to be held in segregation³, which reduces the likelihood that they will progress positively through the prison system. It also makes it less likely that they will access resources which support them to rehabilitate. This population in prison have been disproportionately impacted by Covid-19. Recent health data shows that people from Black and Minority Ethnic backgrounds are nearly twice as likely to die from the disease.

The families of prisoners from these backgrounds have been more severely financially impacted due to being more likely to work in sectors which are temporarily not operating, or in unstable jobs⁴.

So far, there is limited research specifically into the impact of Covid-19 on prisoners from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic backgrounds. However, the Public Health England review⁵ clearly sets out that the impact of Covid-19 on Black and Minority Ethnic communities has been more severe than on other communities. It states that this may be explained by several factors ranging from social and economic inequalities, racism, discrimination and stigma. It suggests that historical racism may make individuals from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic communities less likely to seek care when needed, or as NHS staff, to speak up when they have concerns around personal protective equipment (PPE) or increased risks.

Recent events, including the horrific killing of George Floyd, the Grenfell fire and Windrush Scandal, have contributed towards the strong current social movement, Black Lives Matter, which has coincided with Covid-19. In many cases for people from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic backgrounds, their experiences during Covid-19 may therefore have become synonymous with their experiences of racism.

Since the pandemic began, Belong staff and volunteers have continued to provide essential, tailored support directly to people in prison. This is in contrast to the majority of the sector, who had to change delivery services overnight, with face-to-face services largely coming to a halt⁶. Belong staff and volunteers experienced first-hand the response of prisoners to the unfolding events of Covid-19 and the Black Lives Matter movement. Overwhelmingly, our team reported that these events had provoked discussions amongst service users in prisons. However, in many instances prisoners were reporting frustration at being unable engage in activities such as signing petitions, peaceful protests, debates and conversations, or to be meaningfully involved in change. As a result, Belong secured funding to collaborate with people from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic backgrounds in prison, in order to further explore their experiences during the pandemic, what they need to move forward, and how they can play a central part in initiating change for the future. The project has been co-designed to leave a lasting legacy within the criminal justice sector, and to directly involve people from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic backgrounds in driving change forward.

Writing about Ethnicity

There are a number of terms in use to describe race and ethnicity, each with their own political and cultural connotations. Deciding on the right terminology to use to represent the participants in this consultation was not straightforward. In the wake of the Black Lives Matter movement, the acronym 'BAME' (Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic) has grown in prominence. 'BAME' is the acronym currently used by most mainstream services, including within the criminal justice system. However, it has also faced criticism, with some communities feeling that they were not represented by the phrase. No one word or phrase can describe the heritage and rich cultural history behind each individual who participated in this consultation- this is far from a homogenous group. In order to explore the views of people in prison further and to decide on a term, we conducted an impact assessment with participants and Belong's staff.

We explored the term "People of Colour", which some of Belong's staff felt was a more politicised term appropriate to the report and its context. However, in general participants in prison did not identify or engage with the term, finding it too closely linked to the term "coloured", now generally accepted as a racist term. These participants, who all define as Black, commented:

"I don't like it. I feel a link to racist people. It's too separating, too divisive."

"I don't mind it, but historically the word 'colour/coloured is an issue for many."

"Everyone is a colour. I don't like it."

We additionally explored the terms "Non-White", or "Ethnic Minority". There was a consensus that "Non-White" was too general, and has connotations of being 'othered'. "Ethnic Minorities" was ruled out, as we did not consult with White Ethnic Minorities, which would not have been clear through using the term.

During the impact assessment, it was clear that the Belong team and the majority of participants agreed that being specific about people's backgrounds, placing information in context where possible, was very important. Some questioned the need for a word to describe the overall group at all. One participant, who identifies as Black African, said:

"Differentiate by the country they came from is what I would do, but I get that is hard when you are trying to come up with a term to encompass everyone who is not White."

Some of our staff team felt that the acronym 'BAME' (Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic) was a useful term, due to its consistency with other mainstream organisations. However, other team members raised that the term was extremely limited.

People in prison also commented that the term 'BAME' was not specific enough to describe their unique identities, with one participant who identifies as Black African commenting:

"Everyone is from different backgrounds, so that's a bit generalised I feel."

Overall however, participants felt that the term Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic was the most acceptable option, with these participants, who all define as Black, commenting:

“I think its alright, but the ‘minority’ part may be taken negatively on its own.”

“It is what it is. Maybe there is other ways to describe it that are better, but i’m cool with it. It is maybe a little ‘boxed off!’”

“Doesn’t really bother me but I think for the majority it would be better if something more suitable was used.”

There was a consensus that none of the terms described participants and their identity accurately. Therefore, we have used the term ‘Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic’ in this report, and have, where possible, placed people’s experiences into context. We have chosen not to use the acronym, ‘BAME’ but the long form. We felt that this served to stay closer to individualising people’s experiences. We understand that this conversation needs to be explored further, and we will continue to explore alternatives with people in prison.

Consultation Stage

We undertook one-to-one collaboration meetings to consult with people from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic backgrounds who were serving prison sentences about their experiences of the pandemic, their reflections on the Black Lives Matter movement, their experiences of racism, and their needs in this context. Participants were credited for their time and ideas with funds paid into their prison account.

Originally, the project was designed to compensate participants at a rate equal to that of the London living wage (£10.85 per hour at the time of writing). Prison service authorities however, required participants to be paid in accordance with pay scales for prisoner employees. Participants were therefore compensated for their time at a rate of £2.85 to £3.00 per hour.

We chose one-to-one meetings as our primary method of consultation. These enabled us to mitigate the potential negative impacts of asking participants to reflect on traumatic experiences without support after doing so. Other methods, such as questionnaires, small groups or phone consultations, would have allowed for a larger number of participants, but would not have allowed practitioners to provide adequate follow-up support. We conducted consultations from within HMP The Mount and HMP/YOI Isis as opposed to from within all of the prisons we work in, due to differing Covid-19 restrictions across the prison estate at that time.

Through the consultations, we aimed to reduce feelings of helplessness and hopelessness, increase self-esteem and self-worth, and enable participants to speak out about their experiences. We hoped that this would help individuals avoid engaging in self-destructive behaviours, such as drug taking, self-harm, and violence, and feel more supported during periods of lockdown in prison.

A tailored consultation interview (see Annex A) was designed to gather information on the following areas: the impact of Covid-19 in prison, prisoner's perceptions about the disproportionate impact of the virus on people from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic backgrounds, participants' thoughts and feelings around the role of structural racism, and the impact of the killing of George Floyd and subsequent Black Lives Matter Protests. Participants were given the opportunity to share thoughts and feelings on instances of racism in the criminal justice system which may have personally impacted them. They were asked to provide comments on the efficacy and helpfulness of the support systems in place for people who report being on the receiving end of racism in prison. Finally and perhaps most importantly, the consultations aimed to discover what support and interventions participants felt would benefit them and to generate ideas for prisoner-led projects.

In order to standardise interviews, reduce interviewer bias and to support practitioners to speak confidentially about the topics, practitioners were provided with interview guidance (Annex B). Practitioners were also provided with access to clinical supervision and management support throughout the consultation process.

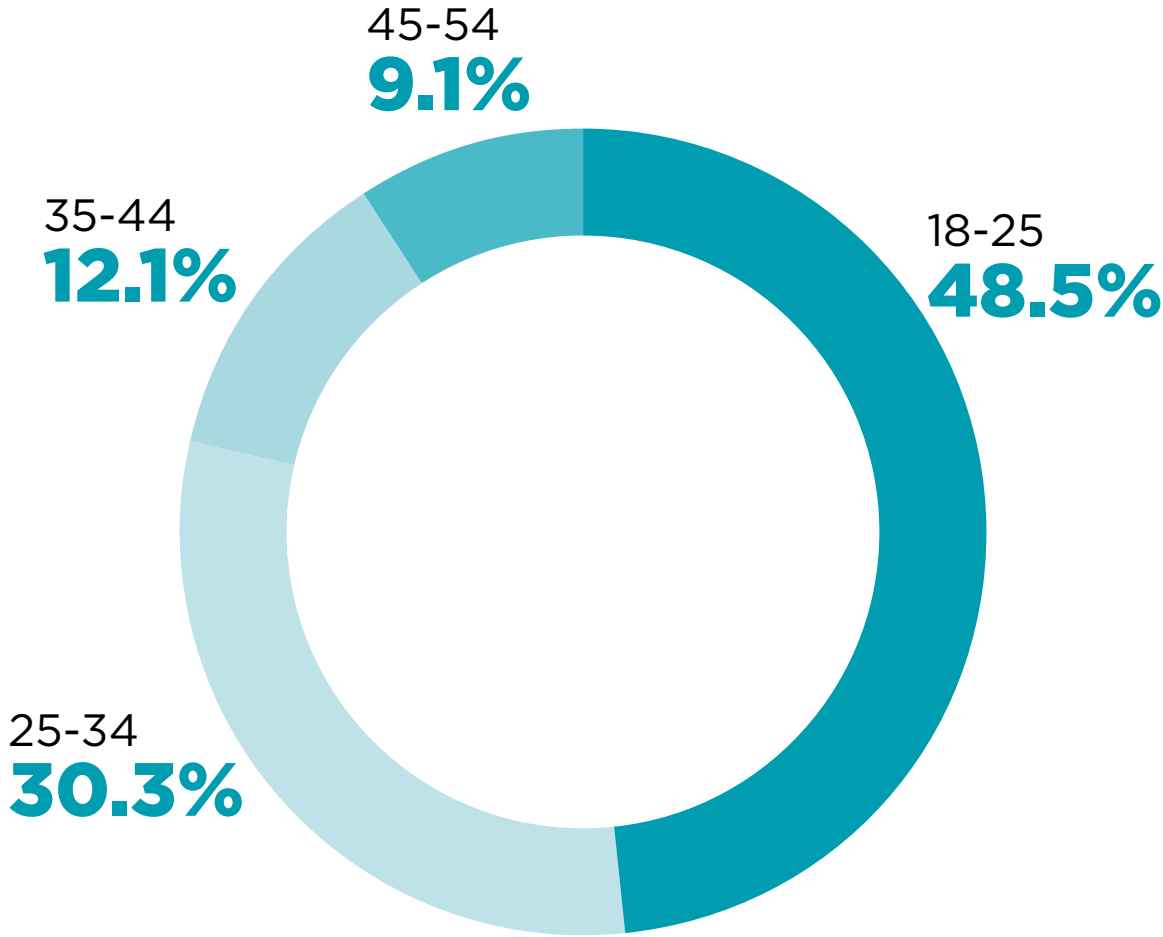
Participants were provided with a consent form (Annex C) detailing how Belong will use any information they provide as part of the consultation, giving them the opportunity to consent to this, or to decide not to consent. This included detail of how safeguarding disclosures would be dealt with, and who the interviewers were.

Our Participants

A total of 33 men between the ages of 18-54 participated. Almost half of our participants were between the age of 18-25.

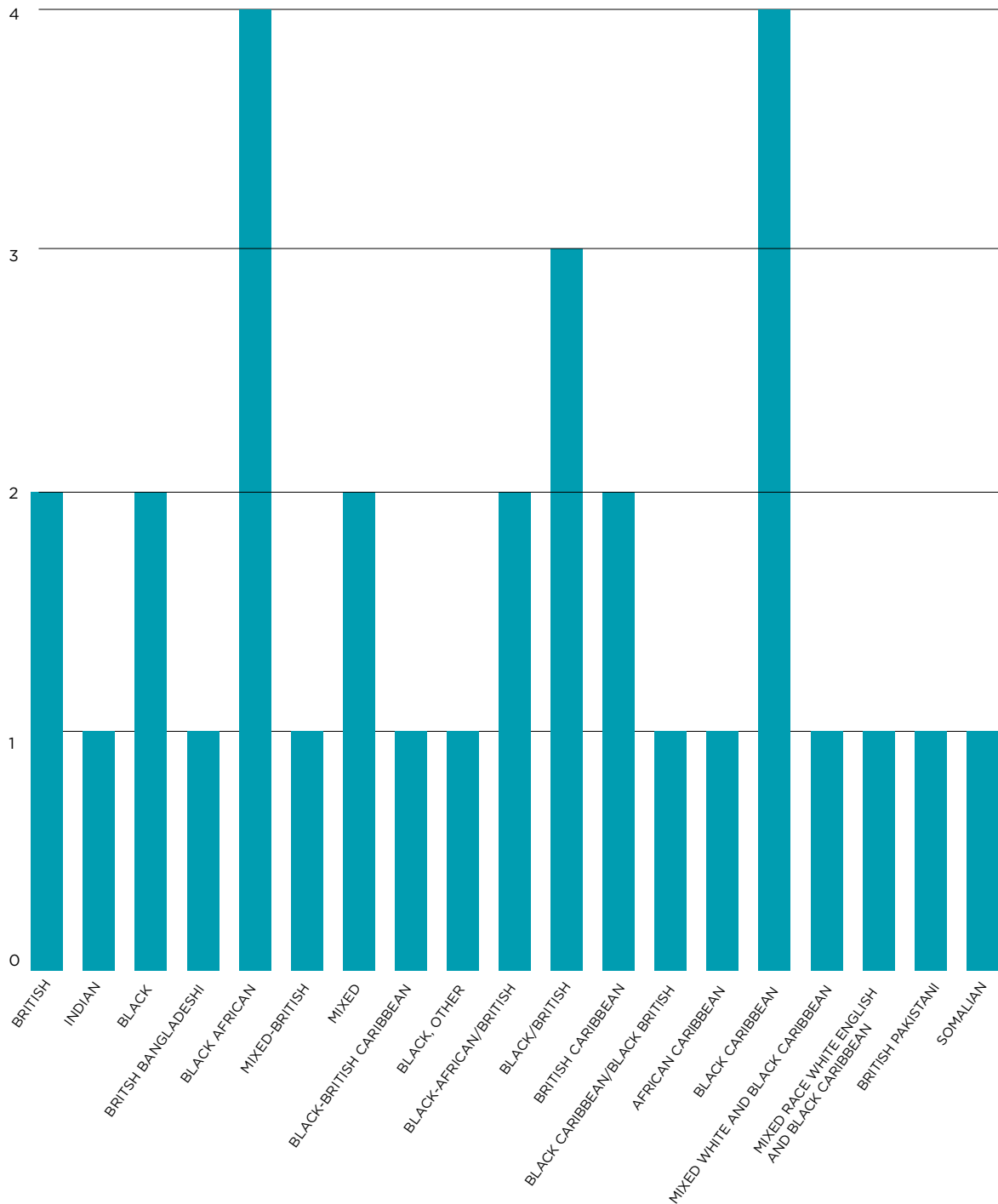
Participants were all men serving sentences at two prisons: HMP The Mount, a Category C prison in Hemel Hempstead, and HMP/YOI Isis, a men’s prison and Young Offender’s Institution in South East London. Belong already work from within these prisons delivering Restorative Justice approaches in response to anti-social behaviour and violence. In delivering these approaches we work closely with each prison’s Safer Custody and Offender Management departments, and research shows that these initiatives are successful in reducing incidences of violence and increasing the wellbeing of participants⁷. Approximately 30% of the men we interviewed were existing service users of Belong’s services, and the other 70% were identified through word-of-mouth via Belong practitioners and prison officers.

Although all those who were interviewed during the consultations identify as male, we aim to engage female people from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic backgrounds who are serving sentences in female prisons in similar consultations, when Covid-19 restrictions are eased.



Age Ranges of Participants

We asked participants to self-identify their ethnicities. Participants identified a range of different terminology they felt comfortable to be identified with, representing the diverse range of experiences within the set of 33 participants.

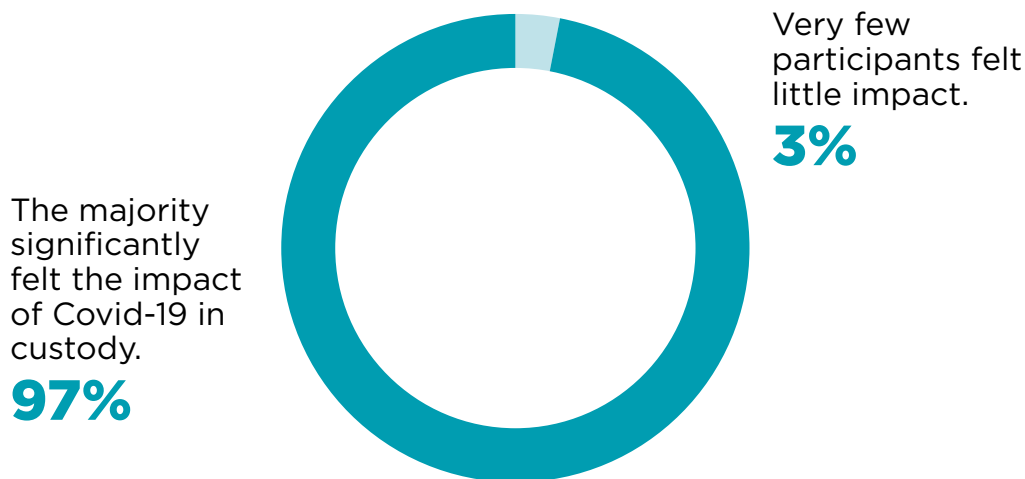


COVID-19 in Prison

The 'exceptional regime management plan' was introduced in all prisons on 24th March 2020, shortly after national lockdown began in the community. Under coronavirus restrictions, prisoners were held in their cells for up to 23 and a half hours a day, and time out of cell was reduced to 30-minutes. Face-to-face family and legal visits stopped; classrooms and workshops closed; offending behaviour programmes and sentence planning placed on hold; and release on temporary licence almost entirely suspended⁸. Prison transfers were put on hold, and new arrivals were required to quarantine for 14 days. The Howard League emphasise the severity of the current prison regime, stating that "conditions are consistent with, or very close to, international definitions of solitary confinement (22 hours or more alone each day)"⁹. Where in the community some lockdown restrictions were eased in June 2020, restrictions in prisons lasted longer, and in many, are yet to be unwound. The Ministry of Justice cite the need for tighter restrictions in prison as necessary to limit the spread of the virus while maintaining the core functions of these vital parts of the justice system.

The majority of participants indicated that they had significantly felt the impact of Covid-19 and the subsequent lockdown and restrictions in prison. Many referenced the long hours of being in their cells with little or no support, and a lack of activities and education to keep them stimulated.

The closing of social visits and isolation from friends and family, for a period of time, was spoken of as something particularly challenging.



One participant, who identifies as 'Mixed British' said:

"[it has made me feel] that I want to be closer to my family; i.e. spend more time with my Mum. She has lost a brother and a sister this year and another brother last year."

Another participant, who identified as 'Mixed Race', said:

"[It was] stressful to start. [I've] not been involved in a lockdown in prison. My son was born on the 7th April so [there were] no visits, no contact and bonding etc."

Participants expressed feelings of confusion and stated that they would have benefited from additional information and accessible explanations to better understand what has been happening. Some shared fears and worries for their families out in the community and some shared news of bereavements they had experienced.

“In prison you don’t get things explained to you, you have to get it from the news so my experience has just been lockdown in my cell, no contact with family and not much information.”

“it has made me think about my family, people are losing their family - your people, your friends , anyone can catch it, it doesn’t have a gender, a race, [it] could just take your friends [and] family members it’s scary.”

“...My family are ok but I try not to think too hard about them, as it worries me.”

“For a moment there was a sense of mourning during it. My Nan passed away at the early stages, I’m not that close to her but [it was] hard because [I] knew the funeral wouldn’t be able to happen and [I was] concerned about other people like my dad and stuff.”

An issue of inequality regarding the distribution of jobs within the prisons was referenced by men who took part in the consultation interviews. Many participants stated that in their experience, jobs were more often given to prisoners from white ethnicities despite prisoners from other ethnicities being suitably qualified for these jobs. It was expressed that prisoners entrusted with jobs around the prison would likely get more time out of their cells to complete their employment tasks. This structural inequality relating to the distribution of jobs, if it is founded, could have made the experience of Covid-19 restrictions in prison more challenging for people from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic backgrounds who are serving prison sentences.

Participants highlighted the impact the prolonged lockdown had on their physical and mental health; whilst some shared positive coping strategies, others reflected the harsh reality of how difficult it has been. One participant, who identifies as Black African, described the impact of lockdown on their life:

“It [has] been bad really, changed the whole of my normality I was used to. The lockdown has really affected me, you can’t do normal things like go to the gym, meet people, talk to people, no more visits. It’s hard.”

Other participants commented:

“I’m feeling dread over people dying/losing someone”

“Being locked up everyone has put on weight, so I’ve been trying not to eat too much only thing in jail you’ve got is to be mentally/physically fit and how to speak to people and how you look especially if you’ve been in a long time like me- 8 years.”

“... I do a lot of reading so it keeps me busy. It does affect everyone but it’s okay but 23 hour bang up is a long time. I’m blessed I have a hi-fi and the radio, books but lots of people don’t have nothing but a TV.”

“It has helped me in some ways be more patient (although I’ve had my moments), check myself and remember my self-worth.”

When asked about the support that was offered to them, a common response from participants included mention of additional phone credit provided by the prison service in positive terms.

This additional phone credit enabled participants to make more calls to their friends and families. Unfortunately, many participants said that this support had limitations, and talked about the need to be able to talk regularly to someone in person whilst serving a prison sentence.

One participant, who identifies as British Bangladeshi, said:

“£5 pin credit, do you know how much that is? It’s an hours worth of phone calls. It’s an hour for 24 hours times 7 that’s nothing, thanks very much. They act like they’re giving us the world. When you ask to drop money from privates to spends so you can put more on the phone they say no, they just don’t let you drop down.”

Some participants commented on a perceived disparity between lockdown measures in the community, and the regime within the prisons, particularly in relation to prisoners having no access to indoor prison gyms, whilst after June community gyms were re-opened.

One participant, who identifies as Black African, commented:

“The prison need to realise we’ve been in lockdown a long time and need to open education and the gym. In the community things have changed but inside nothing has changed recently and it’s not good for people. It’s not good for inmates.”

Additional Vulnerability to COVID-19

The majority (78.7%) of participants were aware of the additional vulnerability to Covid-19 for people from Black and Minority Ethnic backgrounds, most stating they had heard about it on the news. Many referenced having thought about the reasons why this additional vulnerability exists.

Some participants stated that they had not heard of research suggesting that people from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic backgrounds have an additional vulnerability to coronavirus; some had heard of the research but felt that there was little evidence to suggest that it was true, and some felt they did not have enough information in order to make a judgement about this.

One participant, who identified as Black Caribbean/Black British, said:

“No I don’t like to blame things without knowing facts it’s just opinion. I don’t believe what the media say....”

Another participant, who identifies as Black, said:

“The government were saying BAME people are dying because of where they live. That shouldn’t have anything to do with it. I can’t see a Black person going to hospital and getting worse treatment than a White person, they are treated equally, if that was the case BAME people would be dying for a long time so I disagree with that, I don’t think if they live in a poorer background they are going to get coronavirus and gonna die. My kids are not well to do, they are from an ordinary household and they’re fine. I think it’s just portraying Black people as hard done by and gonna die by coronavirus and where they live”

Many participants explored their own ideas about the possible contributing factors. General inequality and a lack of support was as a dominant theme along with the type of work being named as another important consideration. The below participant, who identifies as Mixed White/Caribbean, thought:

“When we first spoke about this, I was thinking about everything in prison and what happens mirrors society, I’ve been in prison nearly 13 years. It’s a long-term problem, I was born in the 1960s and I’ve seen it when it was really bad times. I often have this conversation with my son comparing to what it was like in the 60s/70s and it’s so much better. Racism will always be there on all sides. It’s bad education, it’s learnt at a young age.”

Inadequate housing leading to sanitation issues was frequently mentioned, along with genetics, underlying health issues and poverty, which were all stated often as other contributing factors.

“Multicultural people everyone I know lives on council estates, all close to each other [so] if one person gets it [everyone does]. Stairs, lifts don’t get cleaned. Upper class people normally White people got a house where there’s space. My area is where Grenfell is ...”

The lack of employment opportunities available to their own communities was explored by participants. Stories were shared of qualified professionals unable to secure relevant employment and the prevalence of people from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic backgrounds working in frontline or low paid jobs was highlighted. A loss of hope was reflected and linked with low employment opportunities and an unequal society. Perceptions of little or no support for Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic Communities.

“To be honest the majority of Black people and Asian people we don’t really get any good jobs so it’s like bus drivers, train drivers and some Black people in NHS it’s not really what we should do for a job end of the day it’s paying the bills. To be honest it’s just the way the government is, say for instance I come out of jail and go to apply for a job, it’s harder for a Black person that’s come out of jail to get a job, you have to declare you have a criminal record so when you go for interviews the first thing is they look at criminal record and look down their nose at you.”

“I think it is down to the jobs they do, but this is because they cannot get things like office jobs. They have the qualifications but they don’t get them. I can’t say that it is because of them being Black or African and they don’t say that when they don’t get the job, but the fact is there are much less people from this background in jobs like that and some people think it is because of their background.”



**Inadequate
Housing**



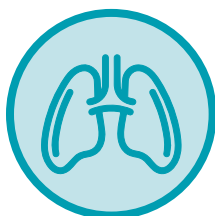
Genetics



**Type of work/
Front Line Jobs**



**General
Inequality**



**Underlying
Health
Conditions**



Poverty

The Killing of George Floyd

On 25th May 2020, George Floyd was horrifically killed in the US. The first solidarity protests in the UK in London occurred on 28th May 2020, shortly after research had been released stating that Covid-19 had a disproportionate impact on communities of colour¹⁰. Participants were invited to share their thoughts and feelings regarding the killing of George Floyd and subsequent Black Lives Matter protests.

Many participants shared that they had felt strongly impacted. Sadly some also reflected on why this horrific incident did not come as a surprise but felt familiar to them.

“[I felt it was] very upsetting, [I felt] resentful, disappointed, frustrated. It’s good that things are being brought to the forefront. Things are the way they are because this is how ‘they’ want it to be.”

“I felt like crying and was very upset. That could have been my brother who was killed like that. In a way they reacted how they felt appropriate, he was to everyone; a father, or brother, friend.”

“It was dread. I watched the video and wondered why no one did anything who was nearby. The policeman looked comfortable with what he was doing...”

Participants were open in their sharing of their thoughts on police brutality, institutional racism and negative experiences they had unfortunately had. These are shared further in the section “Personal Experiences”.

In asking whether participants had conversations with peers or professionals about this topic, we found that 57% of people had. Notably, while only 9% of men took part in something to respond or show solidarity with the large scale protests happening globally, 69% of participants said that there was a way in which they would have liked to respond. Some participants reflected that if they were in the community they would have liked to have attended peaceful protests along with their friends and family; some reflected that they would have appreciated the opportunity in prison to demonstrate their solidarity with the cause, and to have the opportunity to talk and share their thoughts and feelings.

57%

of participants had conversations with peers or professionals related to the killing of George Floyd

69%

of participants expressed that they would have liked to respond or show solidarity in some way

9%

of participants did respond in some way

Ways in which participants did respond included one creating a personal tribute to add to his wall, another giving a talk on Black Lives Matter in the prison's chapel and another staging a peaceful protest on the exercise yard.

Overwhelmingly, participants reported a range of creative ways in which they wanted to respond peacefully:

“[I] had a recording studio outside and I think maybe I would have got some guys to write some music on the cause. We wrote a song in here called ‘No one’s above the law’ in regards to Mark Duggan. The guy got signed by Sony we didn’t put it out because it was really, really deep and put the blame on the Police. I think me personally I would have penned a track. My voice compared to thousands and thousands of people wouldn’t make a difference though.”

“I would have gone to the protest ya know if I was outside.”

“Yes. I would have liked to have got my feelings / words onto paper and put it out there.”

“If I was outside the only thing I could really do was take part in peaceful protests which I would have done, and write articles in the media. I would also have wanted to take part in public debates if I could.”

Conversations about this topic highlighted an importance, expressed by participants, of standing in solidarity and perhaps collectively processing the trauma their communities have experienced:

“Following his murder I saw more people come together (White and Black). It made me feel good to see overall. The unity of it all made me feel good. I’ve never seen that kind of thing before – but I have remembered being angry in the past due to other Black people being harmed.”

However, an underlying theme was an awareness of the risk involved, of being reprimanded either in prison or in the community for being involved in a protest of any kind. These participants describe their fears around being re-imprisoned:

“No way, I hear about people, like people on licence going to these rallies it’s ludicrous they’re putting themselves in a ridiculous position.”

One participant described the strength of emotion they felt at the time, and the dissonance between wanting to act, but not exactly knowing how:

“At the time I could not understand what was going on and why. I was shocked and felt sick by the video of him being killed. I wanted to act / to riot, to do something at the time. I didn’t agree though overall with what some were doing off the back of it, there are other ways to show support.”

Personal Experiences

When asked whether they thought about racism in their day to day lives, 60% of participants indicated holding an awareness of racism. Participants shared how this impacted them, and talked about discriminatory experiences which made them hold this awareness.

“[I] kept being asked if I had drugs to sell, continually told I couldn’t keep up with the work and there were clearly others worse than me”

“It’s relevant isn’t it?”

“...their attitude towards you, the way they speak to you, all it comes down to is they are either racist or just see you as a criminal or both. You will never know..

“The way they look at you, like if I go to a shop people follow you around like security etc.”

“Constant rejection for no other reason than my name.”

“...being mixed race prompts me to often think about this.”

Practitioners proceeded to ask participants whether they had ever felt unfairly treated or discriminated against due to their race or ethnicity, in the community or in prison. An overwhelming 97% said they had. Participants shared experiences which ranged from overt name calling, covert racial bias often relating to not being afforded the same opportunities as a white person, with some also touching on themes of institutional racism within the police and the prison environment. The rate of ‘stop and search’ used by the police on people from Black and Minority Ethnic backgrounds was talked about as well as perceived discrimination in the awarding of jobs and positions of responsibility within the prison environment.

Participants were also honest in exploring their own feelings of internalised racism and the impact this has on them and their own communities. 79% of participants said they had felt stereotyped or that generalisations had been made about them based on their race or ethnicity, and a high proportion indicated that they had felt this way in relation to the criminal justice system. Sadly 85% of participants said they would not feel comfortable or confident using the existing systems in place to deal with complaints of racism. When reflecting on this most participants referred to a mistrust in the complaints systems in place in prison.

97%

of participants said they had felt discriminated against due to their race or ethnicity

79%

of participants said they had felt stereotyped or that generalisations had been made about them due to their race or ethnicity

85%

of participants said they would not feel comfortable or confident in using the existing systems in place to deal with formal complaints of racism

Some participants cited a perceived institutional corruption as the reason for this mistrust. These participants, who identify as Black Caribbean, said:

“If you put in a DIRF [Discrimination Incident Reporting Form] all the staff know who wrote it. Time in the past wrote the DIRF certain wings were locked down, can’t go to the other side of the wing where you put the forms had to give to staff members to put in the box. Same staff you’re writing a DIRF about is taking it to the box. Friend wrote a DIRF about an Officer. The other day she incited something, she should have been sacked...”

“If I write a DIRF by myself, that’s me, they won’t’ do nothing but if multiple people write a DIRF they’ll act on it. Me personally I just think they look after each other and don’t care about prisoners. Certain Govs do but a majority they don’t care, in my opinion.

Whilst others suggested that it may hinder their progress within the prison system:

“Doing a life sentence you want to keep under the radar.”

Another participant echoed this:

“You just put the spotlight on yourself... I just want to do my time and go home...”

Another participant, who identifies as Black Caribbean, suggested that it would not be taken seriously:

“I don’t think it really does anything”.

Impact on Communities

When asked about how these experiences of discrimination and racism may impact on communities of people from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic backgrounds, 93% of participants had something to say about what they felt the effect was. Thoughts were shared on how communities subsequently become low in confidence and self-esteem. Feelings of anger and isolation were spoken of, with a pervasive mistrust being reflected upon. This was spoken about in terms of confusion and mistrust in each other, creating divisions and tensions in communities, and mistrust in the systems which are supposed to provide a function of keeping people safe, like the police. Reflections on how experiences of discrimination make people want to push back were shared, particularly the impact on young men, on how it can provoke more rebellion, violence and aggression, and cause some to become the generalisations they were deemed to be.

“I think it would make them feel upset and sad. I think the communities feel a bit isolated from others.”

“It lowers your self-esteem you lose confidence in things that you do and lose trust in people around you.”

“I think you just find yourself fooling yourself into thinking that you don’t really want those jobs so feel like it’s your choice but really it affects you but it’s like a defence mechanism so you don’t think about it too much. .”

“People eventually succumb to a degree and behave the way they have constantly been told to behave.”

“Makes everybody angrier, more rebellious against the system.

It affects people’s mental health and day to day life and isolates people...”

“I think it brings people down – they see things going on and question themselves...”

“...weakens you as a person; your prospects, and makes you think more about things that hinder you or drag you down.”

“It wears you down.”

“They might not like to socialise with other people that aren’t Black or be friends with someone. Or might not apply for certain jobs, want to live in a certain area etc. it affects people differently.”

What would you say....

Feedback from participants on any advice they would give to someone who may have experienced racial discrimination was filled with empathy, support and guidance.

Some participants had practical advice that they wanted to offer people who had experiences racial discrimination in prison, although these suggestions were often followed up with a caveat or lack of trust that this would produce the desired result:

“... would say talk to the SO [senior officer] for real, put in Comp-¹[complaint form], that DIRF you mentioned until you get the right answer. Keep the paper trail. The only thing you can do. Officers have gang shit going on, they want to show loyalty to each other even if someone's done something wrong. They can get spiteful so you have to do it the right way or go to a Governor if you see one and keep the paperwork fluent.”

“I would tell them to go through the DIRF but I'd be there to watch the process and support and encourage them to make sure it is being done”

Others wanted to be part of the solution, such as one participant who said:

“If it was on the wing, I would ask who it was and we could go to them and have a discussion, ask what's wrong, why are you being racist, try and be diplomatic, try and get to the root of it.”

The majority of participants had words of advice and support they wanted to offer:

“I ignore it. Work harder to prove them wrong. Use it to motivate yourself.”

“Make yourself heard – stick with it and don't let people change your beliefs and be strong with this decision.”

“Don't have it, don't let them do it. Be Black and proud.”

“Keep calm, be humble, don't show weakness and try and laugh it off. If you can hold it-you can turn it against them and maybe help them to change.”

“I'd say stand up for yourself and fight back against them”

“Don't keep it in. Don't bottle it up. Do something about it - maybe therapy, talking or whatever helps you.”

“I would listen and help where I could.”

“Get it off your chest.”

“Follow it up and talk to someone. Don’t let it go or let them get away with it”

“Talk about it, express yourself to people you trust.”

“The person that’s perpetrated this, they are not your teacher. Don’t be like them and start harbouring or resenting like that person. Then all you’ve done is emulated that person so inadvertently they’ve become your teacher. It doesn’t take two wrongs to make a right there’s always a better way to deal with it. They don’t even probably know why they’re being racist or where it comes from so don’t let them have power over you.”

“Stand up for your beliefs. and speak up. Don’t just put up with or take it just to get something or get somewhere.”

“Don’t believe what they say. Don’t let it affect you and do what you want to do in life.”

“Try to find the best people to talk to or who are the most supportive.”

“Remember your self-worth.”

“Don’t take it personal because it’s their view only, as a whole.”

“Other people’s opinions shouldn’t change how you think or determine what you are, can be, or what you believe in.”

“Do what you have to do and get on with your life. Success is the greatest revenge..”

“I would be able to support them emotionally (give them a space to talk) and would encourage them to seek some help.”

“If you’re on the street, the best advice is to ignore it.”

“Distance yourself from that kind of person. Also remember that not everyone is like that.”

“Don’t react, keep yourself to yourself, bite your tongue.”

“Stay strong and keep your head up. Go for what you want and don’t quit.”

We asked participants what they would say if they had an opportunity to speak with someone who had racist or discriminatory views. Participants expressed a desire to understand why someone may have these views. There was an acknowledgement of how difficult it can be to have such conversations but a strong need to ask questions, be heard and gain answers was present. Participants shared coping mechanisms and expressed wanting to not only understand why people may hold these views but to also educate them to increase their empathy, tolerance and general acceptance of difference. The powerful emotions felt were clear.

It's a question I want answers to, it's probably not even them just what happened in history but I don't know man it just doesn't make sense.

They need to be educated. I'd say to them; we are all as one.

EDUCATE YOURSELF MORE.

There is no room for a racist nowadays. How do you even exist?

WE WASN'T BORN RACIST. WE ARE LED INTO IT. NO ONE IS ACCIDENTALLY RACIST. THINK ABOUT HOW YOU GOT TO WHERE YOU ARE NOW AND WHAT YOU ARE THINKING AND SAYING.

I'd laugh at them. They can't affect me with what they say. I'd call them a bully to be starting on someone you think you can control or put down.

What makes you different to me - how would you feel living in a different climate or place; being a different colour? I'd say you are a follower. Who made you this way?

THEY WANT POWER THAT THEY DON'T HAVE TO START WITH.

I'D TELL THEM TO WATCH WHAT THEY SAY TO PEOPLE AND GIVE THEM A WARNING NOT TO DO IT AGAIN.

You need to stop this. We are all human, we have blood like you, eat and sleep like you - we are all equal. You are wasting your time with this behaviour..

YOU AREN'T SELLING YOURSELF IN A GOOD WAY. YOU ARE CONFUSED AND NOT EDUCATED. YOU ARE MAKING YOURSELF LOOK SILLY. YOU CANNOT BE WRONG AND STRONG.

Try hard to change your views and learn about other people and what they go through, how they live day to day.

Open your eyes and understand we are all human beings.

DIE A SLOW AND HORRIBLE DEATH. YOU ARE A DRAIN ON THE PLANETS RESOURCES AND OXYGEN.

I'd avoid it as it is a difficult subject to tackle or bring up. I'd like to think I'd be able to do it one day though.

YOU MAY NOT BE ABLE TO HELP HAVING THESE OPINIONS, BUT MAKE SURE BEFORE YOU HAVE AN OPINION ON SOMEONE THAT YOU ARE INFORMED AND EDUCATED ABOUT THEM.

Yeh I'd ask them why are you like that? Tell me why? Their answer would probably be 'I don't like this or that' but like why don't you like that? We bleed the same blood do we not? Yes, we do. Turn us inside out we're all the same we're all human just different nothing wrong with that. If everyone just loved each other there wouldn't be racism.

I would want to ask why they think that way and if there is any chance to see people differently. I'd be worried about their relationships with other people and think they need a course to improve on how they treat other people different from them.

I WOULD FRONT THEM OUT AND ASK THEM TO EXPLAIN THEMSELVES TO ME AND EXPLAIN THEIR VERSION OF WHAT THEY THINK RACISM IS OR MEANS.

I WOULD JUST TELL THEM EVERYTHING THAT GOES ON, THAT HAPPENS JUST REALLY AND TRULY OPEN UP TO THEM SO MY VOICE CAN ACTUALLY BE HEARD I FEEL LIKE THAT WOULD MAKE A DIFFERENCE...

I've spoken to people before and tried to bridge the gap try to understand. No one is born racist it's something instilled through upbringing/experiences. Kids aren't in the playground being racist it's been picked up.

BE MINDFUL. ONE DAY YOU MIGHT NEED HELP FROM SOMEONE FROM THAT BACKGROUND OR AREA OR YOUR CHILDREN MIGHT MOVE INTO A BLACK FAMILY.

Moving Forward

We asked participants to share thoughts, feelings and ideas on the future, and what they would like to see happen moving forward. A significant number of participants felt initially hopeless about things changing, especially in their lifetime. Some of these feelings are showcased in the quotes below:

“Realistically what can change now? Not a lot so I don’t know.”

“There has to be more focus and a bigger spotlight on the problem for people to come together and to work together and to be educated and to make change. I am doubtful much will happen and definitely I doubt I’ll see it my lifetime.”

“More rehabilitation to happen / take place. It’s all been lost. Things are supposed to be moving forward but aren’t moving really at all.”

When we directly asked participants about what we could do as an organisation and what the prison service could do, many participants expressed an interest in co-producing the design and delivery of projects, and many shared ideas for creative projects, group work and education and training courses which they felt would be useful.

Reflective Spaces/Workshops 1-1 and Group

The majority of participants expressed that the consultation interview had given them a chance to reflect on and talk about relevant issues when they had no other spaces to do so. Many stated that they would benefit from more regular spaces, some indicating that the one to one conversations had felt supportive. Many expressed a desire to also be able to connect with others whose lived experiences, thoughts and feelings align with their own. A sense of wanting to be heard, understood and supported to problem solve, was present; as well as the need to build each other up and increase feelings of self-worth and self-esteem. Suggestions for creative ways to express, process and raise awareness were made. Many expressed that they felt that their lived experiences and learning could be useful to others and there was a strong sense of wanting to create connections and effect change.

Education and Training

Many participants reflected that the reason racism persisted was due to a lack of education. Ideas were shared for how more courses and anti-racist education could be implemented to eradicate stereotypes and raise awareness of difference, tolerance and equality. Participants verbalised that they would like to engage in learning about how to facilitate conversations and address issues themselves. A need for more positive role models coming into prisons was spoken of with suggestions of sports personalities who also supported the Black Lives Matter movement and the cause of anti-racism.

Participants raised that they felt staff members within the establishments could benefit from additional training, to build awareness of unconscious bias, perpetuating stereotypes and learn skills in how to better support people from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic backgrounds. Suggestions of focus groups for staff and prisoners to share thoughts, feelings and experiences together were raised and the importance of staff learning from people’s real lived experience was emphasised.

Belong's Role Within the Establishments we are based in...

Participants named that they trusted in Belong to advocate for prisoners around these issues, at different levels; to help bridge the gap between the prisoners and prison system, in the prisons we work in.

Thoughts were explored about areas where participants wanted to see improvement. Participants raised wanting to see more equality in job opportunities in custody; improvements in formal complaints systems; access to affordable and culturally relevant products e.g. afro-hair products; inclusive sports activities e.g. basketball and cricket which participants named as popular with their communities; better access to relevant information on employment which they felt people from Black and Minority Ethnic backgrounds could have higher chances of securing in the community, e.g. cyber and hospitality, to be able to access jobs fairs with these options and courses to train for these roles whilst in custody.

Ideas were shared with thought, integrity and highlighted a great need for marginalised voices to be heard and responded to.

Creativity during COVID-19

In June 2020 at HMP The Mount, Belong ran a creative competition, providing people in prison with resources to make art work in order to explore and express their feelings at the time. Below we have exhibited some of the inspiring creative work that was created during this time by people from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic backgrounds. These have been anonymised, but we would like to thank the contributors for their beautiful words and creativity.



05/06/20

**The Mount went silent and ghostly
Nobody walking about, staff mostly
The usual hum had disappeared
No noise except birds it feels weird**

**Looking out seeing no planes
Kites and Crows having free range
Nature enjoying the peace and quiet
Crows the only things causing a riot**

**The virus has changed the world forever
It's something we thought would happen never
People have died, the count is rising
Trees the only things moving on the horizon**

**The view outside has just stood still
Luckily I'm healthy and haven't been ill
This virus is deadly that we know
But hopefully a cure will make it go**



Creativity during Covid-19

My Covid-19 existence

It was the 2nd from last Tuesday in March the actual date was 23,
The government put out a nationwide news bulletin, addressed to all and sundry
That due to the threat of Covid-19, we'll all have to go on total lock-down, no more visits
from any friends or family, would we see
My last oral parole review had been adjourned from the 10th of February,
So I instinctively know this new situation could add at least a few more years,
before I'd likely to be freed.

On July 13th, I would have already served 15 years in jail on a 2 and a
half year tariff, IPP.
They say we're all in this together but already what seems to be clearly evident about this
new disease is that it seems to be most deadly to those of BAME, like me.

I came away aged 35, and last October reached the tender age of fifty,
Doubt I'll be seeing freedom til I reach the age of 53,
Locked up inside, with no fortune nor fame,
When will they release me? When I'm broken bald and lame?

I still have a dream of becoming something in life,
Success is my most prominent aim
My Achilles heel of getting high and drunk and into social strife,
is a part of my past I now truly must tame

While Covid-19 runs rampage throughout society like the silent killer, no one knows yet
what's fully in store,
It's capable of killing the wealthy, though takes a higher toll amongst the poor,
I try to remember I'm not alone as I lay down to bow, kneel and put my forehead
to the floor.
God I pray, when might you enable me to walk out those prison gates? So glad to close
behind me me, my old prison cell door.
Or will I be buried from her in a box, put 6 ft down below amongst the destitute &
poor Covid-19 has worsened my daily plight,
Diminishing what light had been in sight,
Yet I refuse to be crushed and will never give up my fight.

Though this unfortunate vile virus has surely on my shoulders extra stresses are piled-
I wish I could go back to my old self when I awoke up cheerfully with a get go a and a smile
But sadly my good spirit at times now has deserted me, at times I feel like I'd be better off
to walk the condemned man's green mile,
but I know I have to find inner strength now, after all I'm a grown man now,
and no longer a child.

Annex A: Collaborating with people from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic Backgrounds in Prison: Covid-19 and Beyond

Consultation Questions

Part 1: The impact of Covid-19

- 1. Could you tell us a bit about what your experience of the Coronavirus pandemic has been like?**
 - a) What thoughts and feelings have the last few months during the pandemic brought up for you?
 - b) What support has been offered to you during this time and what has been/could have been helpful?
- 2. Have you been aware that people in the UK who are Black, Asian or come from varied ethnic backgrounds have been disproportionately affected by the Coronavirus pandemic, with higher rates of infection and sadly more people dying from the virus?**
 - a) Do you have any thoughts on why this might be?
- 3. There is ongoing research into why this has been the case, and some say that it is partly due to structural racism and inequalities in our systems in the UK, do you have any thoughts on this?**

Part 2: The links between Coronavirus, Structural Racism and Black Lives Matter

- 1. Whilst we were all processing the news of Coronavirus and the way it was impacting communities of colour, the murder of George Floyd sparked worldwide protests and further highlighted structural racism and inequalities within our systems. What thoughts and feelings did you have around this time?**
 - a) Did you have conversations with peers or professionals about the Black Lives Matter movement?
 - b) Did you take part in anything in custody which was in solidarity with the Black Lives Matter protests happening on the outside?
 - c) Was there a way in which you would have liked to respond yourself?

Part 3: What this means on a personal and day to day level

1. Over the last few months, have you had a chance to reflect on what the Black Lives Matter Movement means to you personally; did you feel it was relevant to your life in any way?

- a) How much do you think about race in your day to day life? What do you think prompts this thinking?
- b) Have you had any experiences in custody and on the outside where you have felt unfairly treated or discriminated against due to your race, ethnicity, or cultural background?
- c) Have you ever felt 'stereotyped' or that generalisations have been made about your race?

2. What were your thoughts and feelings at the time, and what are you left with from these experiences?

- a) What impact do you think these types of experiences have on you and the wider community?

3. How do you personally define racism?

Part 4: Support for people from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic Backgrounds

1. Has it been easy to reach out or receive support when you have had an experience which you have felt was racist or discriminatory?

- a) Can you name either what made you feel supported, or what you think could have made you feel supported?
- b) Do you feel comfortable and confident using the existing systems in place to deal with formal complaints of racism?
- c) Do you have any advice for someone who may have experienced racial discrimination?

2. Is there anything which you would like to say or explain to someone who has racist or discriminatory views?

Part 5: Looking to the future

1. What do you think the prison could do differently?

2. What do you think Belong could do to further support?

3. Thinking back over everything we have discussed today, is there anything that you think needs to happen now?

4. If we were to look to implement ideas from this consultation, would you like to be involved? If so, how?

Annex B: Collaborating with people from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic Backgrounds in Prison: Covid-19 and Beyond Consultation Questions Guidance

Part 1: The impact of Covid-19

Here we would like to find out a bit about what the pandemic has been like for people from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic backgrounds in custody. What the impact has been, what support has been offered and what the gaps have been.

We are aware that the coronavirus pandemic has disproportionately affected communities of colour and research is ongoing into the reasons for this. We would like to find out more from our participants about awareness levels of a) the disproportionate impact and b) the role of racial inequalities in our systems/structural racism.

Just for your reference some examples of how systemic inequalities have impacted communities of colour during the pandemic:

- Economic disparities, poverty, inadequate housing, putting communities of colour at greater risk due to living in closer contact with others and having to go out to work.
- Large proportions of people from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic backgrounds working in frontline jobs who have had to continue working, potentially putting them and their families at greater risk.
- Health inequalities, barriers to accessing healthcare, due to past negative experiences, language barriers, unpaid leave for appointments, 'postcode lottery' issues related to funding and waiting lists in different areas. We still do not fully know how much underlying health issues have contributed to the high number of deaths of people from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic Backgrounds.

Part 2: The links between Coronavirus, Structural Racism and Black Lives Matter

The murder of George Floyd, the global outcry and largescale Black Lives Matter protests during the pandemic were inexplicably linked to discussions about systemic inequalities and structural racism impacting people during the pandemic. The murder of George Floyd is a key example of structural racism, we could unfortunately name similar cases in the UK where people from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic backgrounds have been harmed or died in police custody.

We would like to find out a but more about what the impact of the BLM movement has been on

participants, what support has been offered and where the gaps are. We also ask in this section if there was a way in which participants would have liked to respond which begins the discussion around potential ideas for our future work, encourage participants to think about creative ideas, platforms they would like to engage in etc.

Part 3: What this means on a personal and day to day level

In part 3 of the consultation we open the discussion up a bit more broadly to discuss individuals own experiences of being a person of colour and racism. It can be quite hard to talk about racism, many experiences of racism are covert and normalised. The questions are designed to start thinking about this gently, to think about it from a few different angles as well as how it impacts the individual and wider community, culminating in individuals naming how they would define racism. In this part of the consultation it might be worth reminding participants about avenues available to them to report any incidents and support available to do this e.g. DIRFS, IMB etc.

A reminder of our Safeguarding Policy around disclosures for your reference:

If a child, young person or vulnerable adult discloses information to you, you must:

- *Not promise confidentiality, as you have a duty to share this information so that a referral can be made to Children or Adults Social Care Services if necessary.*
- *Listen to what is being said, without displaying shock or disbelief.*
- *Accept what is said.*
- *Reassure the person but only as far as is honest. Don't make promises you may not be able to keep, for example 'Everything will be alright now' or 'You'll never have to see that person again'.*
- *Do reassure and alleviate guilt, if the person you are speaking to refers to it. For example, you could say, 'You're not to blame'.*
- *Do not interrogate; it is not your responsibility to investigate.*
- *Do not ask leading questions (e.g. Did he touch your private parts?)*
- *Ask open questions such as 'Do you have anything else to tell me?'*
- *Do not ask the person disclosing to you to repeat the information for another volunteer/ member of staff.*
- *Explain what you have to do next and who you have to talk to.*
- *Take notes if possible or write up your conversation as soon as possible afterwards.*
- *Record the date, time, place any non-verbal behaviour and the words used by the person who disclosed to you (do not paraphrase).*
- *Record statements and observable things rather than interpretations or assumptions.*

Whatever the nature of your concerns, discuss them with your Belong supervisor.

Part 4: Support for people from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic Backgrounds

Part 4 is about support, what has helped people feel supported and what the gaps are. We have already touched on this in part 1 and 2 in relation to Covid-19 and BLM, but this is an opportunity for participants to reflect on support received or desired, in relation to their own personal experiences, as well as beginning to open up discussions around restorative conversations in asking what they might say to someone who has racist views.

Part 5: Looking to the future

In part 5 we are hoping to hear from participants about what they would like to see happen next, and what they would like to engage in. We are hoping that out of these consultations, we might be able to build projects with people we consult with, using our place as an established organisation in the criminal justice system to provide support and resources for people who might want to set-up projects. It would be great to tease out more ideas in this part of the consultation, refer to any ideas which participants have shared in part 2, and see which participants would be keen to be involved further. Please remind participants of support available to them and, if it feels relevant, book in a follow up session to check-in and ensure participants feel supported following this in-depth discussion.

General Note:

Those of you running these consultation interviews are incredibly skilled practitioners, included below is some brief reminders which you are all fully aware of, but just to hold in mind to ensure that these conversations are as containing as possible:

Let participants know that there are five parts to this consultation and approximately how long the consultation will take. Make sure we are receiving what is being said by participants with containment and holding, listen quietly, carefully, and patiently. Let participants explain to you in their own words what they have experienced without asking leading questions. Be aware of your own privilege and unconscious biases and try not to assume anything, speculate, or jump to conclusions, rather listen to what is being said without displaying shock, disbelief, or denial. Accept what is being said without judgement and with empathy, but also without overly sharing how hearing this makes you feel, as this can invalidate or minimise an individual's experience. Remember to fully acknowledge what a participant has shared and to reassure and validate them and their experience.

Annex C: Collaborating with people from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic Backgrounds in Prison, Covid-19 and Beyond Consultation Privacy and Consent Form

This consultation has been fully explained to me and all of my questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I agree to take part in this consultation and have the findings included in a report to inform future projects and collaborations.

I understand that my personal information will be kept confidential, and no identifiable information about me, used or collected for the consultation, will be shared.

I understand that I will be paid £ _____ for participation in this consultation.

I have been informed that I do not have to participate in this consultation. I have agreed to participate in this consultation.

Name of Participant:

Signature:

Date:

Name of Belong Team Member:

Signature:

Date:

(2 copies should be taken - 1 copy to the participant, 1 kept in Belong's records)

25th August 2020

Dear

Thank you for considering taking part in the consultation with Belong on 'Collaborating with people from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic backgrounds in Prison, Covid-19 and Beyond'. This consultation is to help us to understand the experiences of people in custody whose heritage is Black, Asian or from an Ethnic Group which is a minority in the UK. This first stage consultation will involve approximately 50 people and will be written up into a report collating all our findings. This report will enable us to gain a better understanding of what future projects in this collaboration should look like. This letter and form explains how we will use any information you provide as part of this consultation and gives you the opportunity to consent to this, or to decide not to consent. Please read this letter and form carefully, take your time to make your decision and please ask any questions that you may have.

- Belong is required to protect your privacy and not disclose your personal information (information about you and that identifies you as an individual e.g. name, date of birth, NOMIS number, background, offending history).
- During the consultation, notes will be taken to ensure that we fully capture your views and what is discussed as accurately as possible. These notes will be anonymised, and no names will be used in the writing up of the consultation.
- In order to safeguard you and others, if anything is discussed which means that you or anyone else is at risk of harm, then we will discuss with you the steps we need to take to ensure the safety of you and others and who we will share information with.
- Once the notes from the consultation are written up you will be able to look over these and ensure that they are an accurate representation of what you have shared. You can let us know if anything needs to change and we will make these changes before submitting the notes to be collated for the report.
- We would like to collaborate with you on ideas that you share for projects to make these ideas a reality and we will keep you involved in the next stage of the process.

If you sign the attached consent form this means that you have read the above information about this consultation and have had a chance to ask questions to help you understand how your information will be used, and that you give permission to allow your information to be used in this way.

Many thanks

Belong: Making Justice Happen

References

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Reference 3: Shalev, S. and Edgar, K. (2015) _Deep Custody: segregation units and close supervision centres in England and Wales_, London: Prison Reform Trust.

Reference 4: Public Health England (2020), _Beyond the data: Understanding the impact of COVID-19 on BAME groups.

Reference 5: Public Health England (2020), _Disparities in the Risk and Outcomes of COVID-19.

Reference 6: Clinks (2020): _The impact of Covid-19 on the Voluntary Sector in Criminal Justice.

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Reference 8: Prison Reform Trust (2020), _Lockdown Conditions leave Prisoners at risk of Serving Longer Sentences._ Found at: <http://www.prisonreformtrust.org.uk/PressPolicy/News/vw/1/ItemID/932>

Reference 9: Justice Committee (2020), Coronavirus (Covid-19): The Impact on Prisons. <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm5801/cmselect/cmjust/299/29902.htm>

Next Steps...

Belong is now in the process of working with service users and establishments to implement ideas from these consultations.

We would like to express our gratitude to the service users who have taken part in this project so far.



You can get in touch with Belong by e-mailing us at: enquiries@belonglondon.com, or find out more about us by visiting: <http://www.belongmakingjusticehappen.co.uk/>

We would also like to thank Clinks, HMPPS and the MOJ, who funded this work through a Covid-19 Response Grant.



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