

COVID-19's Impact on Ypsilanti's Residents of Color

Patrick Meehan
Marquan Jackson
Alize Asberry Payne
Trina Shanks
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Situated just east of Ann Arbor, Ypsilanti is the often overlooked younger sibling of its larger, more prosperous neighbor to the west. Consisting of both a city and a township, the Ypsilanti metropolitan area is home to more than 75,000 residents. Nevertheless, the characterization of it as overlooked is not merely a benign cultural signifier but is emblematic of genuine neglect in the public consciousness and public-serving institutions reflected in the impact of COVID-19.

Home to Eastern Michigan University, and situated six miles from the University of Michigan, Ypsilanti works well for the well-educated. Indeed, 41 percent of city residents, and 32 percent of township residents have a bachelor's degree or higher, better than the national [average](#). Nevertheless, [median](#) household income in the city is only \$36,982 per year, compared to \$63,956 in Ann Arbor. The chasm between education and income in Ypsilanti highlights the enormous inequality in the community.

Race is inextricably linked to inequality in Ypsilanti. 33 percent of township and 27 percent of city residents are Black, respectively. Ypsilanti's Black residents largely live far from its academic edifices and historic homes, leaving them more exposed to the novel coronavirus when it emerged in Michigan this spring.

With the understanding that the impact of COVID-19 on Black and low income residents might be overlooked or unreported, EMU's Family Empowerment Program partnered with the Washtenaw County Racial Equity Office and the Center for Equitable Family and Community Well-Being at the University of Michigan School of Social Work to survey residents. Between June 12 and August 21, 607 Ypsilanti residents were surveyed on the impact of COVID-19, including their exposure to the disease, how serious they took the pandemic, deaths among friends and family, and so on. The research team adapted questions from the Detroit Metro Area Communities Study COVID-19 Rapid Response survey, and added additional questions to gauge feelings toward the government's response to COVID-19 in their community. To ensure the study team captured the views of low income residents and people of color, 159 surveys were collected among residents of the Ypsilanti Housing Commission, the area's public housing authority. The demographic characteristics of the study participants can be seen below.

Deaths

[Given the mortality of COVID-19 is higher than the seasonal flu and individuals have no natural defenses against the novel coronavirus](#), it was very important for the study team to measure the impact of COVID-related deaths in Ypsilanti. We found Black respondents were far more likely to have had a friend or family member die of COVID-19 than white or Latinx respondents.



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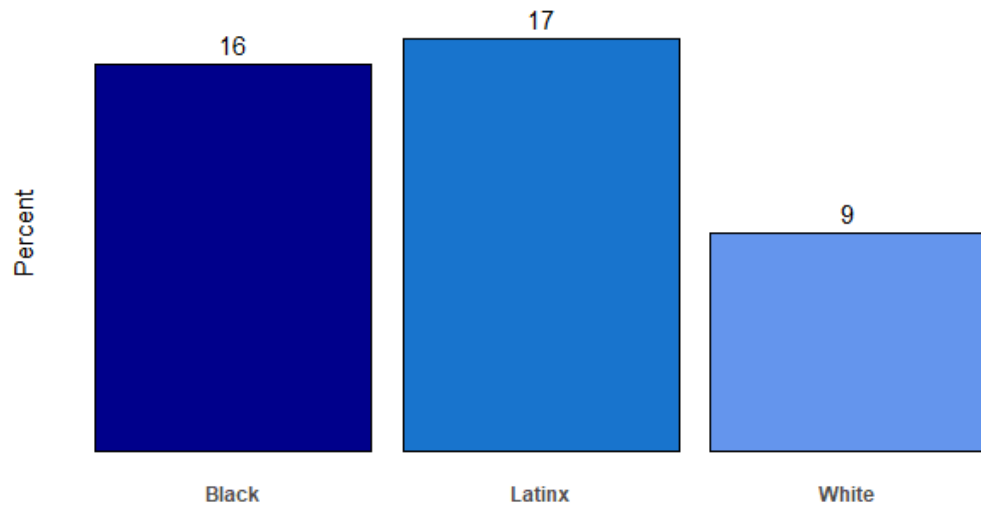
The fact that there was variation in the seriousness with which individuals took COVID-19 is problematic for the health of the whole community. For one, it sends mixed signals to elected officials about how seriously to respond. Moreover, such variation exacerbates existing inequalities, and spotlights which voices in the community carry the most sway. If 58% of white respondents took COVID-19 seriously, for example, it is possible to imagine a different, more full-throated response on the part of elected officials to deal with it and stop its spread.

Unemployment

Following a series of emergency orders from Gov. Gretchen Whitmer in March, the Michigan economy largely shut down. Within Ypsilanti, residents of color felt the effects of the shut down more acutely than white residents. Our results indicated Black and Latinx respondents were more likely to have lost jobs as a result of COVID-19 than white respondents.

Lost Job Due to COVID-19

Based on survey of 607 Ypsilanti residents from June 12 to August 21, 2020



Black and Latinx respondents were nearly twice as likely to have lost their jobs as white respondents. The trends in Ypsilanti were consistent with those [nationally](#); COVID-19 has had a much greater economic impact for people of color than for white Americans.

Able to Work from Home

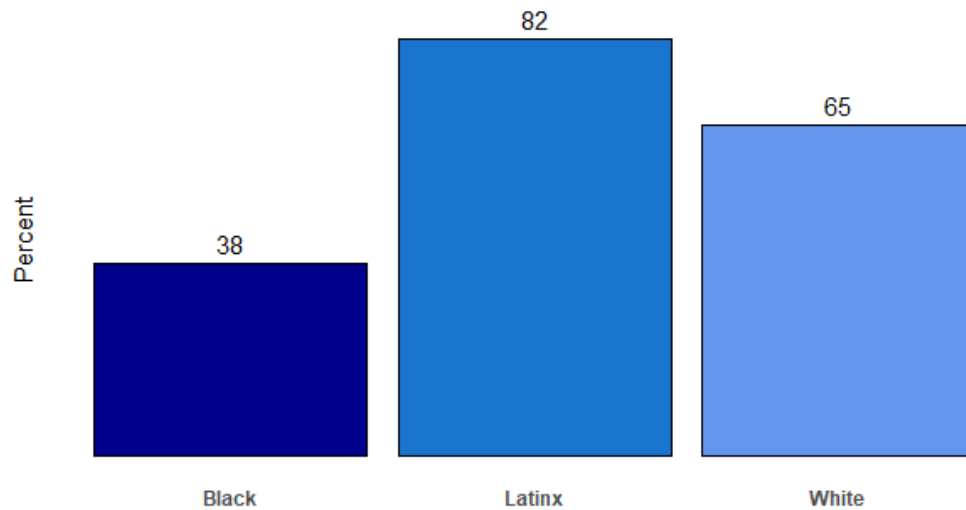
Given the existence of the economic shutdown, it was very important to observe who was able to work from home during the pandemic. We found that only 38% of Black respondents were able to work from home. This was not true of all people of color. 82% of Latinx respondents reported they were able to work from home during the pandemic. Since we did not ask respondents the type of work they do, or what industry they work in, this observation ran counter to expectations broadly speaking.



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Able to Work From Home During the Pandemic

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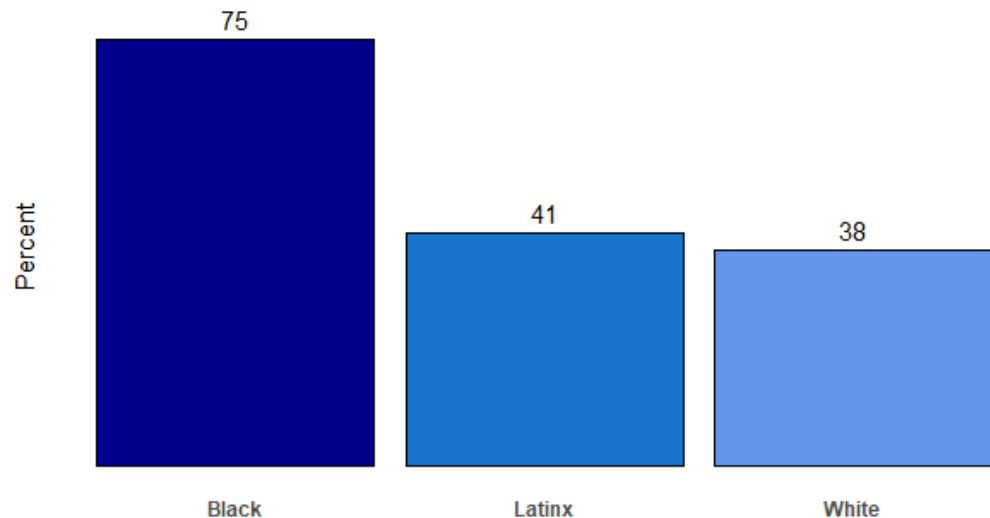
The trends for Black respondents were largely consistent with [national data](#) on the ability to work from home pre-pandemic. The inability to work from home suggests Black respondents fell into the pool of so-called “essential workers” that put them at [greater risk](#) of infection and death.

Among those considered essential during the pandemic were those in low-wage occupations, such as home health care aides, delivery drivers, cashiers, grocery store employees, and so forth. These individuals made it possible for the majority of individuals to shelter in place during the pandemic. Consequently, the ability to work from home was a signifier of economic stability within our sample. 73% of those able to work from home could afford a \$400 unexpected expense among our respondents, compared to 49% of those unable to work from home.

Moreover, only 32% of those able to work from home were renters, and people of color made up the vast majority of renters in our sample. Specifically, 75% of Black and 41% of Latinx respondents rented their residence, respectively. The figure for white respondents was 38%.

Currently rent their residence

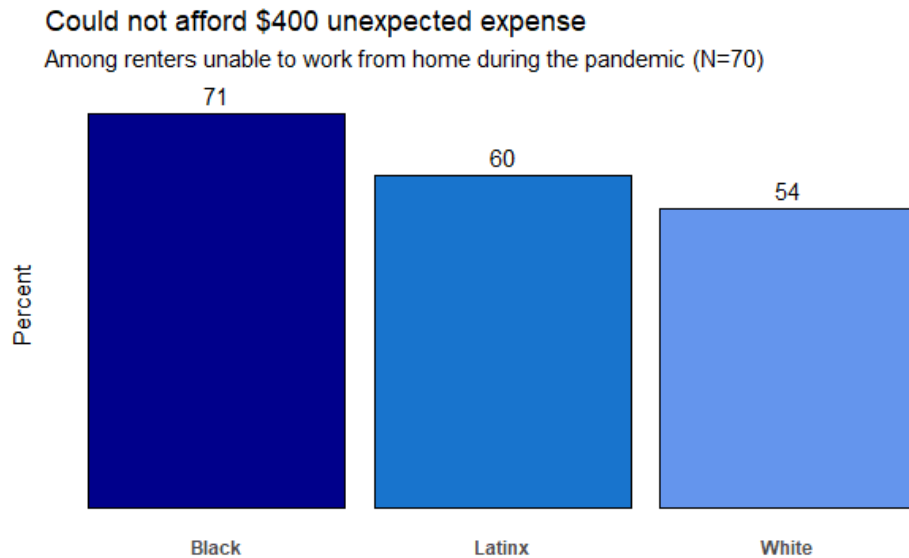
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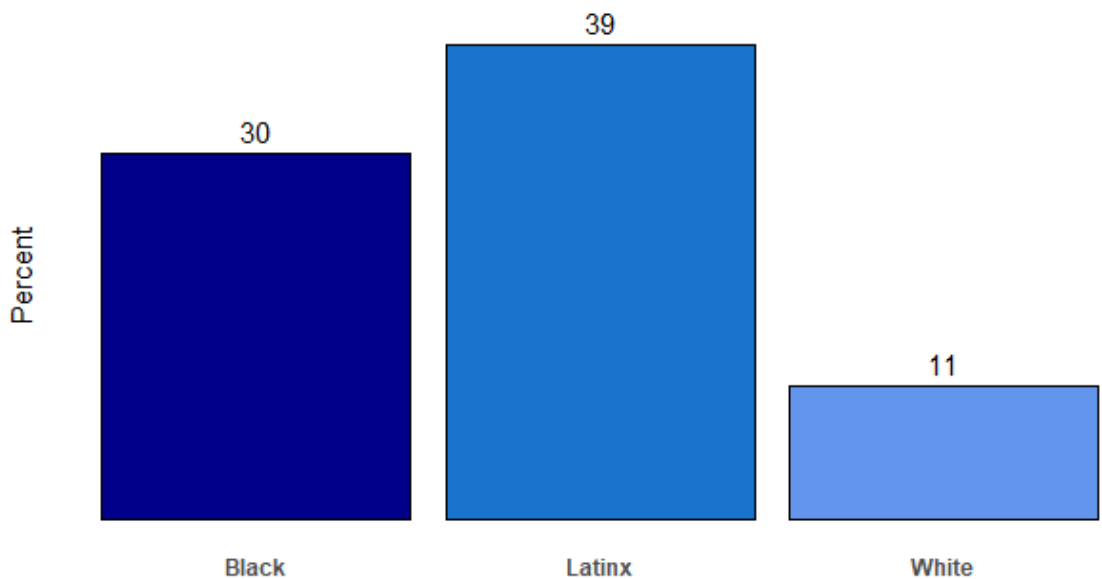
The characteristics of renters in our sample followed [decades](#) of redlining in Ypsilanti that prevented Black residents from owning homes. Furthermore, the combination of renting and being unable to work from home left our Black respondents particularly vulnerable. 71% of Black respondents in this position could not afford a \$400 unexpected expense, compared to 54% of white respondents.



Late Payments

Regardless of where individuals were working, the pandemic and subsequent spring shutdown strained household finances. Gov. Whitmer's eviction moratorium expired on July 16, meaning individuals and families were once again at risk of eviction during the period of data collection for this study. Thus, it was very important to observe how common late payments were in Ypsilanti during that time. We found it to be quite common among residents of color.

Have Been Late with Mortgage or Rent Payments During Pandemic
Based on survey of 607 Ypsilanti residents from June 12 to August 21, 2020

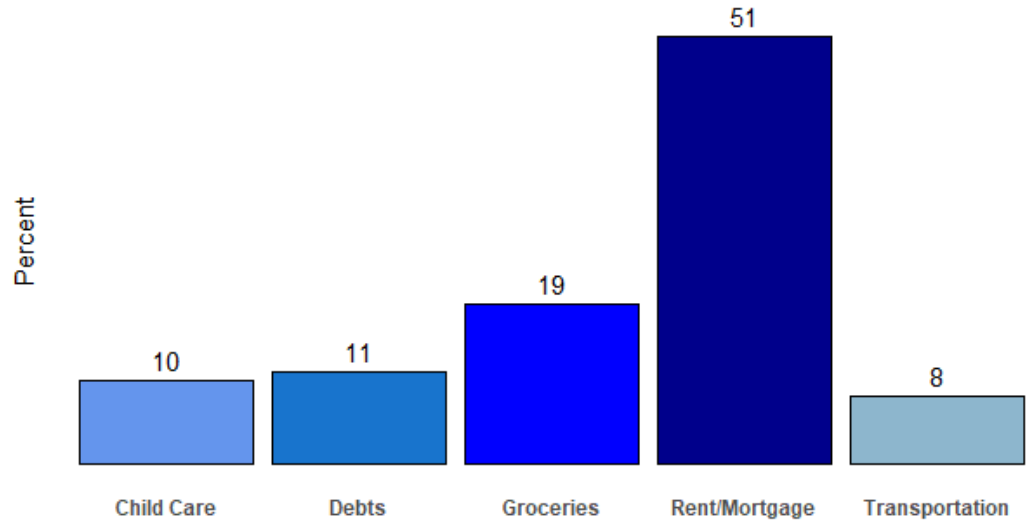


Hunger

With household budgets strained, we asked respondents to indicate how they prioritized their spending in the pandemic. More than 51% chose their rent or mortgage payments. Given that respondents reported being late with these payments, it stands to reason they are skimping elsewhere in their household budgets. One place might be groceries, which was the top spending priority of 19% of respondents.

Top Spending Priority During the Pandemic

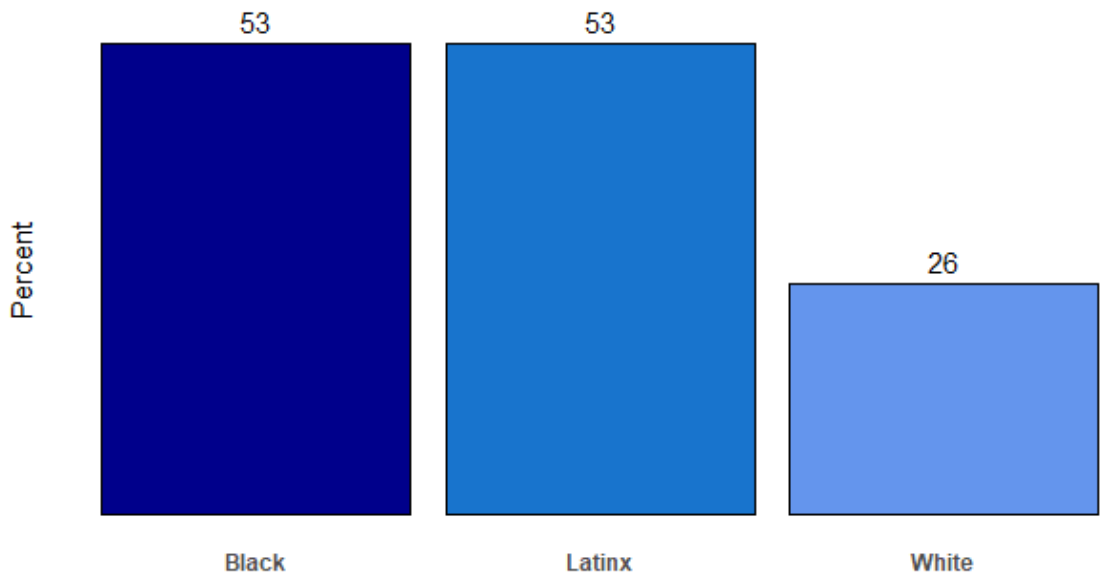
Based on survey of 607 Ypsilanti residents from June 12 to August 21, 2020



SNAP benefits can help balance budgets for groceries. More than 50% of Black and Latinx households report receiving SNAP benefits, respectively. Nevertheless, that does not mean families were not facing hunger, or anxiety about running out of food.

Receive SNAP During Pandemic

Based on survey of 607 Ypsilanti residents from June 12 to August 21, 2020



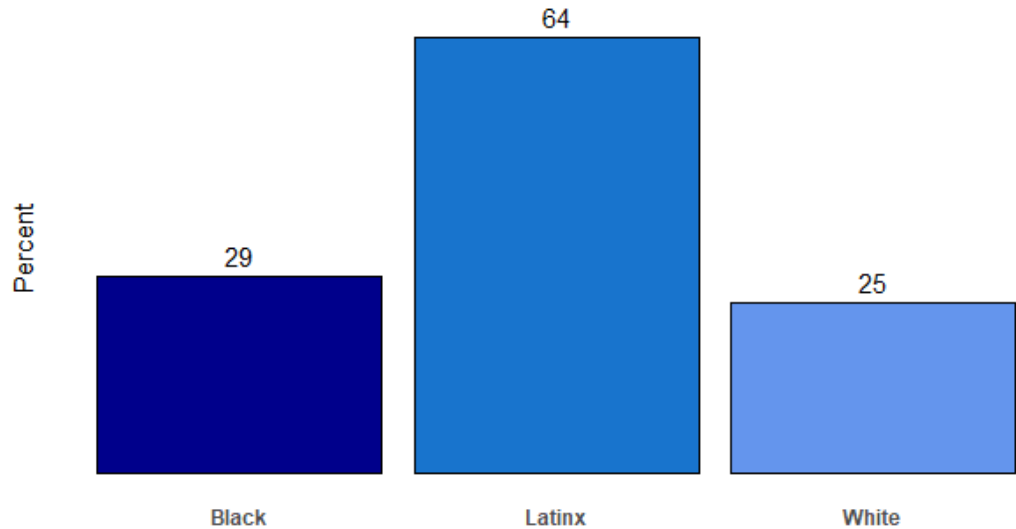


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We found that many respondents indicated they had eaten less in the last 7 days for fear of running out of food. This was true for 64% of Latinx respondents.

Eaten Less in Last 7 Days for Fear of Running Out of Food

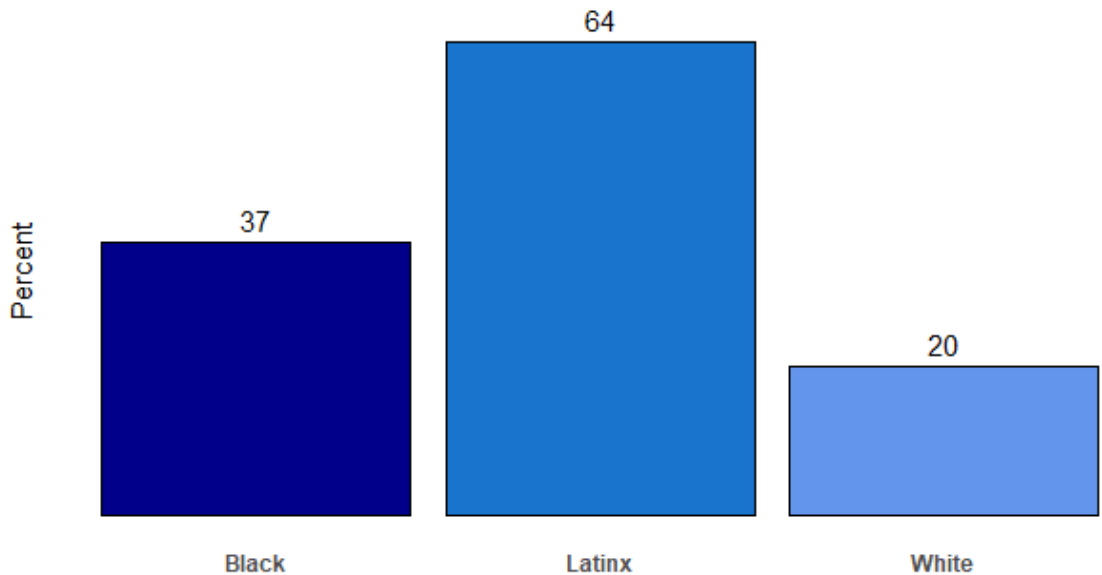
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These figures were unfortunate on their own, but an even higher percentage of respondents worried they would run out of food. Once again, this feeling was pronounced among Latinx respondents.

In Last 7 Days, Have Been Worried About Running Out of Food

Based on survey of 607 Ypsilanti residents from June 12 to August 21, 2020



Hunger during COVID is a national [problem](#), but one that exists in Ypsilanti as well. The combination of eating less and worrying about running out of food may also induce [toxic stress](#) in individuals and their households. Given the percentages, such stress is likely to be more common in Ypsilanti's household of color.



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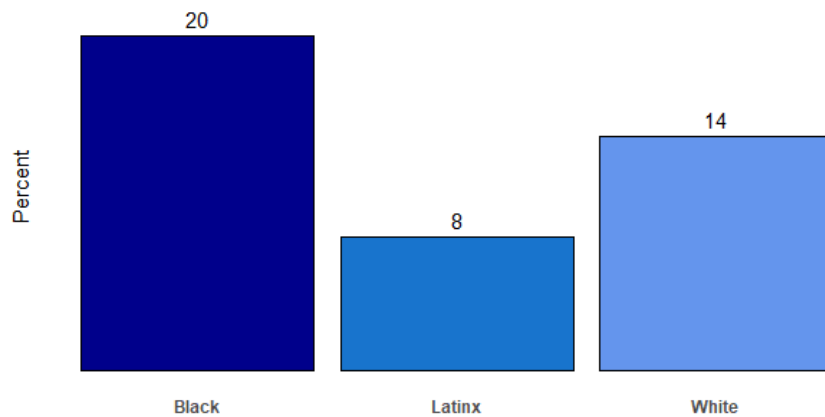
Feelings Toward Institutions

Faced with a once-in-a-century viral pandemic that has affected people of color more than white residents, the study team wanted to know how respondents felt about their public institutions, specifically their elected officials and law enforcement. We already observed variation in how seriously respondents took COVID-19 for themselves, personally. So, it was possible that variation was reflected in how they felt about their public-serving institutions.

We asked respondents to indicate their level of agreement with statements such as "My elected officials are concerned about COVID-19 in my community," or "Members of law enforcement in my community care about people like me."

Disagree Elected Officials Concerned About COVID-19 in My Community

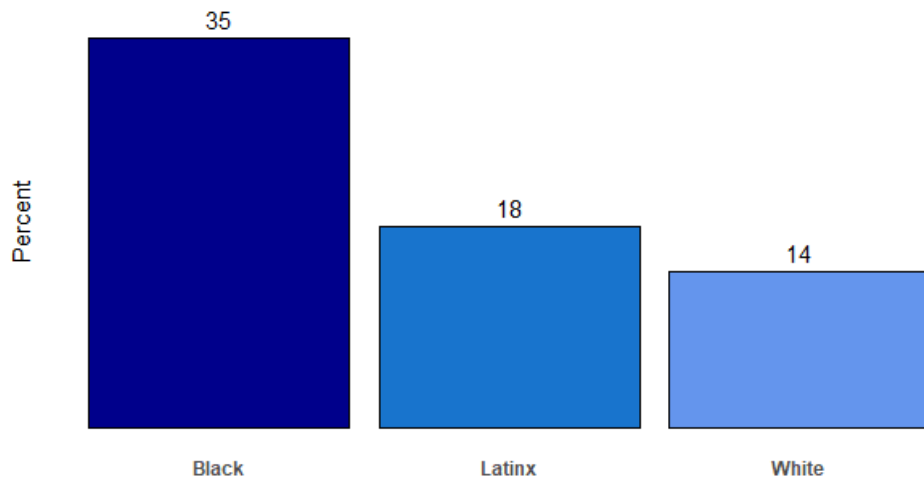
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Based on these results, Latinx respondents appeared willing to give elected officials the benefit of the doubt regarding COVID-19 in their community. However, 20% of Black respondents felt their elected officials were not concerned about COVID-19 in their community. The question was not directed at a specific level of government. Respondents may have felt their local elected officials were doing the best they could under the circumstances. Respondents may also have felt more concern could have been shown toward COVID-19 in Ypsilanti, specifically. Regardless, the majority of respondents across races felt their elected officials did care about COVID-19 in their community.

Disagree Members of Law Enforcement Care About People Like Me

Based on survey of 607 Ypsilanti residents from June 12 to August 21, 2020





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The same benefit of the doubt did not appear to be extended to members of law enforcement, particularly for Black respondents. Data for this study was collected amidst national protests against police brutality following the police-related killings of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor. 35% of Black respondents felt members of law enforcement did not care about people like them. This was largely consistent with national data from the [Congressional Research Service](#), which finds that only 40% of non-white Americans have confidence in the police, versus 59% of white Americans.

Conclusions

The results shared here only begin to tell the story of COVID-19's impact on Ypsilanti's residents of color. We could only observe answers to questions we asked, and the scale of COVID-19 is such that we will be feeling its impact for years. Yet in its most basic form, the COVID-19 pandemic can be understood as having disparate impact on Ypsilanti's residents of color. This was true nationally, as well. However, its national similarities are more an indictment of Ypsilanti's inequality than they are exculpatory for the pandemic's impact. The area is highly-educated and enjoys access to quality health care services.

Nevertheless, Black respondents were far more likely to know friends and family members who have died from COVID-19. They were more likely to be renters unable to both work from home or afford a \$400 unexpected expense. Both Black and Latinx respondents were more likely to have lost their jobs as a result of COVID-19, and to have missed rent/mortgage payments. Our Latinx respondents were also more likely to go without food, and fear running out of food.

Having a job, a roof over one's head, food on the table, are basic life needs. COVID-19 disrupted these needs for Ypsilanti's residents of color and has made life more difficult as a result. These facts cannot be overlooked as the nation recovers. Those most impacted will be most in need.



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The Center for Equitable Family and Community Well-Being was established in 2020 at the University of Michigan's School of Social Work whose mission is Utilizing collaborative relationships and innovative practice to foster a more equitable distribution of power and resources.

Recommended Citation

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Contact

Center for Equitable Family and Community Well-Being
University of Michigan – School of Social Work
1080 S. University Ave.
Ann Arbor, MI 48109
734-936-2709
equity-for-all@umich.edu