



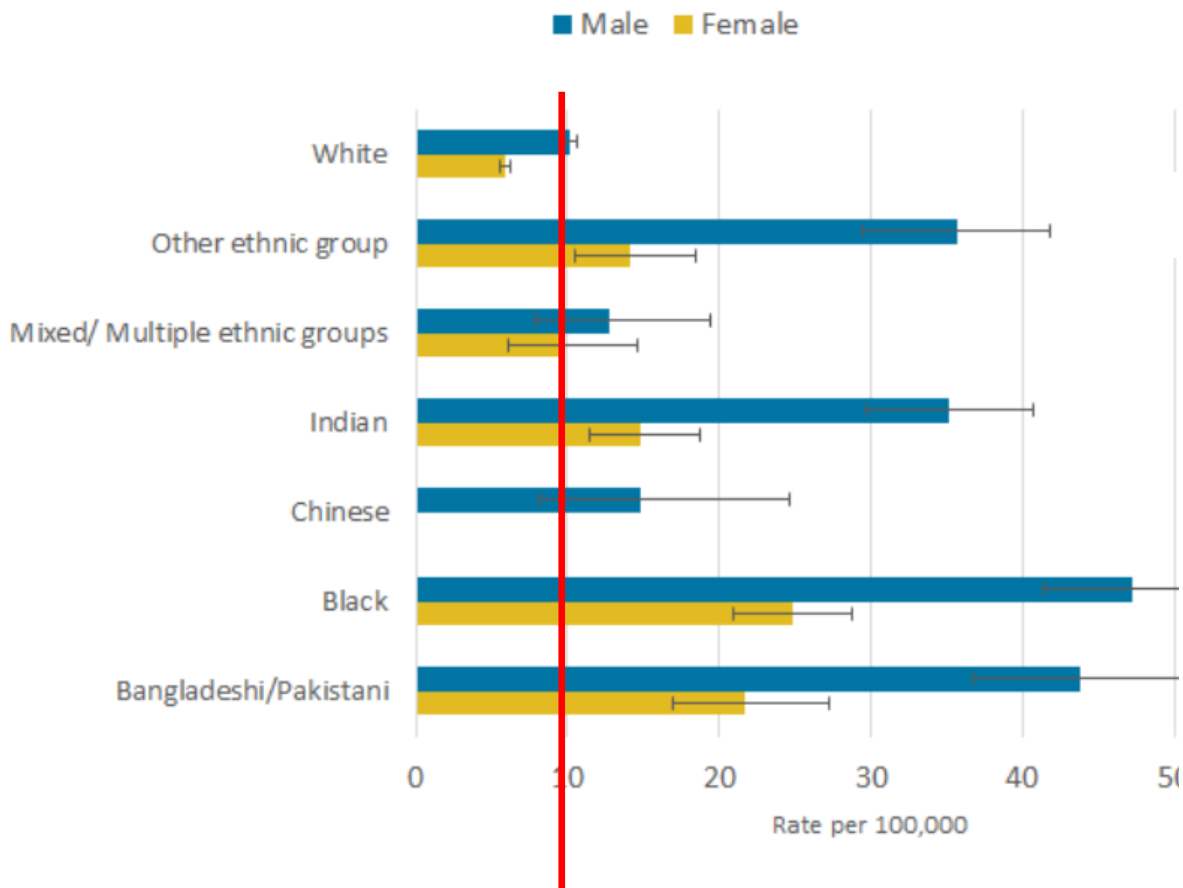
*“Light in a very dark time”*

Pandemic lessons for  
inclusive policymaking

Saffron Karlsen  
Professor of Sociology,  
University of Bristol

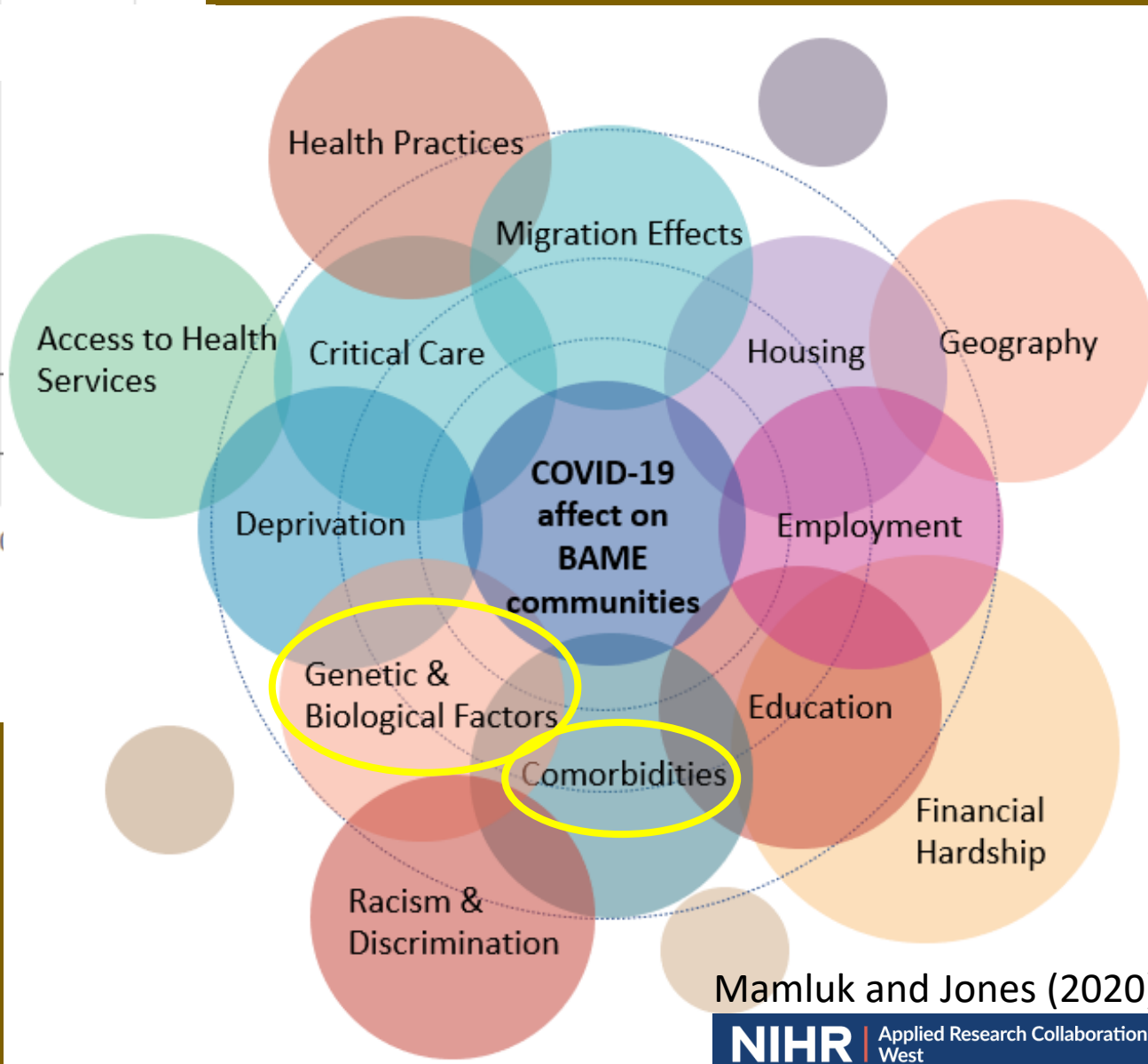


# The Evidence



Source: Office for National Statistics

Age-standardised rates for deaths involving COVID-19 at ages 9 to 64 years by sex and ethnic group, per 100,000 people: England and Wales, occurring 2 May to 15 May 2020



Mamluk and Jones (2020)

# *“Disgustingly divisive”* lies...

“[The message that] ‘you [people in ethnic minority groups] basically have [problems with] your metabolism or your body make-up and it’s totally different [to other people’s] so you’re going to be high profile [at high risk] for Covid-19’ was bull[shit] - we just thought ‘you weren’t treating us properly’. [...] it’s lack of resources, PPE, and maybe lack of trust, lack of good quality of health[care], so there were more reasons behind it [than they were admitting].”

(Female, 53, Black Caribbean)

“Since when was a virus racist?” (Female, 34, Mixed – Black Caribbean and white)

“ [...] it was all this sort of rubbish, because the likely explanation doesn’t put the Government in a good light.”

(Female, 39, Black British Caribbean)



## ...and the “*blame game*”

“[The govt. thought], ‘let’s just blame them [...] we’re in the right-wing place so people will believe that”

“[...] the Black Lives Matter protest. The news really focused on how ‘this is really going to help the surge of coronavirus [...]’ and actually [...] people] were following rules. And then you’ve got those pictures of Brighton where you’ve got hundreds and hundreds of people hoarding on the beach and nothing [was said].  
(Female, 28, British Indian)

“the narrative shifted from ‘white people pulling together [...]’, to members of the ‘BAME community’ targeted as the major carriers and causing harm and being reckless.”  
(Male, 50, Black Caribbean)

Photo by [Annie Spratt](#) on [Unsplash](#)

# Meaningful evidence engagement



“The organizations that participated in the network, we have benefited in the exchange of information, and in the approach [where] we can challenge some of the things that are being said. That wasn't there before.” (ACVCS)

“I began to realise that we had unearthed [the effects of] decades of pure racism ... the pandemic gave us an ability to articulate that.” (HAPS).

“the opportunity for us to make sure that we could bring the experiences, the voices of those affected within the groups that we serve, to the forum, so that, you know, especially those statutory providers, could hear those voices. So absolutely essential to make sure the voices were heard, and constantly heard. ...week after week, month after month, we could make sure that we were constantly hearing voices, but also hearing what's going on in other places,

“What I really like is our differences and relationships that mean we can ... really enable people to talk about what's worrying them, have the time to think about it and make an informed decision.” (CSPS)



“We were all equal in the room so every voice was valued. Despite the size of the group, ... it was carefully coordinated to try and make sure that no one’s question got lost, or didn’t happen, because it was, you know, 50 odd in the room at times, in the Zoom Room at times, you know, but they did it.” (JSVCS)

“many people have come together from many different backgrounds, who are all highly motivated. And I think the richness of the group is the interconnectivity. So we’ll come, we’ll look at specific issues. Look, people bring different perspectives. And quite often, you know, we come away with some really good outcomes, not necessarily what you might predict. Because you know, there are just such a wide variety of people who have access to different resources, and different ideas that are able to take things forward. So it’s that kind of rich tapestry that I love about this group. It’s quite dynamic”.  
(JBCoC)

Working together to identify problems and solutions



Now we're back to '[...] we want Black people to come in first and have the injections because you're at highest risk'. How many idiots do you think are out there that are going to be Black – including myself – that are going to have an injection by our glorious leader [Boris Johnson] [...]? And then we have a glorious leader [Donald Trump] in America giving out the same message – 'you're nothing, you're rubbish, I think nothing of you, but you're going to have the injection first and then we're going into Africa'.

(Female, 53, Black Caribbean)

## Impact of (dis)trust

"We've had almost 20,000 now, vaccinations done out in community settings. We would never ever have done anything like that before COVID. We just wouldn't, we wouldn't have had the money. We wouldn't have found the commitment. We might have tried a pilot of one or two and then just it would have died by the wayside. But we have done dozens and dozens of those clinics and 20, you know 20,000 people, the vast majority of them simply would not have the vaccination otherwise. It's just phenomenal." (CSPS)

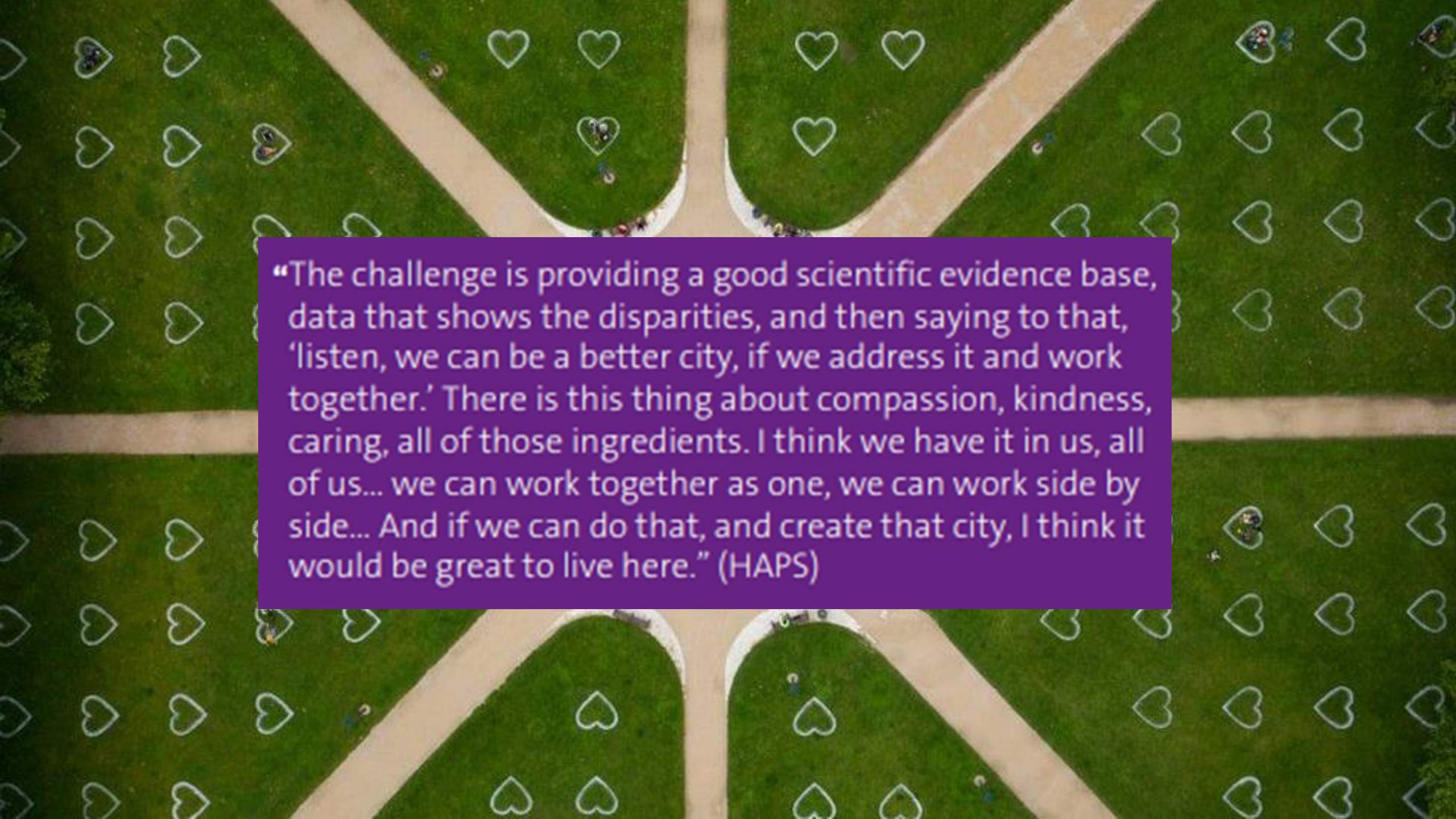
“They were trying to make you a victim and they didn’t succeed because you were always one step ahead of them, like you [always] are, because you have to be, in work or in life. You’re always one step ahead of a racist.” (Female, 53, Black Caribbean)

## Inclusion and empowerment

“It’s changing my mindset [to think] that you can achieve anything you set your mind to it. And it’s the empowerment you get from this committee.” (HAPS)

“[In the early days] It just felt as though there was nothing [to hope for...] But actually coming together, there was hope, because we were all in the same boat. We all wanted the same thing: to find the best way to support the people that we serve... .. it really was a light in a very dark time. ... So it was about bringing those voices, but also wanting to make sure that we were being a part of any solution that was being put forward. I mean, the last thing we wanted to do was sort of be lost in the, the chaos of all that was going on, and not having any hope. Whereas being a part of something that was much bigger, with others who are in the same position, ... means that I felt a part of something. I wasn’t alone, our organization wasn’t alone. And actually, we’re all going to work together for some sort of solution.” (JSVCS)



An aerial photograph of a park with a grid of paths. The grassy areas between the paths are marked with white heart-shaped outlines. Several people are seen walking on the paths. A purple text box is overlaid on the center of the image.

“The challenge is providing a good scientific evidence base, data that shows the disparities, and then saying to that, ‘listen, we can be a better city, if we address it and work together.’ There is this thing about compassion, kindness, caring, all of those ingredients. I think we have it in us, all of us... we can work together as one, we can work side by side... And if we can do that, and create that city, I think it would be great to live here.” (HAPS)





Thanks to:

- Dr Rosie Nelson and Dr Rosa Targett
- Colleagues at Black South West Network and Bristol City Council
- Elizabeth Blackwell Institute

Open-access references:

- Karlsen and Nelson (2021) 'Staying one step in front of a racist', available at: <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fsoc.2021.730313/full>
- Karlsen and Targett (2022) 'Coproducting what works for our city', available at <https://www.bristol.gov.uk/files/documents/5344-evaluation-of-the-bristol-race-equality-covid-19-steering-group-report/file>