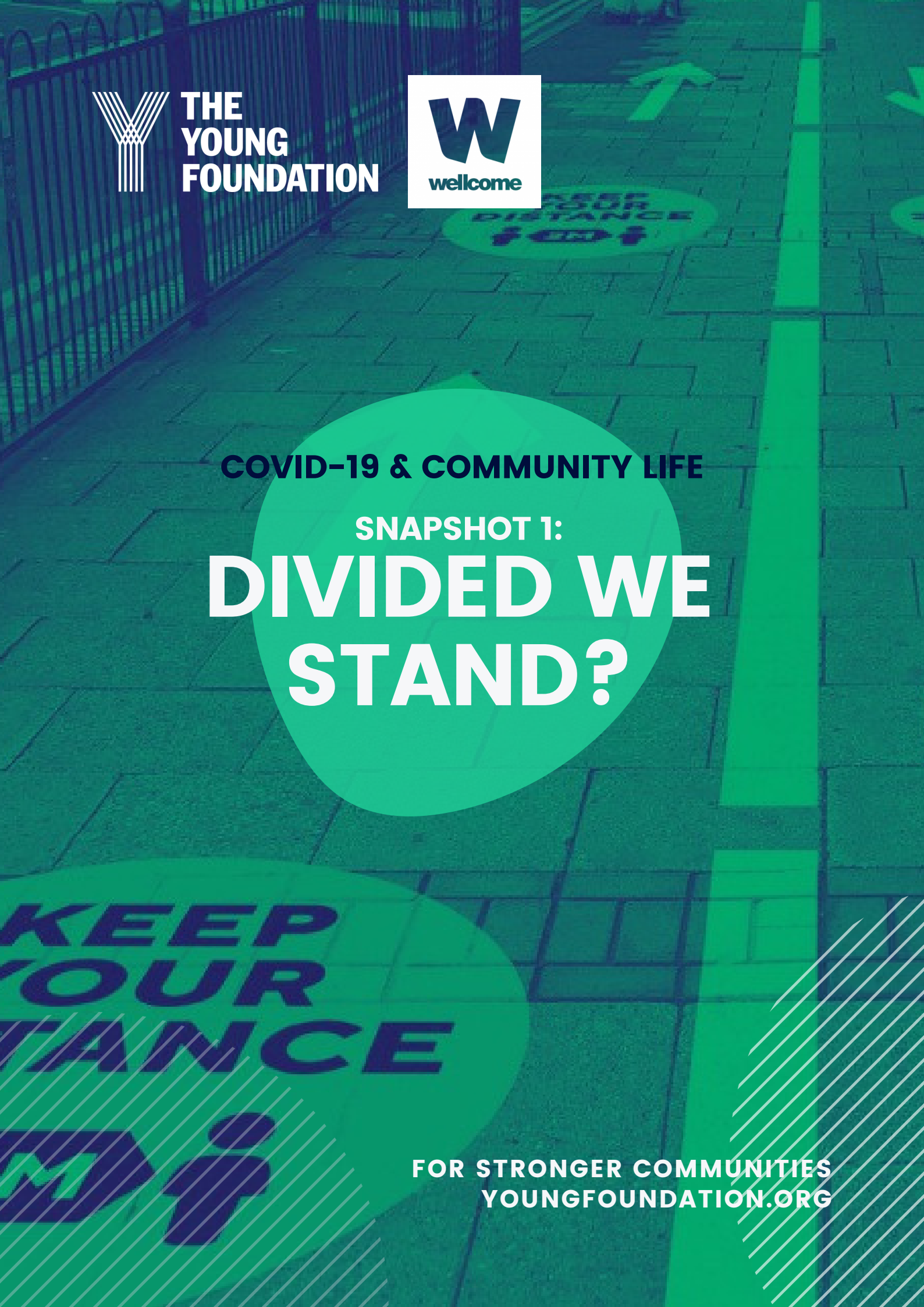
THE YOUNG FOUNDATION
wellcome
COVID-19 & COMMUNITY LIFE
SNAPSHOT 1:
DIVIDED WE STAND?
FOR STRONGER COMMUNITIES
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COVID-19 & COMMUNITY LIFE

Covid-19 & Community Life is a study run by The Young Foundation and generously supported by the Wellcome Trust. The project is exploring how Covid-19 is changing our relationships, interactions and experience of community in real-time. Using both a digital platform, whereby around 140 participants share their stories and experiences online, supplemented with phone interviews with 30 people who do not have access to, or feel comfortable using, digital devices. We are focusing on three key themes:

- how the Covid-19 pandemic is affecting interactions between individual in society;
- how the role of the digital realm plays a role in community response; and
- how individuals and communities relate to science and research.

A more detailed summary of the methodology is at the end of this report.
This snapshot report is based on the findings of 132 online participants. It represents an interim, top-line analysis. A more detailed report will be published later in the project.

SNAPSHOT 1:

UNITY & DIVISION

As the pandemic arrived on UK shores, the country was already sharply divided. We had just left the European Union, with no sign of reconciliation between those on either side of the debate. We had also been living through febrile times more broadly. There were over 280 recorded protest events in the UK in 2019 [1], compared to 154 in 2010, and Extinction Rebellion and climate strikes led by school children closed out the year. The protests by junior doctors over changes to their contracts seem a distant memory after all that has happened to the NHS since, but they were just one of many examples of tension and disagreement between different groups of citizens and/or the State.

Initially, the pandemic brought an immediate halt to all protests and attention focused exclusively on Covid-19. It was hailed as a 'great leveller', that we 'are all in this together' and a light was shone on the many examples of people coming together across divides to support one another.

Of course, over time, it became clear that Covid-19 is not a great leveller – people from Black and Ethnic Minority groups, from low-income households or deprived communities, and key workers are disproportionately bearing the brunt of the disease, in health, social and economic terms.

But what does this mixed picture tell us about the longer-term pattern of unity and division across the UK?

In August 2020, the ONS[2] published statistics which showed that:

> **"Over the period as a whole, from 24 April to 28 June 2020, more adults on average thought that Britain will be united after we have recovered from the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic (46%) than thought that we were united before the pandemic (24%)."**

1 Bailey, D.J. (2020) Decade of dissent: how protest is shaking the UK and why it's likely to continue . Las accessed 24/9/20 https://theconversation.com/decade-of-dissent-how-protest-is-shaking-the-uk-and-why-its-likely-to-continue-125843
2 Office for National Statistics (2020). Unity and division in Great Britain: 24 April to 28 June 2020. Last accessed 18/9/20 https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/wellbeing/bulletins/unityanddivisioningreatbritain/24aprilto28june2020

This is quite a remarkable shift in opinion. It also showed that people in Scotland were less optimistic than those in England and Wales, and women more positive about the future than men.

Crucially, however, it shows that as the pandemic unfolded, an initial high of optimism gave way to the point that, by the end of June, people were no more likely to feel the country would be united after the pandemic than before:

> **"As time progressed through the period, the percentage of adults who thought that Britain would be more united after the pandemic declined by 29 percentage points (from 57% in the first week of the period to 28% in the last week) so that by the end of this period, there was no difference in the percentage of people who thought that Britain would be united before the pandemic compared with those who thought it would be united after."**

WHAT THIS DATA DOESN'T TELL US IS WHY

Our participants showed a similar pattern of response – half (49%) do not think there will be any difference after the pandemic, with one-third (35%) hoping for at least a modest improvement, but 16% expecting things to get worse.

THE OLD ISSUES WILL STILL BE THERE

In the deck of cards representing the issues and challenges facing the UK, the Aces in the pack remain Brexit, immigration, equality (along gender, race and economic lines), and, to a lesser extent, devolution. While there is recognition that the pandemic has often brought people and communities together in a moment of crisis, the majority are pessimistic about any long-term change.

> "All these divisions are still there. We have foodbanks and BLM protests, Brexit is looming large and any goodwill from the start of the pandemic has long since evaporated, and people behave like idiots again."

> "Post-Covid, the UK will be further divided than it ever was, as the problems of post Brexit transition and Covid recovery come home to roost at the same time ... Covid has allowed the Union within the UK to become weaker, as each region has done its own thing leading to a confusing set of rules and approaches.."

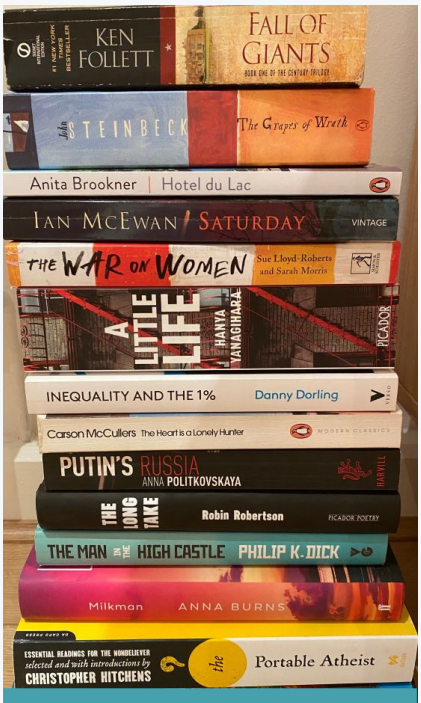
> "Inequalities will be worse because of the effects COVID will have on employment and health which will effect poorer people more and because the Government will not continue to support all workers, industries or the homeless or disadvantaged. We might never recover from the COVID outbreak."

For some, the pandemic has simply thrown into even sharper relief the divisions which already existed, with people sending us, for example, photos of piles of books they planned to read covering inequality and the spectrum of social issues. And sometimes there is a sense that certain viewpoints heavily overlap making it easier for people to judge, dismiss and discriminate against one another.

> "I think the pandemic has further illustrated the deep divides in society. Combined with BLM and Brexit, I think society will become more divided, not less. In my experience, the idea of unity against the pandemic was already co-opted by the alt right - all the allusions to the Blitz spirit, fighting the virus, clapping for Boris Johnson, etc."

> "Those who didn't support Brexit seem to be resigned to the catastrophe. That's not unity, it's despair."

> "I think that those who are happy to follow the government's guidance will be seen as those who voted to leave the EU and the divisions will become more entrenched."



"The pile of books I planned to read...."

And even where early glimmers of hope were found, "already the post-Covid cracks are appearing. E.g.: furloughed staff berated as lazy, NHS workers abuses. Piece by piece the dream of a post-Covid utopia is eroded, and ultimately will take with it any semblance of unification we once knew".

COVID-19 HAS PROVIDED FERTILE GROUND TO KEEP DIVISIONS ALIVE

> "People have become divided, into those who 'believe' in the coronavirus and those who do not".

People have also been divided over debates about the cause and source of the virus, how best to reduce the risk, roles and responsibilities, and what the impacts of the pandemic really are. The divisions are stark and for some "it has become normal to see someone shouting at people not wearing masks one minute, and to stumble across a group of conspiracy theorists protesting against another lockdown the next".

Unsurprisingly, there are feelings of frustration, exasperation and exhaustion. There is a sense that Covid-19 is simply a new vehicle for old arguments.

> "This situation has split the country. The government is not as popular. The reality of the situation is hitting hard and issues around exam results, homelessness and lack of PPE have had the effect of splitting the country. There are differences between the UK's countries in the way they are dealing with things. This hasn't helped."

> "Brexit has caused a huge rift, and I don't see any way of mending it ... This culture war still exists; coronavirus has simply highlighted it. E.g. pro vs anti-mask, pro vs anti-vaccine, racism against Chinese/Asian people."

IN WHOM CAN WE TRUST?

Both politicians and the media come in for substantive criticism, with people from all parts of the country and walks of life concerned that either incompetence or deliberate misinformation and manipulation are kindling the fires of division.

> "As a country we are very divided at present. we have a prime minister that does not really care what the people want. I'm Scottish and only listen to the advice of Nicola Sturgeon and the Scottish government."

For some it has led to deep distrust, and as a result, sometimes disparaging views of those who continue to support the Westminster Government in particular. Those living in devolved nations tend to perceive their national government as more trustworthy, but the inconsistencies between nations are troubling for most.

"The Government seem to be blaming people from my age group for the spike...

...when they are in fact to blame when they bring out schemes that encourage people to go out."

> "I don't see any meaningful change to where we were ... some people are happy to interpret the performance of the government - among the worst in Europe if not the world -as not so bad. People are willing to give the government the benefit of the doubt, to overlook the albeit minute number of their good decisions (like introducing a furlough scheme), and to interpret guidance, research and so on in a way that fits their prior beliefs."

> "People have become untrusting of the government due to the lack of consistent information, constant changes in policies and laws, and have been engaging in conspiracy theories."

The media, in particular, comes in identified as a source of information and misinformation. Social media tends to be most heavily criticised, and many implicitly or explicitly criticise those who post or share content which others find offensive, or deem incorrect.

> "There are factions in the modern world that thrive off division and have an interest in stoking it via social media."

> "The press manoeuvres us a lot more than we realise - take the documentary on Rupert Murdoch to see how powerful the media is. The opposing sides of the Guardian and the Sun. We are constantly being pitted against each other for every issue whether it's Meghan Merkel, masks, vaccines or poor people in boats coming into Kent."

> "I have seen social media posts with people of different races and religions trying to pin blame on other ethnic or religious groups for causing or exacerbating the spread of COVID 19. It has highlighted the selfishness and disregard for others in our society."

EVEN OPTIMISM IS TEMPERED

Among those who indicated a belief that we would be more united as a country after the pandemic, just over half think that overall the country will still be divided – a case of things being slightly less bad, rather than genuinely united. The most positive point clearly to two reasons for their optimism:

- The examples of community spirit they witnessed during the height of lockdown
- A belief that people will have learned from a shared and difficult experience

> "Britain will be more united, equal & kinder. They will have seen what it means to be vulnerable through their own lives & those close to them. The shocking numbers of deaths, coverage on the news of people on ventilators. The realisation that you are not in control. The heart will soften to those around them."

> "We have gone from being a split country on our political views, to a united country as we have all gone through the same thing. Even the richest people felt trapped at some point and I think the relief of this lockdown being over will unite a lot of people."

> "I think people will be more united than before because of their experiences during lockdown, it was wonderful to see everybody was in this together, there was no class divide, Covid-19 didn't pick what colour, nationality or what religion you were born into it didn't discriminate any part of society."

A few, however, take a more pragmatic view. A more united future is not seen as the result of increased empathy or understanding, but will simply be a necessity in the face of future political and economic adversity.

> "People will have realised somewhat how much they have been made fools of in the passing of time and that will act as a cursor in uniting them They will come to realise that Covid-19 is no respecter of persons and neither is the government. What after that can people do except to come together against the common enemy(ies)."

> "I think Britain with have to unite together to get the economy up and running again."

MIXED REASONS FOR NEGATIVITY

While only a minority predict a clear worsening and more divided country after the pandemic, there is little consistency in reasons for this.

Most commonly, at one end of the spectrum there are simple fears that social distancing means "it will take time for us all to be united again as we have not seen each other in a long time" or that ongoing health concerns will be a barrier as "people are a bit more mindful of others as they're not sure what to expect next". A few also point to a perceived worsening of individual behaviours, more "selfish", undermining collective unity.

Others point firmly to the political consequences they see unfolding, in relation to the state of the union and devolution, but also in relation to other anticipated consequences.

> "We have already seen different parts of the Union showing increased dissent (if only to make political capital) and this is likely to get worse".

> "I feel the union of nations will collapse. Scotland and Wales will break away from Westminster control due to its insane policies".

> "It'll get worse because the disabled will be worse off. They always are."

The strongest and most emotive points, however, come from those who are looking at how issues of equality and human rights have played out during the course of the pandemic.

> "I'd like to believe that we would be less but the truth at the moment seems to be that people are more divided - pro or anti mask wearing, fearful or disdainful (Pandemic vs Plandemic)."

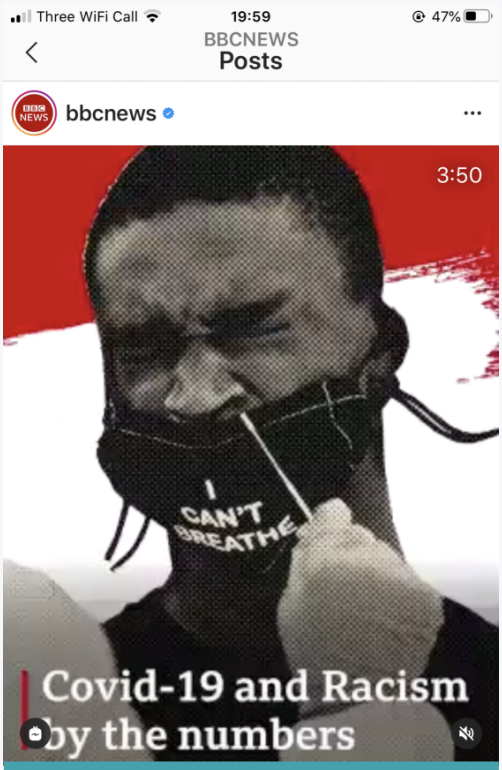
People in this group see clearly how groups have fractured along not only attitudes and responses to Covid-19 itself, but how the situation has magnified and exacerbated divisions along racial, religious and economic lines. They also point to the role of the media and social media in fuelling and inflaming tensions. This is not a left-wing dominated agenda; concerns are expressed equally by people who experienced the Black Lives Matter protests as negative, or who are against vaccination, as by those who challenge such perspectives.

> “I think COVID has highlighted and widened many divides. The poor have only become poorer, while the rich have become richer. People are watching and attacking strangers based on their response to COVID.”

> “I now fear that forced vaccination is the next step ... It's a fallacy to say everyone needs the vaccine as T-cell response in young people is high and makes them asymptomatic - injecting RNA to create antibodies is a travesty of science and justice.”

> "In the early days of the virus I believe there was a sense of unity and stoicism both locally and nationwide but I feel a lot of this was undone and damaged by the BLM movement during the summer.”

> “George Floyd's death forced the British public to ask itself some questions about race and identity that it had long avoided. The only clear consensus is that his death was horrific, beyond that opinion is extremely divided on how the incident relates to the Black British experience. COVID 19 conspiracy theories spread through social media, lack of consensus amongst experts and government indecisiveness has left the country probably more divided than it has ever been in my lifetime. Post COVID I don't see this changing.”



"This is quite upsetting and a reminder that racism is everywhere"

APPENDIX

HOW WE ARE CONDUCTING THIS RESEARCH

Using both a digital platform and telephone interviews, this study hears from voices around the UK to better understand how interactions and relationships have influenced the role of communities during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Around 140 nationally representative participants from around the UK participate in weekly online tasks and discussion boards set by The Young Foundation on an online digital platform called Recollective. The participants are tasked with completing specific activities including polls, photo and video responses, digital diaries and other creative activities, to help us gather insights on different issues as the situation continues to evolve. The tool and method used enables a highly interactive yet un-intrusive approach to working in a participatory way. It also enables a flexible and interactive method in what is a fast-evolving context which can respond to new changes and challenges.

In order to capture the voices of those individuals who are digitally excluded, we are working with 15 trained peer researchers who are part of The Young Foundation's Peer Research Network. These peer researchers are individuals who are deeply connected within their own communities and as part of this project are conducting bi-weekly telephone calls with around 30 individuals from around the UK who either do not have access to, or feel comfortable using, digital devices.

This combined approach ensures that we are hearing from a range of voices and viewpoints, allowing us to create a nationally representative picture of what is happening around the UK as the Covid-19 pandemic continues to unfold.

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Authors: Victoria Boelman, Eve Avdoulos, Jana Tauschinski, and Alice Bell
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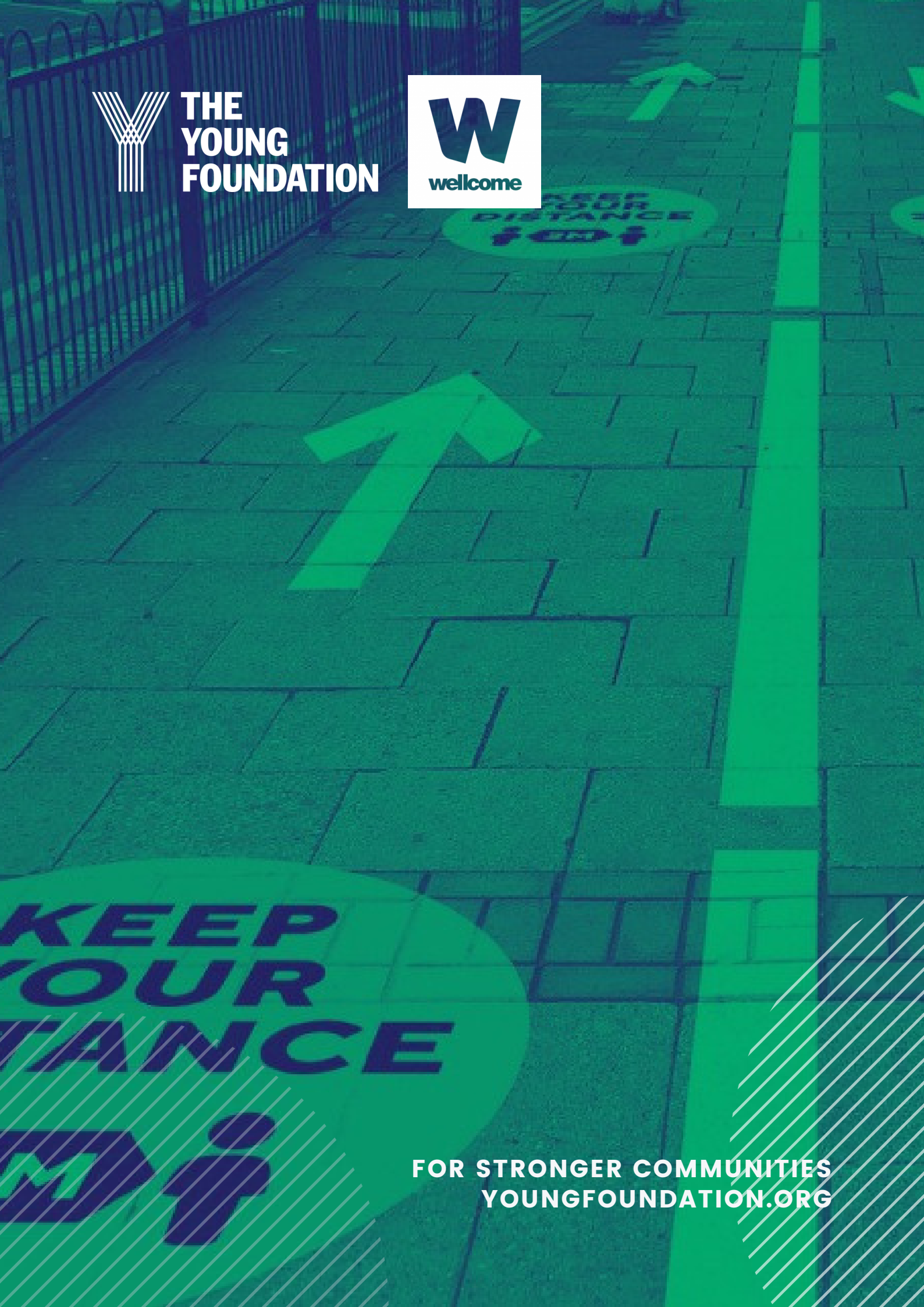

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