

# The 2021 UK Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities (CRED) - The Equiano Project Review

## Context

Last summer, at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic and widespread lockdown, the tragic death of George Floyd in the United States sent shockwaves across the world. Britain saw large protests and an outpouring of grief, sadness and rage by thousands. However, it soon became clear that those protesting were expressing more than their disaffection with the circumstances of Floyd's death. Floyd's death sparked national and international conversations about race and racism, the role of policing in society and vocalised a strong feeling of betrayal felt by many people of ethnic minority background in Britain. These shockwaves can still be felt in both the US and the UK almost one year later.

Recognising the impact of last year's protests and taking into account public concerns regarding race and racism, Number 10 established the Commission of Race and Ethnic Disparities (CRED) to investigate the causes and consequences of racial and ethnic disparities and the extent to which they are a result of racism. This was done with the intent of prescribing effective policies to mitigate any group-specific issues. Dr Tony Sewell CBE chaired the commission and led its recent report released on the 31st March 2021.

## Who is Dr Tony Sewell CBE?

Dr Tony Sewell CBE is one of 11 members of the commission. All but one member of the commission are of ethnic minority background. The team drew expertise from a wide range of disciplines from health and education to broadcasting and science. Dr Sewell's expertise lies within social mobility, education and youth development. Dr Sewell's commitment to empowering young people from disadvantaged backgrounds was first publicly materialised with his PhD titled *Black Masculinities and Schooling*. Since then, Dr Sewell has spent a significant portion of his professional life in some of London's most disadvantaged schools as a schoolteacher and has subsequently set up [Generating Genius](#), a critically-acclaimed charity. His philanthropic efforts seek to empower young people from socially-deprived backgrounds, including those of ethnic minorities, to succeed in STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics).

## Reaction

Despite Dr Sewell's lifelong personal and professional commitment to helping young people from disadvantaged backgrounds, following the publication of the CRED Report, we are appalled to see racially-motivated and personal attacks on Dr Sewell in an attempt to undermine the credibility of the report and the commission's efforts.

**THE  
EQUIANO  
PROJECT**

It is further surprising that some of the incendiary comments came before the report was even published. We do not feel the need to repeat the statements, however, where such people, especially academics could have used their position to examine the report's arguments, instead, some have chosen to perpetuate a conflict-driven approach to discussing such difficult and complicated issues and we strongly condemn it.

With that said, not all of the criticism of the report has been of this nature, far from in fact and we have collated some of the fair criticism [here](#).

We hope that despite the negative and unhelpful reactions in some quarters, this report acts as a springboard to many further discussions that will closely examine the nature of ethnic disparities in the UK, particularly welcoming new perspectives from people of all backgrounds. Indeed, the reaction to the report reflects a broader breakdown of civil discourse and constructive dialogue that has captured so many areas of public debate where nuanced debate and discussion of substance is replaced with ad-hominem, hyperbolic and reactionary mud-slinging. It is unfortunate that we, as a society, have stopped developing the language, maturity and humility to discuss these matters in a way that does not unnecessarily hyper-intensify the public discourse and damages public trust. The report, whilst generally moderately expressed, does, at times, veer into polemic language such as “Neither the banning of White authors or token expressions of Black achievement will help to broaden young minds.” (p.8) which, arguably, does not make the problem easier.

### **Summary of report findings**

Despite the public fury from some that commenced prior to the report's release, it is a paper that makes some sensible suggestions as a whole, draws on a reasonably well-rounded body of evidence and treats the issue of racism with nuance and seriousness.

The 258-page report does not deny the existence of racism in society today. Its first recommendation, challenging racist and discriminatory actions is welcome. Indeed, it states that:

*“Outright racism still exists in the UK, whether it surfaces as graffiti on someone's business, violence in the street, or prejudice in the labour market. It can cause a unique and indelible pain for the individual affected and has no place in any civilised society” (p. 9).*

During the research process of the report, the commission did welcome anecdotal evidence, but the main focus of the report was to 'detangle' all of the possible factors, such as class, geography and income, that could give rise to such disparities to determine the true nature of discrimination in the UK.

As a result of the 'detangling' process, it concluded that “we found that most of the disparities we examined, which some attribute to racial discrimination, often do not

have their origins in racism” (p.11). Rather, Britain is a “relatively open society” (p.9) and no longer a society “deliberately rigged against ethnic minorities” (p. 8).

Therefore, the main argument put forward by the report is that even though racism is still a problem, it plays a minimal factor in explaining disparities in ethnic group outcomes when compared to other social, cultural, geographical and economic factors. In order to create fairness, it argues, we must address the underlying socioeconomic causal factors which have been ignored for so long. To many, this will challenge their pre-existing assumptions about race in Britain and the report may be a difficult ‘pill to swallow’ because of this.

The report itself endorses the Macpherson definition of institutional racism but demands that it cannot be applied to fluid conceptualisations of racism, such as microaggressions. The report argues that attempts to study racial disparities should be based on objective and “observable metrics” (p.36). Therefore, the commission argues that more care is needed when using terms like ‘institutional racism’ as this cannot be applied to every case of disparity and can often be obscuring rather than revealing.

In response to their findings, the CRED built policy responses that can be separated into four thematic groups: building trust, promoting fairness, creating agency and achieving inclusivity. These recommendations vary from greater transparency in policing through body cams to a new, more inclusive education curriculum. In total, the report makes twenty-four government recommendations which can be found [here](#).

## **Positives**

Compared to much of the existing literature on ‘institutional racism’, the report is a landmark report insofar as it differs from the traditional approach to looking at disparities. It is a common practice in journalism, political activism, academia and within public institutions to determine where inequalities or disproportionalities exist and then attribute these examples of inequality as forms of racial discrimination.

Recently, there have been cases of treating these examples in the aggregate to substantiate broad claims of systemic or institutional racism. The report picks up on such faulty, simplistic and statistically-flawed conclusions. Instead, it repeatedly reinforces the fact that socioeconomic disparities are complex and multifaceted in nature and any attempt to divorce such phenomena from this complexity does a disservice to all members of society, particularly people of ethnic minority background.

We believe that this is the main strength of the report because creating policies that seek to create a ‘fairer playing field’ for everyone in society must require a detailed look at the differences within ethnic groups themselves. This is not a case of “pitting” ethnic groups against each other, but rather a serious examination of the unique problems that are experienced by different ethnic groups.

This is why recommendation 24 is right to reject the term 'BAME'. The report identifies that, up until now, much of the existing research has analysed data in a binary way: those who are racialised as white and those who aren't. This type of analysis does nothing in the way of looking at variations in outcomes within ethnic groups. It also does not tell us the 'why' behind such variations. For the most part, the term BAME is an unhelpful way of looking at data. Additionally, we recognise the theoretical problems with grouping society through binary optics; it looks at a myriad of groups in relation to their white counterparts, thus, contributing to the idea that white people are not 'racialised' in the same way other groups in society are. It also masks the diversity within white groups.

The term BAME has also not picked up on meaningful data pertaining to North African and Arab ethnic groups in the UK. As such, these groups, who make up a significant part of urban cities, such as London, have been excluded in data storytelling for so long.

The report goes further to recognise that, at times, it may be more meaningful to statistically group individuals on the basis of shared cultural attitudes because it would tell us more about group behaviour and dynamics. As such, the report says that we may find larger variations in outcome between British Indians of Mirpur descent compared with Gujarati origins, which are communities in their own right. However, these variations have seldom been analysed by previous disparity reports.

By distancing itself from binary optics, the report does very well to identify the disparities within white ethnic groups too. The reason why this is a strength is because, once again, it challenges our default proxy through which we analyse disparities or disproportionalities: race. The report argues that to determine the true nature of discrimination, we need to talk about proxies such as geography, class and education **directly**, rather than under the veil of race.

Subsequently, we learn of the disadvantages that affect white ethnic groups that have been shunned in public discourse. For example, Gypsy and Roma pupils are least likely to meet expected child development standards, with only 34% doing so. This pales in comparison to their Indian counterparts at 78%.

To clarify, the report points out that these disadvantages are not exclusively unique to certain ethnic groups. If similar socio-economic conditions are met, then we can expect to see similar outcomes with anybody of any ethnic group. In this way, the report does not isolate other ethnic groups in their policy recommendations, thereby, expanding their realm of work outside of race and ethnicity.

Another strength of the report is that it touches upon 'taboo' topics like the role of family and parenting in outcomes. Whilst, from our perspective, it is unclear the role that family structures play, we welcome the desire to confront these taboo subjects head-on. These topics have previously been avoided in academia and public discourse out of fear of alienating or placing blame among entire ethnic groups or struggling single-parents, for example. The report understands that this can be a sensitive issue to talk about, but we did *not* feel that its arguments are about placing

blame on people, nor does it make normative suggestions as to how people should live or set up their family arrangements. Rather, it is pointing at the potential areas where support can be given by British institutions to those who are affected by such factors.

For instance, the report draws on a wealth of research that looks into the role of two-parent families in childhood. It states that “research shows that children who experience family breakdown are more likely to underperform at school” (p. 42). This can affect any child of any ethnic background and that this may have a detrimental effect on children and adolescents. The report does not necessarily make claims that such phenomena are immutable or inherent to certain ethnic groups, and therefore, cannot be solved. However, it merely points out that such phenomena are more common in certain ethnic or cultural groups than in others. More research is needed to understand why that is.

According to current numbers:

*“Black African people have a lower rate of single parenthood but at 43% are still well above the average. South Asian and Chinese ethnic groups are much lower than other groups with the Indian ethnic group the lowest at just 6%.” (p. 41)*

If we see that Black African, Chinese and South Asian students fare well academically compared to Black Caribbean students, what can we say about the role of parenting in these outcomes? Can we attribute better outcomes in education to parenting that stresses the importance of academic achievement to children? Is there a causal link here? These are important questions that the report asks. However, we would contend that the evidence presented in the report is *not* strong enough to conclude that parenting or family structure are causes of low socioeconomic background rather than a *consequence of it*. Whilst we recognise the fundamental importance of a stable, supportive family structure, we would veer away from any attempt to moralise about people’s family structure, when, indeed, there are a complex range of reasons for that too. We would welcome further research into this area.

We can also look at other areas: according to the most recent government data on reading proficiency for 6 to 7-year-olds, 37% of pupils from the Chinese ethnic group met the higher reading standard which is the highest percentage out of all ethnic groups. But, only 4% of white Gypsy and Roma pupils met the higher standard which is the lowest percentage out of all ethnic groups. To add further to this complexity, if we were to take an even more granular approach, we see that for every ethnic group, it is girls who outperform their male counterparts. Again, girls from the Chinese ethnic group were the most likely to meet the expected reading standard, at 88%, and the higher standard, at 41%. Why do Chinese pupils outperform white Gypsy or Roma pupils? Why is it that we consistently see girls outperforming their male counterparts in every ethnic group?

To many this may be news, however, these questions are not the first time they have been asked.

For example, the 2010 Millenium Cohort Study also revealed a similar complex reality:

*“There are quite large ethnic gaps in early child cognitive development, particularly between white and Pakistani/ Bangladeshi children. However, family background factors account for much of these differences. For example, children from minority ethnic backgrounds, on average, live in poorer households and have less educated parents. Some groups are also less likely to speak English at home.*

*There are fewer gaps in terms of noncognitive development. Only Pakistani children are behind in raw terms at both 3 and 5. Again, however, much of the difference can be explained by family background.*

*Home-learning environment seems to play a crucial role in both cognitive and noncognitive development, particularly at and before age 3. As black African children have the worst measured home-learning environment in the sample (at ages 3 and 5) this may point to a possible policy response.*

*Child health (e.g. birthweight) explains some of the ethnic gaps in cognitive development. Mothers’ depression during the child’s first year helps to account for differences in non-cognitive development. Parenting styles and rules also seem to affect both cognitive and non-cognitive development, with routines making the largest difference. Minority ethnic children tend to have less regular bed times and this impacts on their early outcomes. This may point to another possible policy response – for instance, educating parents about the benefits of regular bed and meal times could be part of the new Children’s Centre agenda.” (p.4) ([source](#))*

These disparities and the causes for such disparities should be of critical public importance because they may determine the trajectory of a child’s life into adulthood. We welcome the report’s desire to look at not just why certain groups are failing, but instead, why some groups are succeeding, to see if there are things that can be learnt and modelled for *all* people in society.

Finally, while many are quick to talk about the existing data on police stop and searches and arrests, they do so with the population-proportion benchmark. At best, this type of analysis demonstrates an elementary capacity to understand the role biases in police interactions with the public. The report brings the complex discussions being had within science and academia to public view. As a result, it rightly argues that these benchmarks are the wrong way to go about looking at disparities.

We would like to elaborate on the empirical problems with using the population-proportion benchmark as the report conveniently points out. The problem

with using this benchmark is that it statistically assumes that police interactions or arrests happen either randomly (i.e. arrests happening as a result of a randomly generated person by a computer) or methodically (e.g. arresting one in every one hundred people of the British population). If either assumption were true, we would see arrest rates in roughly the proportions that different ethnic groups make up society. If there were any deviations on those numbers, it may suggest some level of bias. However, we know that neither of these assumptions are true. This is because, in the case of police interactions, these are highly volatile and situation-dependent events. They do not occur methodically or randomly.

This is best illustrated with this hypothetical example:

Imagine that Britain received the cure to all cancers and was rolling out its treatment among the public. According to the population-proportion argument, given that black people make up roughly 5% of the population, one could assume that the cancer treatment rollout would be 'fair' and 'doing well' if 5% of this treatment went to black people. However, this is empirically flawed. This is because it does not take into account the rate at which such populations are exposed to cancer. Therefore, if we were told that 50% of black people made up the number of cancer patients, but received only 5% of treatment of the total rollout, we know that the rollout is not going so well. The population-proportion argument makes us blind to such realities. In this scenario, a better benchmark than population-proportion would be to ask: "is there a disproportionality of cancer treatment among black people **given** their exposure to cancer?"

In the same way, a better benchmark to look at disparities in policing would be to ask: "do we see a disproportionality of police stop and searches or arrests of ethnic minorities given their exposure to the police or at the rate at which they commit crimes?". The population-proportion analysis tells us almost nothing about the role of biases in disparities of group outcomes.

The report also picks up disparities in healthcare which use the correct analytical approach, such as the fact that maternal mortality, although rare in the UK, disproportionately affects women who are of ethnic minorities. These statistics deal with women who have the same level of exposure to birth - that is to say that every woman gave birth in these statistics and we can assume to an extent, that supposing these women were healthy, they should have had the same level of exposure to the risks and complications associated with giving birth. Therefore, it is of concern to see a higher rate of death among mothers of ethnic minority background. The commission responds appropriately and seriously:

*"Although incidence of maternal mortality is rare, the increased rates seen in ethnic minority groups need to be better understood and explained. The Commission is aware that work is being done in this area both in government and as part of the NHS Long Term Plan. The Commissioners believe that more research into causes in the disparities of maternal mortality should be*

*one of the highest priorities for the new Office for Health Disparities outlined in the recommendation below.” (p. 218)*

We hope that, with the empirical problems of the population-proportion argument being publicised, researchers feel inspired to look at disparities through a more helpful and statistically robust analytical lens. Additionally, we hope that such frameworks inspire the work of the newly proposed Office for Health Disparities so that we can reach more conclusive answers to existing knowledge.

We welcome the highlighting of the need to build social and cultural capital. Young people in particular who are involved in a range of extracurricular activities are more well-rounded, confident, have greater social networks and are better prepared to take on new challenges. Social and cultural capital can sometimes be just as important as economic capital, especially when young people are applying for further education and employment. Class is still a huge determiner of life outcome in the UK, if you come from an established, well-connected and affluent background, your life chances are exponentially increased. Investment in and emphasis on levelling the playing field is fundamental and are pleased the report recognises this too.

Lastly, we welcome the report's emphasis on the values of trust, agency, inclusivity and fairness, all key elements to fostering a more dynamic, empowering and cohesive society. These are the values that build a strong foundation for a better society. When individuals feel able and capable of taking charge of their lives, orienting themselves towards a goal and propelling themselves forward, they can achieve unbounded possibilities. Whilst historically, people from an ethnic minority background faced extremely high structural barriers, this is no longer the case in the same way and that progress must be recognised and now, it is important to acknowledge the role that individual agency can play in transforming one's life in a variety of ways.

### **Shortcomings**

Being a landmark report will bring about its own limitations and weaknesses. This is to be expected. Despite the report's new analytical perspective at looking at disparities and disproportionalities, we feel that there were areas that highlighted limitations in personal agency that the report could have investigated on a deeper level. In particular, in the *Cultural Traditions, Family and Social Integration* section, the report used Baroness Casey's *Review into Opportunity and Integration* to demonstrate that over half of Pakistani and Bangladeshi women are economically inactive in the UK.

The report highlighted that this may be a difference in attitude towards cultural integration. According to more recent figures (2019) published by the government, this number remains at 57%. However, other ethnic minority categories for economically inactive women (i.e. Indian, Mixed, Asian and Black) pale in comparison. This comparison highlights an interesting anomaly and raises interesting questions that the report could have answered: Given that India, Pakistan and Bangladesh form what we know as South Asia, we can assume that to some



degree cultural attitudes and norms may be shared among such communities. However, considering the large gaps in economic activity between Pakistani and Bangladeshi women compared to Indian women, are there salient differences in cultural attitudes to women's role in the workforce within the South Asian community in the UK? If so, do we see an intended desire among Bangladeshi or Pakistani women to integrate into the workforce but feel that they cannot (e.g. a lack of qualifications, English speaking skills, ultra-conservative gender norms in the family etc.)? There is clearly a limit to personal agency here and Dr Rakib Ehsan has rightly pointed out that perhaps support for female empowerment in certain communities may be needed. Therefore, collective action can often go hand-in-hand with facilitating personal agency.

As an extension to looking at ultra-conservative cultural attitudes within ethnic groups, while we agree with the report's broad idea that different communities should come together to accept Britishness and a shared civic identity, it points out that certain groups of the population have a stronger sense of ethnic identity (p.48). However, it does not examine the potential impact this may have on social integration and what this means for having a shared identity of Britishness. In short, it provides an overconfident view on civic identity without looking at potential rifts within such attitudes that may cleave a shared national identity, with these rifts being potentially difficult to reconcile.

This point sets the scene for our following remark: the report provided minimal analysis on intra-ethnic minority differences which may cause further divisions within groups, even on an identity-based level. In the case of social integration and the South Asian community, the report could have analysed the role of religion and castes. We accept that there is still a lot of research needed to be done here, however, a 2010 government report titled *Caste Discrimination and Harassment in Britain* pointed out that caste discrimination may be relevant to reduced career prospects and reduced income potential, poorer mental health, social isolation and detrimental effects on education. However, we recognise that further research is needed in this area and that this report was likely more interested in disparities in relation to 'Black' groups.

The report calls for the development of a new teaching resource called the Making of Modern Britain in response to what it describes as 'negative calls for 'decolonising' the curriculum.' (p.8) which looks at 'how Britishness influenced the Commonwealth and local communities, and how the Commonwealth and local communities influenced what we now know as modern Britain.'. [Whilst we have been critical of the 'decolonise the curriculum' movement for its racialisation of history and often ideologically-driven orientation](#), we welcome the overall desire to broaden our understanding of history and how we came to be the society we are today. We would argue that the report's recommendations in this area do not go far enough. The stories we tell ourselves as a society are fundamental to how each generation comes to understand their past, present and future but this must be matched with civic-bond building and cross-community engagement. We believe that the report substantially lacks examination or recommendations in the areas of social cohesion, community relations, integration, civic participation, which are key indicators of whether

democratic societies are participatory and inclusive to all members of society. We argue that the Making of Modern Britain curriculum may end up being another simplistic narrative of the past unless it is bolstered by civic reinvigoration. We recommend that the government expands its National Citizen Service for 16 and 17-year-olds to include work with The Equiano Project as well as community groups to develop projects and workshops for young people on these issues. We also believe that more investment should be put in cross-community and cross-regional engagement around social, civic and democratic matters.

The report, whilst using terms like agency, inclusivity, trust etc, lacks a broader philosophical orientation. What is the vision for society? What are we trying to collectively achieve? Where are we heading? The report uses the phrase “white majorities” (p.7) which, indicates that, whilst criticizing the use of BAME, has no problem using racialised language in other instances. Indeed, whilst we welcome the scrapping of the word BAME, it is too easy to fall into racialised terminology and therefore, how we develop the language and vocabulary to articulate a more unifying vision of the future, needs further work. We believe that we should be working towards a society that abolishes race as a concept, to where race is as important as hair or eye colour, where it becomes a relic of the past and not an organiser of the future. Therefore, phrases like “white majorities” should be questioned, and we should be thinking about where we’re actually trying to go as a society, not just criticising how things have been previously done.

Whilst we too emphasize the importance of agency, we know that it is not the full story. There is a danger in the emphasis on agency, broken families and culture leading to a “pull yourself up by your bootstraps” hyper-individualistic mentality that can be simplistic. This could not solve the Windrush Scandal or the housing crisis. An emphasis on agency must not become a substitute for supporting effective collective and community action that can transform communities. The lack of engagement with social cohesion as mentioned in our previous point, further highlights this. Britain’s poorest communities, particularly in the big cities that have higher rates of ethnic minority populations are facing a housing crisis, being pushed out of their homes due to the cost of living and much else that exacerbate inequality. Policy recommendations that seek to bring down the cost of living and help people from low socio-economic backgrounds get on the housing ladder or access social housing, will no doubt help millions of ethnic minority families build up the economic capital to alleviate intergenerational entrenched poverty and strengthen families.

Similarly, whilst we welcome the emphasis on empirical evidence, especially in contrast to the all-inclusive wider popular cultural focus on “lived experience”, to focus solely on empirical evidence would be wrong. It assumes that people would read the report and spontaneously abandon their beliefs that Britain is or isn’t a certain way due to seeing the “evidence”. We often use our heuristics and intuitive sense of how things are, and that’s valid. Oftentimes, claims of institutional racism become a way of describing, in a broad way, that there is something wrong about the way society is being organised and in truth, that sentiment is shared by many. Whilst the report cannot solve all of our society’s problems, without an understanding of human nature and a philosophically-underpinned, historically-grounded,

future-oriented vision of society, its fixation on evidence will miss an important piece of the puzzle.

## Conclusion

This report has come at a difficult, yet important time; with British society still feeling the shockwaves of last summer's public outcry and race headlining national news stories on a regular basis, the CRED report is the first of its kind. It is a report that shifts away from traditional types of analyses that look at disparities and disproportionalities with a reductionist approach of attributing disparities and disproportionalities to discrimination. It also calls into question the prior analytical approaches of determining disparities and disproportionalities in themselves. As a result, the CRED report sheds light on the complex and multifaceted reality of socio-economic disparities while recognising the prevalence of racism that still exists in Britain, which to many, will starkly contrast the current defeatist narratives of society.

We expect that the report may be vehemently rejected by public figures, academics, organisations, institutions and businesses who have already made their mind up about ascribing to 'anti-racist' ideologies as opposed to liberal ideals of tolerance, freedom and humanism. Despite this, we believe that given the report's new perspective on disparities and actively highlighting the achievements of ethnic minority groups, most will engage with the ideas put forward in an open-minded manner.

We hope that this report will inspire more research to determine the exact weighting of the causality of conflicting contributing factors in unequal outcomes. As such, it will give us a clearer and tidier understanding of the role racial discrimination plays in society. We also hope that this report acts as a stepping stone to discovering new truths and findings that we have not yet considered.

We encourage people to engage with the work that The Equiano Project is doing, shedding light on new areas, debates and discussions and pioneering a universalist approach to these matters, engaging with schools, universities, community groups and companies.

We recommend that people watch our first ever video which brought together many of the leading thinkers in this area back in August 2020, to examine the question: [Is it time to forge a new narrative about race?](#)