



Inconvenience and disruption

Race, ethnicity, and talk of the pandemic across America

Corey D. Fields*, Rahsaan Mahadeo*, Lisa Hummel, Sara Moore

The American Voices Project (AVP) relies on immersive interviews to deliver a comprehensive portrait of life across the country. The interview protocol blends qualitative, survey, administrative, and experimental approaches to collecting data on such topics as family, living situations, community, health, emotional well-being, living costs, and income. The AVP is a nationally representative sample of hundreds of communities in the United States. Within each of these sites, a representative sample of addresses is selected. In March 2020, recruitment and interviewing began to be carried out remotely (instead of face-to-face), and questions were added on the pandemic, health and health care, race and systemic racism, employment and earnings, schooling and childcare, and safety net usage (including new stimulus programs).

The “Monitoring the Crisis” series uses AVP interviews to report on the impact of the pandemic throughout the country. This report is sponsored by the Stanford Center on Poverty and Inequality. To protect respondents’ anonymity, quotations have been altered slightly by changing inconsequential details. To learn more about the American Voices Project and its methodology, please visit inequality.stanford.edu/avp/methodology.

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The pandemic may have affected everyone, but it has not done so equally. It is impossible to measure the magnitude of Covid's impact without attending to how the experiences of the pandemic varied along a range of social axes. To truly understand the pandemic, it is important to delineate the particular within the universal. In other words, while engagement with Covid was universal, there were particular experiences of the pandemic that correlated with respondents' racial and ethnic identification. So, while it is important to attend to the shared experiences that unite the nation, mapping out divergent experiences of Covid is critical to understanding the impact of the pandemic. To illuminate and explore these particularities, we examine how race and ethnicity shape differences in perceptions of Covid's impact.

Race and ethnicity play important roles in shaping our routines, skills, and dispositions, and, correspondingly, our experience of events that upset the functioning of day-to-day life. The impact of race and ethnicity can emerge directly through racial and ethnic cultural traditions, but it can also emerge indirectly through discrimination and mistreatment based on race or ethnicity. Accordingly, to fully understand the impact of the events of summer 2020, analysts must commit to a relational perspective that shows how the experiences of different groups are interconnected. This entails not only statistically comparing differences across demographic groups, but also examining how the responses of different groups are related. The same event might bring chaos and disruption to one group, while another group experiences growth and possibility. So, just because everyone experiences an event does not mean that event has the same meaning and importance for everyone.

As we will see, the stark contrast between respondents of different races and ethnicities is in part a product of the cumulative advantages and disadvantages groups experience in relation to one

KEY FINDINGS

Although everyone was forced to reckon with the pandemic, it would be misleading to suggest that Covid produced a shared experience among all Americans. We find, to the contrary, much variation in the details of "Covid life" even during the first summer of the pandemic.

When white respondents talked about the impact of the pandemic, they focused on alterations to routines and day-to-day life, with health concerns primarily centered on mental health.

Although Black and Hispanic interviewees also experienced and discussed many of the same inconveniences emphasized by white interviewees, these respondents also frequently talked about physical health worries and financial strain, including their fears of job loss and struggles to pay bills.

another. As the Matthew Effect suggests, cumulative advantages and disadvantages do not accrue in isolation from, but rather in relation to, one another.¹ Hence, developing an accurate representation of the qualitative differences between racial and ethnic groups requires relational observations of how people live, and paying close attention to how power, privilege, and inequality shape those experiences.²

We will show that, although all of our respondents were dealing with life in a pandemic, their worries focused on very different features of that pandemic life. Based on the interview transcripts, we delineate two divergent but related strains of interviewee experience of the early stage of the pandemic. There was a “language of inconvenience” that focused on the alterations to routines and day-to-day life that the pandemic demanded. The language of inconvenience was primarily keyed into an upsetting of the contours of daily life. In contrast, there was also a “language of disruption” that instead focused on concerns about physical health and financial worries. The latter language was tied to concerns that would produce more than inconvenience. Rather, these challenges disrupted the contours of life and produced physical and material hardships that respondents were forced to manage.

The distinction between inconvenience and disruption is certainly tied to the substance of the discourse. For instance, dealing with a partner working from home is an inconvenience, but managing a cut in work hours is a disruption. However, the gap between inconvenience and disruption is also one of intensity. Inconveniences were omnipresent during the first summer of the pandemic and certainly annoyed respondents. Disruptions did not hit everyone equally, and they weighed more heavily than inconveniences on those who experienced them. Indeed, part of the reason that these inconveniences were ardently discussed among some respondents is that, without the distraction of big disruptions, the inconveniences are all that remains to focus upon.

We lay out below how these two very different languages were drawn upon as our respondents discussed issues of health, economics, relationships, and much more.

Data and analysis strategy

The American Voices Project (AVP) interviews members of U.S. households aged 18 and older. This report uses a subset of those interviews to examine how different racial and ethnic groups talked about their experiences during the summer of 2020. We have a two-pronged sampling strategy. First, we use transcripts from interviews conducted between May 1 and August 31, 2020. Second, we selected all the interviews with nonwhite respondents from this period and drew a random sample of interviews with white respondents. This decision was made to ensure a robust representation of Black, Hispanic, Asian, and multiracial respondents.

The final sample for this report includes 136 interviews. Our respondents are racially, socioeconomically, and geographically diverse (see Table 1), but the relatively small sample size means that it is more difficult to identify systematic differences across social groups. While the racial and ethnic differences identified here are informative, readers should exercise caution in treating these differences as representative.

Table 1. Distribution of sociodemographic characteristics¹

	PERCENTAGE
Gender	
Male	61
Household income	
Low (<\$30,000)	21
Middle (\$30,000–\$85,000)	18
High (>\$85,000)	15
Race or ethnicity	
Non-Hispanic white	57
Non-Hispanic Black	16
Non-Hispanic other race	8

Note: N=136. Counts of missing responses do not appear separately in the table. “Other race” includes respondents reporting a race not specified above or reporting more than one race. Cell counts of less than 11 respondents are suppressed for confidentiality purposes.

We then identified themes for analysis. We were broadly interested in how respondents from communities of color were talking about the events of summer 2020. We were also interested in how the experience of nonwhite respondents differed from their white counterparts. We were particularly interested in the impact of Covid on a range of domains: social relationships, physical and mental health, and material conditions of life related to work, finances, and housing. Additionally, we coded interview transcripts to ascertain respondents' attitudes about U.S. race relations more generally.³

After the interview transcripts had been coded, we identified the main developmental themes. In the discussion below, we describe only those themes that were common to a set of transcripts.⁴ Throughout the analysis, we were attuned to variation across racial and ethnic groups. We were particularly interested in variation in how respondents talked about *experiences* of the pandemic.

The pandemic

Media and scholarly coverage has highlighted many racial and ethnic disparities in the effects of Covid, focusing on statistical disparities in the effects of Covid on such outcomes as rates of transmission, rates of death, and labor market and economic standing.^{5,6,7} Given the existing racial inequalities in health care, employment, and wealth, it is not surprising that the pandemic affected Americans in unequal ways across outcomes of this sort.

We are focusing, by contrast, on the experience of the pandemic and how those experiences are characterized. We stay “close to the ground” to discover how everyday experiences, as conveyed by our respondents, were or were not different across racial and ethnic groups. By proceeding in this way, we can illustrate how all types of outcomes, even those that aren't well captured by conventional analyses of statistical disparities, are structured by people's racial and ethnic identities. While only a few respondents talked about their

pandemic experiences in relation to other racial or ethnic groups, we find clear distinctions in how respondents from different racial and ethnic groups talked about their experiences of the pandemic.

For white respondents, the pandemic certainly re-ordered day-to-day life, and respondents foregrounded these effects of the pandemic. They spoke of having to shift to working from home and managing online instruction as schools closed. There was also concern about the emotional and psychological impact of being limited in their ability to move freely. In emphasizing these types of concerns, white respondents deploy the “language of inconvenience.” Although the inconveniences are often stressful, deeply felt, and deeply disturbing, they don't typically rise to a highly disruptive level, and they were generally managed without significantly upsetting the physical or material status of the respondents who were dealing with them.

Relative to other respondents, these inconveniences dominated the stories white respondents of all social classes told about life during the pandemic. It is important to keep in mind that “inconvenience” is not synonymous with “unimportant.” While white respondents didn't frequently talk about physical or material disruption, managing all the inconveniences of the pandemic could take a toll. When asked about changes in her life that resulted from Covid, one respondent captured the impact of inconvenience and anxiety associated with waiting and not knowing what was going on:

You know, nothing – we're not in a bad situation but it's a very, very depressing just not knowing when this is all going to be over. You know, is there going to be a vaccine, is it going to be available this fall, next spring. Is it never going to be available, right, what's going to happen, we don't know. You know, are we ever going to be able to travel again, we don't know. So, it's a very monotonous, it's just very like you know, like Groundhog Day.

White woman

She was not alone in talking about the pandemic in a way that focused on mental health, alterations to routines, and disruption of day-to-day life. The impact on the material conditions and health of white respondents featured less prominently in their interviews. At this point in the pandemic, many saw little to no impact on their own lives on those fronts.

It just left me there by myself basically, so I didn't move from my couch for what feels like a month. Nothing fundamentally has changed yet, I haven't been able to see a couple of my friends... But mostly, it's changed what I think about stuff; it hasn't changed my day-to-day.

White male

I'm looking out my window right now at my neighbors. I mean, there's people out and about all the time. We've been careful. Everybody's been careful. I don't think I've been in anybody's house for the last four months, but I've either taken my lawn chair and sat on their lawn or you know, distance from the front porch or something like that. So, no, we have not been isolated at this time, which has been great.

White woman

At first, I was scared out of my mind, I am sure like a lot of people were and I wasn't going out. I mean, what I did, I would just go grocery shopping for like six, seven weeks at a time... [Then] I started thinking, well, I am not going to learn anything if I am in my house all the time not wanting to go out. So, I started slowly going out, going places, mostly stores for things that I needed and little by little I started hanging out, going out and meeting other people that I knew that were alright.

White man

Again, it is worth noting that inconvenience was not without impact. Being bombarded with little changes to day-to-day life takes its toll and dealing with pandemic-related annoyances forced respondents to be flexible in ways they were not experienced with. There were material costs to these adjustments, but more importantly there were mental costs that respondents bore. Additionally, at this stage in the pandemic, the physical health tolls of the pandemic were disproportionately concentrated outside of the areas where white people lived.⁸ These dynamics are reflected in the way these respondents talked about Covid.

Black and Hispanic respondents also noted pandemic-driven changes in everyday routines. Respondents from all racial and ethnic backgrounds talked about things like being stuck in the house and gaining weight. However, for Black and Hispanic respondents, that sort of inconvenience and annoyance was often paired with more profoundly disruptive concerns. Indeed, the language of inconvenience frequently evoked by white respondents contrasts sharply with the language of disruption that featured more prominently when respondents from other racial and ethnic groups talked about the pandemic. Generally, pandemic effects on material conditions or health loomed larger in the conversations of Black and Hispanic respondents, and these interviews frequently included concerns about Covid engendering fear and concern in their lives.

It's been a slow, slow hell, quite honestly.

Black man

They called them fast to tell them they had Covid-19 and they said "you gave it to us, because you were the one who started with that cough" and I said, "Where would I get it? You know what? They haven't even given me the results." I got the results today...and they told me I have it.

Hispanic woman

There are times when I want to go out to [city], but I can't 'cause I don't want to risk getting my brother sick, or him getting me sick...I just kind of feel alone here. And, I guess with this open relationship I'm in, I don't really get the full attention that I need. Just, I feel alone in person. And then, I can't see my sister.

Hispanic man

To be sure, the pandemic added strain to everyone's relationships, but that strain manifested in different ways. While white respondents talked about how adjustment to Covid was inconvenient, Black and Hispanic respondents were more likely to talk about quite substantial impacts, like getting infected or worrying about infecting others.

It is not surprising, given the social realities of life in the United States, that reactions among Black and Hispanic interviewees were expressed in stronger terms. Black and Hispanic workers were more likely to be in jobs that were deemed “essential” and therefore meant they were still going into work and were unable to work from home. Additionally, Black and Hispanic workers are disproportionately represented in professions like the service industry that were hit hard in the initial stages of the pandemic.⁹ And, finally, disparities in health (and healthcare) make Black and Latino respondents more vulnerable to public health crises.¹⁰ Accordingly, these respondents' narratives of life in the pandemic were informed by material and health disruption when sharing their experiences of the pandemic. This pattern manifested across a range of Covid-related experiences.

Health and health-related behaviors

For white respondents, the primary health concerns related to Covid often focused on mental health and well-being. Because social contact was limited, there was often some amount of isolation from friends and family. This isolation provoked concerns about the respondents' own mental well-being, as well as worries about family and friends who were isolated. In addition to concerns about social isolation, there were worries about

the challenges of managing anxiety about the pandemic. Respondents often spoke about feelings of anxiety and depression related to behaviors and practices aimed at avoiding Covid, but there was less explicit worry about direct physical health effects.

I think I've had a low-grade depression...it started to become more chronic and then with Covid it just seemed to get a little bit worse and it just seems like over the past four years at least, everything is slowly gotten worse and worse and worse.

White man

Since Covid, I mean, I do have times when it's just depressed. It's like am I ever, I am [in my mid-70s], am I ever going to get to travel internationally again...I just feel depressed, just kind of, is this ever going to be over and I don't feel particularly scared about getting Covid because I am very careful...So on a day-to-day level, I am not scared of Covid, but there is kind of that overarching cloud that it's out there and the numbers have been increasing in our county.

White woman

Everyone's been frustrated and just kind of worn out and scared. I think a lot of them have been very scared because there's a lot of unknowns.

White man

But the pandemic did not produce anxiety and isolation for everyone. Whether it was taking up new hobbies, rethinking career decisions, or connecting with friends and family, the pause in “normal” life that resulted from the pandemic provided a break from the fast pace of life. For some respondents, the stoppage that Covid produced gave them a chance to reflect on their own lives and start to make changes. This take on the pandemic was pretty much exclusive to white respondents. For some white respondents, Covid gave them freedom to do things they have always wanted to do.

So, I'm not going to lie. Like staying home for me is awesome. I love it. I love it. I'm an introvert. I love video games. I have a ton of like online friends. And it's awesome. I finally have time to train my dog. I finally have time to pursue my dreams. I finally have time for art. I'm not spending every waking second at work, trying to make ends meet.

White woman

A few respondents from other racial and ethnic groups would reflect on how life had become slower and less fast-paced, but these reflections were always positioned as a potential silver lining to a terrible situation. Purely positive assessment of the pandemic based on its unexpected benefits was unique to white respondents.

On occasion, the threat of catching Covid felt significant in the interviews with white respondents, but mostly there was a “one-household remove” when it came to concerns about Covid’s direct impact on physical health. These concerns about friends and family members’ vulnerability to the disease ran deep, but they were primarily focused on people outside of their households. They were worried about parents, friends who were essential workers, or, on rare occasions, general concerns about society or their broader residential community. But even many of these concerns about their non-household members were mainly focused on their mental health.

It scares me so much. Like it does. It does scare me. My mom is [in her early 60s] and she does home health care. So, she is around the elderly 24/7 for the past eight weeks...Constant fear, constant fear still now constant fear. She doesn't know what's going to happen. She's constantly in fear that she is going to infect somebody or be infected because she's surrounded by the elderly.

White woman

I've got to where I'm like, “Mom, driver over here.” And I'm, like, I'll take her to Hobby Lobby or Big Lots or something like that, you know,

early in the morning, so there's nobody there because I know she's lonely since the pandemic. She can't go anywhere. You know what I mean? And I don't want her to be going anywhere, but she won't just get out and walk around her yard or anything. She just sits in her recliner.

White woman

I couldn't handle being alone all the time and my mother is alone all the time because we all agreed my father, my mother and I, that it could not be a good idea for her to see people much. So, I haven't seen her much at all and the few times that have happened, when it got warmer out and I see her in the backyard and just sit with her.

White man

White respondents did have worries about transmission of the virus, but not within their own households. They projected their concerns to family and friends who they perceived as in more vulnerable positions that might expose them to Covid. There were also a few white respondents who lost family members to Covid. But, in general, the actual virus was being felt less closely in white households, which was consistent with transmission patterns during the first summer of the pandemic. For white respondents, the second-order health concerns are driving most opinions and behaviors.

For Black and Hispanic respondents, there was much more explicit discussion about the direct physical health impacts of Covid. While these respondents were also concerned about friends and non-residential family, they expressed worry about Covid impacting people living in their own households.

Personally, you know what I was working when the virus first spiked up, and then I got scared that I was going to contract the virus so I stopped working and also, I couldn't work because I had to come home to my kids, but as far as how it affected me, I'm very nervous and scared about it. I've gotten a little bit better with it but I ran

out, and I got all kinds of hand sanitizers like everybody I'm sure did and disinfect and I just seem to be social distancing myself.

Black woman

So, last Friday or two Fridays ago, she wasn't feeling well. And she had to get tested for Covid and she came up positive. So, all of us in the household had to be quarantined.

Mexican woman

I've had various family members contract the virus, and they explain to me the symptoms and I tell them what to do. One of my sons had it, my 21-year-old, and he had it and he worked through the period of the no taste and the breathing and all that, and he got through it.

Black woman

Covid was not the only health concern Black and Hispanic respondents are worried about. As a result of public health restrictions, some respondents expressed anxiety about being able to get medications for other health issues. Similar to white respondents, there were also worries about loneliness and general anxiety related to Covid.

I can't get my refills...So I'm like, oh God, you know, I'm not on my blood pressure pills and that's not good and I'm no my last pen needle for my insulin and therefore I'm saying, you know, with this Covid-19 it has been really hectic, because even going to my doctor appointment I can't even go, you know, because they're having to reschedule.

Hispanic woman

I've been very afraid. I was really afraid when it first came out. I wouldn't let nobody in and I wouldn't go out...I was afraid to let my daughters come in. I was afraid to let my granddaughter in. I told her, she's my caretaker and I was afraid to let her in because she got other clients. So, I

was really, really afraid and I was calling my primary care doctor almost every day.

Black woman

It's important to note that it is difficult to determine the actual risk that any specific AVP respondent has of catching Covid. It is possible that respondents' answers are based on their perceptions of threat, not likelihood of transmission. Still, it is clear that white respondents expressed more concerns with the indirect health effects of the pandemic, while nonwhite respondents also included significant concerns about its direct health effects.¹¹ For Black and Hispanic respondents, there were more direct concerns about catching and transmitting Covid. These respondents spoke more explicitly about how they have altered their lives to try to reduce the possibility of catching Covid.

While white respondents spoke about not being able to do as much as before Covid, Black and Hispanic respondents detailed more intense alterations to life that were driven by health concerns. This included talking about how they have altered or intensified sanitation practices, as well as discussions about increased social distancing in public and self-imposed restrictions on their movement.

Since the pandemic, I have had to catch the cabs. I've had to call cabs to take me various places that I need to go get my money orders in the beginning of the month to go shopping because at the time I was afraid to ride the bus. It's a close environment, people talking and you know I got to – it's just scary as hell, you don't know what the hell is going on, I ain't trying to be with damn people in a closed environment too.

Black/Native American woman

The difference in how respondents talked about the health implications of Covid were striking. Despite the universal experience of the public health crisis, the way interviewees talked about

the health impact of the disease was divided along racial and ethnic lines. The key result: In interviews with minority respondents, there was more focus on losses and health impacts related to Covid.

Finances, work, and other material conditions

For many respondents, even though they avoided any major health impacts, their lives were still reshaped by the pandemic. Finances and work were non-health domains where fallout from Covid could reshape interviewee's material conditions. Similar to the health-related outcomes, race and ethnicity shaped the way that financial concerns figured into how respondents talked about pandemic life.

Although white respondents were less likely to report alterations to their material circumstances during Covid, they frequently spoke about how the pandemic altered the conditions under which they performed their jobs. The pandemic meant working in new ways and adjusting the work/life balance as the boundaries between the two were shifting. One respondent spoke about how she had not experienced serious financial impacts, but now had to manage turning home into an office for two:

Well, my husband and I both are really lucky, we still have jobs, we still have our, you know, same exact paychecks that we have always had. We used to go into an office, in a cubicle and work for 8 hours a day and then go home, but we both have the ability to work from home.

White woman

This respondent was not alone in seeing little to no financial impact from the crisis:

I'm probably among the people whose lives have changed the least I would say. I was already working from home on both my jobs. And so that – that's, you know, that hasn't changed. But the change is that [my wife] is now working from home also and so it means, you know, the two of

us are – well, I just have to be respectful of one another during our work days.

White man

We don't have to worry about rent or we do have a little bit of money socked away, but we're doing okay financially. Our jobs are secure. We've never been laid off or we're still working, but we're kind of frontlines because my husband works at the front desk of another hospital.

White woman

The funny thing is it hasn't changed that much for me... I work for an essential service since I provide water. You'd be surprised how fast people go crazy when they don't have it. Or even if their showers is just a little under pressurized. I've been working from the office, which especially early on was the point of jealousy for me because all my other friends were working from home.

White man

While the conditions of their work were altered, many white respondents still had their jobs and did not talk about experiencing financial strain. It is important to stress, however, that just because white respondents didn't talk about material struggles in their interviews does not mean those struggles did not exist. And of course there were some white respondents who experienced job loss or concern about their finances.

Well, at first, I was ok with it, because a lot of the PTSD I have, I'm ok with being kind of secluded, not around a lot of people and stuff. I didn't mind that part initially. Now, it's starting to weigh on me. More importantly it's been very frustrating because the Governor, the state has shut down all gyms and everything like that. So... I am only making a small percentage of what I normally make, because I can only [work] online.

White man

Until he got his unemployment it was hard for us because it was just you know, us trying to do everything and my mom and then we finally got unemployment and so that helps us. But it's still like, you know, it was crazy because during the virus you know you had to buy extra stuff because you never know when you can get back out because you never want to get sick or anything.

White woman

So, and I was supposed to be collecting unemployment they now owe me for 14 or 15 weeks, I haven't seen a cent of it and every time I call well, we're about a week behind, I call the next week well, we're behind about a week, and it keeps going like that, to the point now where they owe me about \$2,000. I'm surviving barely and that brings me more or less to where I am right now.

White man

However, these sorts of concerns were not indicative of how most white interviewees talked about the material impact of Covid. Many reported gratefulness that they could work from home, and relief that they haven't suffered any income loss. But even among those who lost jobs, there was not a profound sense of hopelessness or existential concern about making ends meet.

Black and Hispanic interviewees more frequently talked about the financial strain the pandemic has placed on them. Among these respondents, there was also more explicit discussion about fear of job loss and struggles to pay bills.

And I – you know, probably, I won't be able to pay rent, so I've had to have conversations with my landlord, "Look," you know, "My lease is up in August," you know, "If you can't do anything, you know, I gotta move out and find a new place." Luckily, you know, I do things where, like, people have no problems with me. You know, I [do odd jobs] for the guy, you know, ... things that he has that he's supposed to be responsible

for, I do cause I like doing. So, he – you know, he has luckily worked with me, but if I hadn't done some things I did, it would definitely be a struggle.

Black man

I hope to get a job. I hope this pandemic lessens up and everything's good... 'Cause in some ways, the economy should open up and everything. I'm not saying everything should go back to normal. I understand it's still pretty deadly.

Hispanic man

Oh, because I wasn't working already, so I couldn't really get none of the help that they were giving out versus like the unemployment just certain things. So, it was a little rough. It was a little rough. But I made, I made it. I'm making it as well right now. So yeah, it was a little hard considering that I wasn't working at the time so I didn't have any income so that really put me on the back burner. Other than that, you just make do

Black woman

Material well-being concerns did not just relate to respondents' own households. They expressed worries about family, friends, and people within their local communities. They were also worried about the potential impact others' financial strain would have on their own household. There were worries that their financial position might be in jeopardy because they would have to help out family members and friends. The psychological burden of worrying about the financial concerns of a broader network of people rarely emerged in the transcripts of white interviewees, but Black and Hispanic respondents were more likely to express worry about the financial plight of others in their social network.

It's just how hard it's financially shocking me and, you know, I've had to assist my brother and my sisters. You know, spend groceries for them.

Send my dad money and my brother money so they can get groceries. You know, feed my younger sisters and all that. So, dad – Covid is – cause he lost his job and it took a while for them to get their unemployment checks because it was just a nightmare to get that money apparently.

Black man

Look, the friends I used to work with, there is only one working... When I arrived, I saw prosperity in this country, I saw businesses, and wow, I thought, “hey, it is possible to live here, because there is work here”. Since the day my permit arrived, the following day I started working, the next day. And I met that person, a very good person, and none of us is working now, none.

Latino man

The upshot: Compared to white AVP interviewees, there were more concerns among racial and ethnic minority respondents about their financial situation in summer 2020. Although this is consistent with media and research accounts that highlight both the disproportionate access to financial resources that white people have and the unequal financial losses faced by Black and Hispanic people during the pandemic, our research shows that these statistics translate into everyday concerns, complaints, and worries. Consequently, these differences shaped how people talked about pandemic life.

Relationships

Family relations also frequently came up in AVP interviews. White respondents frequently talked about kids returning home from college or early adulthood. They also discussed spending more time with kids who are attending school from home. These unexpected housing changes resulted in both positives and negatives. The positives were associated with family being closer together. The negatives were related to having to negotiate having all family members at home.

We kind of got an empty nest for eight months prior because the little sister got married and moved out. So, my husband is running around the house in his underwear. Now my daughter moved back home and it's kind of like, oh, it's okay. It's family. You got to take care of family, but it's been crazy, one crazy year. She was devastated by losing the opportunity for this job because they closed everything down in the state.... So, she came back home and she's been living with us ever since.

White woman

Well, it's a little tough. I literally just moved back to my parents' house yesterday, like descended... when I got home, they were like, “Yeah, we don't want any of your friends in the house.” We have like a pretty decent backyard with a deck so they were like, “Yeah, they can come hang out there but they can't come inside.” That's really the only change so far for me, because this is the first time I'm coming home to live at home during Covid.

White man

Even when there were not young children involved, managing a crowded house was a common concern among white respondents. Sharing spaces with partners could alter relationship dynamics, and this was a concern for many people who were forced to work from home and share household space with partners all day.

So, we've basically been here working from home, we sit in the same room now. I used to sit in the dining room and he was up in the computer room, but now we're both in the computer room because it's just a better set up. So, yeah, so we sit like 10 feet from each other, and I look one direction and he looks the other direction...I hate working from home, he hates working from home. We would just much rather you know, be back in our offices, in our cubicles, have it exactly the way it was, but at the same time, we recognize that we are really lucky to just have jobs and you know, we're healthy.

White woman

There were also concerns about lack of access to social relationships. Many respondents talked about loneliness that's been driven by the pandemic. Relatedly, relationships were re-contextualized in the wake of the pandemic. Respondents realized that social connections are especially important. For some respondents, the anxiety generated from the lack of social connections strengthened many of their existing relationships.

It was hard for me to be alone all the time and I was very grateful I had my boyfriend. He doesn't live with me, but we agreed we would see each other anyhow because I couldn't handle being alone all the time.

White man

I do worry about my grandson not getting a good education 'cause they stopped school in March for him and did some online stuff for about a month and so. He was done with it in at 45 minutes to an hour, so what did he really learn, and it scares me that it's time lost, and it's just a scary thing.

White woman

For Black and Hispanic respondents, the same “crowded house” issues also surfaced. Across all the pandemic-related issues we analyzed, the impact on social relations was the one area where the divide between white respondents and everyone else was more limited. In particular, with kids out of school, parents were again managing relations with kids more intensely. Among Black and Hispanic respondents, there were also much more explicit concerns about making sure kids avoided catching Covid.

He doesn't understand that it affects him now but I kind of do it like with the school with the school, with him being out of school for this amount of time, and then with you having to decide whether you want to send your child back to school knowing that this virus is still out there.

And it's like, you want your child to get that proper education but you also don't want to take that chance. You know what I'm saying? And then being that my son has asthma, even though he hadn't had any episodes, it wasn't clear to me that the asthma is gone.

Black woman

Occasionally, bringing in new family members meant taking in a new set of problems and stressors, often involving concerns about work, money, and education. Although this was again similar for all groups, Black and Hispanic parents were more worried than white parents about their returning children, presumably because of racial and ethnic disparities in employment rates during the pandemic.

He, what else can I say about him? Right now, he's not employed right now he was laid off, because I guess because there's lesser work because due to the coronavirus. He was working... and he also was attending [local community college] so, he's not attending college now. I'm trying to talk him back into going, but right now he's not decided of what he's going to do. He's thinking about going to take up a trade, he's not sure exactly what he's going to do right now he's just trying to figure things out.

Black woman

Interestingly, while Black and Hispanic respondents talked about kids being at home and houses being full, this seemed to cause less disruption to household routines. This is possibly because this type of crowding was more frequently experienced among nonwhite respondents and hence came as less of a shock. We also suspect crowding was but one of a panoply of shocks that nonwhite respondents were facing. It registered more profoundly for whites because, by contrast, they lived in an environment that was comparatively more placid.

Political discourse

Covid has not only had implications for individual health, material conditions, and personal relationships. It has also impacted public health and partially shaped the discourse around politics. However, the infusion of politics into discussions of Covid was far from universal. Most respondents thought Covid was a pressing concern that would require temporary changes to behavior to manage. While there was variation in how justified people felt lockdown and mask requirements were, generally these types of policies were accepted as necessary to combat the pandemic. Even those who opposed mask requirements accepted that Covid was a real thing.

There were, however, some respondents who invested in conspiracy theories surrounding Covid or otherwise thought about the pandemic through the lens of partisan politics and ideology; and almost every AVP interviewee who expressed these attitudes was white. The distinction was overwhelming. The racial and ethnic differences in how respondents talked about Covid were noteworthy across a range of areas, but it was most striking in the politicization of the pandemic. White respondents were the only ones talking about conspiracy theories around Covid. They were also the only respondents complaining about public health restrictions from a political or ideological framework.

The hospitals are getting \$37,000 for every Covid patient that supposedly dies...they have a list of symptoms that you have when you have Covid, the defining symptoms, if somebody dies with one of those symptoms, the doctor can put down that the patient died of related Covid symptoms. That hospital gets \$37,000 for that patient being a Covid death. We're seeing that people are getting labeled dying of Covid that never had it.

White woman

We're so used of our freedom I think they think big brother is trying to take over, which I can see some of that going on. Like the Federal government now is trying to have this land grab in our country out here. They're trying to take water rights away from the ranchers... I think the good Lord is going to let this virus take, its kill, just like the flu-epidemic in 70s you know and 1918.

White male

I just don't feel that there is enough honest, true information being put out to everybody. It's always like this tragedy stuff getting everybody all worked up. It is a serious thing, but every time they present things on the news it always seems like they try to blow it out like it's the end of the world constantly.

White male

One Black woman acknowledged the complaints people might make, but came down firmly in support of public health restrictions.

Some people feel as though the government is trying to infringe on their right, you know, dictating where they can go, what pubs they can go to, and what they can do with – how many of them can gather in one spot – and then having the issue, the disagreement of a simple face mask has driven people to death. I mean, people are killing people for their right or so they say, they have a right to which I'm not saying that they don't, but their choosing not to put a simple face mask on could be the life or death of someone else. So, it is a – it is hot, the – when I say it's hot, I just mean the climate now is like a ticking time bomb, it is hot.

Black woman

Based on the interviews, it is difficult to determine an exact level of support for Covid restrictions among Black and Hispanic respondents. But it is clear that, unlike white respondents, they did not talk about such restrictions in the context of politics or constraints on freedom. Some white interviewees politicized the issue in a way that no other group did. Again, it is worth noting that politicization of the issue was not common among white respondents. However, they were the only group of respondents who engaged in politicization of Covid and the public health measures aimed at containing it.

Conclusion

Although everyone was living through the pandemic, AVP evidence from its earliest months shows that it was experienced—and discussed—very differently. Among white respondents, the discussions took the form of a “language of inconvenience,” a language that stressed how everyday routines were undermined. For Black and Hispanic respondents, more profound health and economic disruptions loomed large, and conversations took the form of a “language of disruption.” While these patterns held up consistently across various dimensions of talk related to the pandemic, they were not universal among respondents. There were white respondents who had to manage financial and health disruptions, just as there were Black respondents who felt frustrated with all the inconveniences caused by Covid. However, race and ethnicity does seem to be a useful way to structure the differences in how people were talking about Covid in summer 2020. These differences consistently crossed class lines. So, Black respondents who were financially secure with white-collar jobs that allowed them to work from home talked more like poor Black respondents than their middle-class white peers. Similarly, working-class whites sounded like middle-class and upper-class whites, even when their material experiences were starkly different. Consequently, analysts must bal-

ance the reality that although economic class is an important life determinant, race and ethnicity were critical to shaping the experience of Covid.

Racial and ethnic differences emerged across many domains. For example, many white respondents communicated concerns about figuring out how to establish a home office to adapt to telework, while a significant number of Black and Hispanic respondents expressed worry over keeping themselves and their families safe and healthy. This difference reflects ongoing labor market segregation: Making up the majority of the essential labor workforce, Black and Hispanic employees did not have the luxury of working from home. For many Black and Hispanic people, the pandemic increased risks to life and livelihood. Despite the general call for greater patience as most social activity across the country was put on hold, if not entirely shut down, rent refused to wait.

Some claim that Americans are suffering from two pandemics: (1) Covid and (2) systemic racism. The stories from AVP respondents force us to consider that the two are not mutually exclusive. The disproportionate toll that the coronavirus has taken on Black, Indigenous, and Hispanic communities throughout the United States suggests that these two issues are mutually constitutive. The disparate impact of the pandemic, however, is not only a consequence of pre-existing illness, but also pre-existing social conditions.¹² If nonwhite respondents are frequently speaking the language of disruption, it's because a pandemic—when overlaid on systemic racism—is making disruption such a frequent part of their lives.

Corey D. Fields is an associate professor and the Idol Family Chair in the sociology department at Georgetown University. Rahsaan Mahadeo is an assistant professor at Providence College. Lisa Hummel is a PhD candidate in sociology at Stanford University and Sara Moore was previously a research manager at the Stanford Center on Poverty and Inequality.

Notes

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10. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/19/us/coronavirus-civil-rights.html?searchResultPosition=47>
<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/08/nyregion/coronavirus-race-deaths.html?searchResultPosition=20>
11. This is not to say that Black and Hispanic respondents were not concerned about others. Quite the contrary, they were concerned about both themselves and others, as indicated by these quotes:

All of my friends and stuff, I still see some of them. The virus, I think, took a bunch of them, but they weren't taking care of themselves. They didn't care about wearing a mask and the choices...It's the choices we make that define us.

Black man

I'm very thankful to God that she [respondent's daughter] has not gotten Covid-19. The bad thing is that my ex-husband, he has got Covid-19, but she hasn't been around him and it was just a few days ago when she told me about my ex-husband, her dad...I was like, oh my God, you know, my heart hurt for him because even though we've been divorced for over 20 years he's still my girl's dad.

Hispanic woman
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