

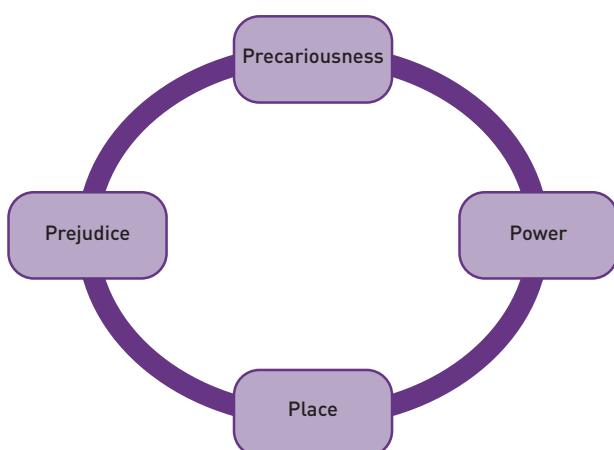
'We Are Ghosts'

Race, Class and Institutional Prejudice

Laurie Mompelat, Omar Khan and Faiza Shaheen

Executive Summary

'We Are Ghosts': *Race, Class and Institutional Prejudice* is the result of a year-long qualitative research project and collaboration between Runnymede and CLASS. In this executive summary, we outline our eight key findings, and issue four related recommendations to improve our analysis of race and class inequality – but more importantly – the lives of working-class people across the UK. Conducted over 2018, interviews and focus groups with 78 people highlighted a growingly punitive culture of services experienced across working-class, BME and migrant communities, despite such groups being repeatedly pitched against each other in mainstream media and political discourse. Rather than the 'white working class' and 'ethnic or migrant working class' living different or separate lives, we found significant overlap in everyday lived experiences, which we analysed by using 4Ps: precariousness, power, place and prejudice.



1. Power and Voice

Interviewees' lived reality was typified by a shared experience of indifference and neglect from public authorities in the face of gentrification and social cleansing. Some participants talked about the slow-burn neglect and abandonment ('we are ghosts'), others about a 'ruthless' council ('let's see what

we can get away with'). Whether in terms of representation in national debates, or in terms of influence over the public services that are intended to support them, working-class people lack representation and voice. For many this leads to a sense of alienation, disillusionment and 'rational disengagement' from public authorities which appear to be working against their best interests.

2. Precariousness

Working-class people have a shared experience of precarity: no safety net to rely on in case of hardship. This starts in the labour market: most of our interviewees were in work, yet were still struggling to make ends meet. But the labour market is not where precarity ends. Welfare cuts have largely eroded the safety net of welfare and good public service provision. Precariousness of housing was a particularly recurring theme, with many people finding themselves waiting indefinitely to secure decent living conditions.

3. Prejudice

A shared experience of race and class prejudice and contempt shaped people's lives from school to the labour market, including when navigating public services. Interactions with local councils were also often experienced as discriminatory – in terms of race, class and migration status. Many interviewees spoke about such encounters as dehumanising: 'They don't see you as a person' / 'They don't treat you as a human being'.

4. Place

Place is a strong resource in people's lives, both in terms of identity and in terms of the networks and relationships that exist principally on a local scale. On the flip side, shared resentment and loss of community space in the face of gentrification are causing economic, social and psychological hardship. We need to focus on place both in terms of how people identify and in terms of the policy responses to race and class inequality. This 'local' aspect of class is often discussed outside of London, but too rarely in the capital. The city is often viewed as inhabited solely by 'cosmopolitan elites', a narrative that erases working-class communities in the city, and especially working-class people of colour.

Findings and Recommendations

1. Change the narrative

The current conception of the working class in the public debate is often based on a mixture of misinformation and mythology, fails to recognise working-class voices and agency, increases division across racial lines, and is divorced from the lived realities of those experiencing race and class injustice. Working-class people are from every ethnic background, British born or migrants, are women as well as men, and live in every part of our country. We can and should build solidarity across such differences: shared identity can emerge from shared conditions but also from shared values, shared history of past struggles, willingness to support each other, and a sense of pride in and belonging to local neighbourhoods.

Finding 1

A set of **shared conditions** shaped the experience of working-class people across all ages and ethnic groups:

- being held back from fulfilling their potential
- social alienation in institutional spaces
- feeling discriminated against in the labour market
- experiencing indignity and neglect when navigating public services
- shared resentment and loss of community space in the face of gentrification

Finding 2

Interviewees' local neighbourhoods were a main point of reference when discussing race and class dynamics: Ladbroke Grove and the Mangrove, the New Cross fire, and the Brixton uprisings would inform the conversations. Most interviewees displayed **a great deal of pride in and commitment to their community, describing local values of solidarity and camaraderie as an integral part of their identity.**

Finding 3

Despite this set of shared conditions, 'class' was discussed with much ambivalence and confusion by interviewees. The question: 'Would you call yourself working class?' was a source of contention and debate. **Older, male and white interviewees were usually the most confident in asserting their working-class identity**, while other interviewees were more likely to be indifferent towards the term, to perceive it as only applying to white British people, or to reject it as a stigmatizing caricature.

Recommendation 1

- **Stop counterposing race and class.** Analysis of – and the policy response to – both race and class should focus on material conditions *as well as* on prejudice and discrimination. How we talk about working-class, BME and migrant communities currently legitimizes and institutionalizes their disadvantages.
- **Root our understanding of the working class in people's current conditions** (4Ps: power, place, precariousness, prejudice), rather than top-down assumptions.
- **Recognize the role of place** in shaping how people interact and identify locally. National discussion and debates about inequality or community cohesion are often too distant from people's experiences and needs.
- We need **a conception of the working class that doesn't pitch working-class people against each other** along the lines of deserving/undeserving, white/BME, British/migrants: such divides have justified policies that make all groups worse off.
- Our conception of the working class must **acknowledge the legacy of empire**: the injustice faced by workers in and from British colonies, and those workers' tremendous contribution to British economy and society over the centuries (*Our Migration Story*).
- **Build on existing 'framing' work**, notably JRF's work on poverty, to outline the strengths of working-class communities and the current barriers that prevent them from securing better lives for themselves.

2. Rebuild the safety net, at work and through public services

A narrative by itself won't change the conditions of working-class people in Britain. Our interviewees were usually more interested in discussing the current injustice and challenges they faced than how they identified or the national narrative on class. Rebuilding the safety net will require undoing years of benefit cuts, while also widening that net to respond to the new forms of precarity identified below (Finding 4 and Finding 5). This will involve improving the rights and outcomes of people in the labour market, but also expanding the services and benefits that are necessary to provide an adequate safety net for the 21st century.

Finding 4

Rather than a strong sense of 'working-class' identity, **what came out more concretely through focus groups was when and where interviewees' backgrounds were experienced as resulting in a lack of 'safety net'**, particularly in times of transition, ill health and crisis. It was in those moments that working-class people were most vulnerable, as they lacked financial safety, institutional support and networks in comparison with more privileged peers. This was accentuated by general housing precariousness: without medium- to long-

Recommendation 2

- **A genuine living wage.** The current national living wage (for those over 25) is £8.21, £0.79 less than a genuine living wage. In London, the living wage needs to be £10.55.
- **Adopt the Institute of Employment Rights' 'Manifesto for Labour Law'** to improve the security, pay, conditions and bargaining power of workers.¹ This includes establishing a Ministry for Labour to rebuild and promote collective bargaining structures.

term stability of housing, interviewees found it more difficult to access local services effectively, and to develop and tap into formal and informal networks of personal support.

Finding 5

The changing face of contemporary work was a factor in blurring the lines of working-class affiliation. Traditionally, work has been the anchor for working-class identity. However, with the growth of the gig economy, work has become more precarious and atomized. As new forms of low-income work do not provide the same sense of identity and common cause for mobilization, 'working class' as a badge of honour seems to have lost its resonance for many people.

- **Reinvest in public services** to bring spending back towards pre-2010 levels.
- Different regions or **localities will have different priorities**, but these should all focus on tackling whatever inequalities need the most extensive focus at the local level (transport, labour market, housing, etc.).
- **Stop the sell-off of public land.** Local authorities should be encouraged not to sell land to private developers where they are failing to provide affordable or social housing.²
- **Improve the security of housing tenure.** As well as building more social housing, this will require providing more long-term, low-cost secure private accommodation (e.g. five-year leases with inflation-protected rental rises).
- **Implement the idea of 'universal basic services'**, expanding the welfare state to include housing, food, transport and internet access.³
- **Lift the ban: give people seeking asylum the right to work**, so that they can use their skills and live in dignity. Everyone deserves a chance to contribute to the economy and to integrate into our communities.'
- **Re-introduce birth right citizenship** as part of a wider review into race, immigration and citizenship law and policy.
- **Relink benefits and inflation**, and ensure benefits more closely correspond to the relative poverty line.
- **Re-establish child poverty targets**, including a specific target to reduce disproportionately high BME child poverty.

3. Strengthen voice and participation

Improving working-class people's lives will require involving them more in decision-making and improving representation across institutions – in the media, in government, in arts, in the professions and universities. There are various ways of achieving these goals. The key point is that every public, private and charitable organization needs to develop ways of strengthening working-class voices and power.

Finding 6

The lived reality of being working class in London was typified by a shared experience of indifference and neglect from the state and public authorities. Interactions with local councils were often experienced as discriminatory, or complacent about residents' needs and difficulties. Some participants talked about slow-burn neglect and abandonment ('we are ghosts'), others about a 'ruthless' council ('let's see what we can get away with'). As a result, people were deterred from trusting and seeking to access statutory services, and relied instead on local networks and friends – as a lifeline or first port of call when facing injustice and hardship. Despite the proven benefits of strong communities, many interviewees expressed frustration at the lack of recognition for their efforts and contributions locally, within communities that are chronically under-resourced, overstretched and dispersed by cuts to services.

Recommendation 3

- **Services should be co-produced**, so that people are involved not just as recipients of public services but as shapers of how those services are better delivered.
- **Devolve power, decision-making and resources locally.** Invest in local community organizations and networks, especially those that engage and involve working-class and ethnic minority people. Democracy requires a stronger civil society voice locally, and such organizations can also serve as intermediaries between the state and citizens.
- Ensure not only that **housing management organizations include working-class voices**, but that those voices **have real power over decision-making**.
- **Introduce the socioeconomic duty**, making class an 'equality ground'. This will allow for positive action measures to be taken on grounds of class as well as race.
- Organizations should set **targets to improve ethnic minority and working-class representation in the workplace**. This includes tackling discrimination in the labour market. Mandate equal pay audits and enforce tougher sanctions on companies who break the law.

4. Re-embed shared values at the core of policy

Research shows that values such as dignity, freedom and equality are widely held. We must urgently re-embed such an ethos in public services, which will take investment, rolling back harmful policies, and implementing a wider cultural change to avoid further dehumanization of working-class, BME and migrant communities.

Hostile environment policies and welfare reforms have been underpinned and justified by wider public discourse targeting and pathologizing working-class, migrant and BME people. As a result, public officials have often found themselves with workplans and targets that fail to centre the dignity of such groups. But these are false narratives: cuts to public services and the housing crisis are the result of political choices, and are not inevitable. The UK is the fifth largest economy in the world and is able to provide the public services required for everyone to live in dignity.

Finding 7

Most interviewees reported experiencing daily encounters with public services as punitive and disempowering – whether this was with the police, job centres, social services, housing offices – to the extent that many discerned an active conflict of interest between services' targets on the one hand and the wellbeing of working-class families on the other. **Many interviewees talked about dehumanisation** ('They don't see you as a person'/'They don't treat you as a human being'). They also highlighted how racism or xenophobia exacerbated their ill-treatment. Wider public narratives around who is 'deserving' and who is 'undeserving' and **the impact of the 'hostile environment' made engaging with public services an even more dispiriting experience**. The gap between professional intervention and the intuitive knowledge of and challenges faced by communities was also experienced as a great barrier to trust and engagement.

Finding 8

A shared impression that local services and support have been designed to be out of reach further entrenches poor esteem of and confidence in services. The current experience of local services cements the belief that the levers of justice are not working for working-class people, and that their rights are ultimately unenforceable. As a result, people step away from support, often out of exhaustion and disillusionment with the support on offer and the way in which it is – or is not – provided. Services become another obstacle to navigate on top of other life stresses.

Recommendation 4

- **Foster equality and dignity across all public services**, embedding inclusion, equality, cohesion in, for example, procurement and planning decision-making processes, and considering social value clauses to enable community participation and control of services.
- **End the hostile-environment immigration policies**, and issue a thorough review of the Home Office's policies, including whether those policies are in line with human rights and race discrimination legislation
- **End data-sharing between public services for the purpose of immigration enforcement**. This destroys trust between communities and services and undermines the duty of care.
- There needs to be **a cultural shift in how local services relate to working-class, migrant and BME people** who use their services. This requires a new public service values framework, as well as training for all staff, from the front line to senior management, on how to ensure working-class, migrant and BME people are treated with dignity and respect when approaching services.
- **Ensure equality law and the socioeconomic duty are taken seriously**, respected and applied in relation to all policy, strengthening the 'due regard' clause in the public sector equality duty.
- In response to the extensive inequalities outlined in the government's Race Disparity Audit, the government should adopt **a race equality strategy across all public policy areas. This strategy should be led by a minister who regularly attends and reports directly to the Cabinet.**

¹ IER (2018) *Rolling out the Manifesto for Labour Law*, London: IER. <https://www.ier.org.uk/sites/ier.org.uk/files/Briefing.pdf>

² H. Wheatley (2019) 'The mass sell-off of public land is driving the housing crisis', *Huffington Post*, 18 March, www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/housing-crisis-public-land-uk_5c811055e4b0a135b5199d5d?utm_hp_ref=uk-news&guccounter=1

³ J. Portes, H. Reed and A. Percy (2017) *Social Prosperity for the Future: A Proposal for Universal Basic Services* (London: UCL Institute for Global Prosperity) www.ucl.ac.uk/bartlett/igp/news/2017/oct/igps-social-prosperity-network-publishes-uks-first-report-universal-basic-services