

Museums, Class and the Pandemic

An investigation into the lived
experiences of working-class Londoners

by Dr Serena Iervolino
and Dr Domenico Sergi



**CURATING
LONDON**



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ABOUT THIS REPORT

Recent decades have witnessed growing interests in museum scholarship and practice surrounding issues of diversity, exclusion, inequality and activism. These efforts have resulted into a number of initiatives aiming to shed light on the histories and lived experiences of minoritised communities. Yet, working-class communities have received less attention when compared to the wealth of work addressing issues of race, ethnicity, sexuality and gender identity, to cite a few.

This report contributes to this limited body of knowledge by discussing findings from *Inequality, Class and the Pandemic* (ICP), a research and collecting project undertaken at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, as part of the ground-breaking Curating London programme, funded by Arts Council England. The project was collaboratively developed by the Museum of London and the Department, Culture, Media and Creative Industries, King's College London.

With ICP we turned our attention to the perhaps less celebrated but equally “essential” workers in low-paid, low-skilled, working-class jobs, such as supermarket workers, cleaners, carers, bartenders, teaching assistants and food delivery couriers. Thus, this study prioritises labour and, more specifically, low-paid employment in examining working-class lived experiences.

Drawing on a small sample of oral history interviews, the report brings into sharp focus the structural inequalities and vulnerabilities experienced by working-class Londoners alongside their sense of agency and solidarity. A complex and nuanced image of working-class communities emerges from our research, which we believe museums in the UK and elsewhere should attend more closely.

The report concludes with a set of recommendations on how museums can best research, document and collect the ever increasing socio-economic inequalities and class differences in Britain and elsewhere. We call for a number of initiatives that museums need to undertake in order to better care for working-class communities, stretching from research and curatorial practice to recruitment and governance.

Ultimately, the report intends to fuel broader reflection in the sector on how museums can more proactively engage with class differences and structural inequalities beyond the pandemic, demonstrating the significance of using class as an analytical category in both museum theory and practice.

The study offers a novel approach to museum work examining issues of social justice, equality/inequality and inclusion; as such will be of interest to both museum academics and practitioners. At the same time, the interdisciplinary outlook of the report, and the insights offered into people's lived experience of the pandemic, make it suitable to a readership stretching beyond the heritage sector.

- **Museum curators and engagement professionals** will find of interest the research design and methodology adopted, and how this translated into high-calibre collecting outcomes.
- **Museum and Heritage scholars** will be particularly interested in the museological questions concerning working-class representations in museums, and our recommendations on how museums can more proactively engage with class-based inequalities.
- **Scholars in the fields of sociology, anthropology, urban studies and geography** will find of interest the narratives emerging from people's lived experience of the pandemic. Those interested in the gig economy and platformed labour will find particularly useful the accounts of food delivery couriers, the study's largest sample.
- **Policymakers** will find this report useful as a resource to inform targeted policy interventions aimed at raising the profile of working-class lived experiences in the wider arts sector.

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CONTENTS

Acknowledgments	6.
Forwards Sharon Ament, Director of the Museum of London Professor Nick Wilson, Head of CMCI, King's College London	7.
Introduction	11.
Museum, Class and the Pandemic	21.
Common challenges	27.
Working-class experiences <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Inequalities in the job market• Vulnerability• Solidarity and Agency	31.
Conclusion	51.
Afterward Michelle McGrath, Founder of Museum as Muck	59.

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We are especially grateful to the project's research participants who agreed to take part in the case study research. This report is dedicated to them. We want to thank each and every one for sharing their experiences with us during these unprecedented times.

We also would like to thank Professor Dave O'Brien (Sheffield University), Beatrice Behlen (Senior Curator of Fashion and Decorative Arts, Museum of London) and Beverly Cook (Curator of Social & Working History, Museum of London) for commenting on earlier drafts of the report. Our thanks also go to Ada Robinson (Curatorial Operations Coordinator, Museum of London) for proofreading the final text.



FOREWORDS

MUSEUM OF LONDON FOREWORD

The COVID-19 pandemic has challenged our way of being, severing us from family and friends and forcing us to deal with loss and bereavement at a scale the city has rarely seen. Since April 2020, the Museum of London started to record these unprecedented events through the rapid-response *Collecting COVID* programme. The programme aimed to tell future generations what it was like to live in London during the pandemic. We issued a call out for proposing acquisition by members of the public, and collected materials ranging from signs in support of key workers to diaries, masks and photographs, we even collected dreams.

We became aware early on in the pandemic that COVID-19 was substantially sharpening socio-economic inequalities across the city. We therefore decided to partner with the Department of Culture, Media and Creative Industries, King's College London to research, document and collect the experiences of working-class people at a critical moment in the history of the city.

At the Museum of London and the Museum of London Docklands, we are concerned with people's lived experience of London. The story we tell is one of place and people, evolving through interaction and exchange. We want to engage everyone with the London Collection reaching as many people as possible. This research is a vital step in achieving this ambition.

Inequality, Class and the Pandemic was carried out as part of what we consider to be groundbreaking museology through the Curating London programme. Funded by Arts Council England, it aims to challenge the way we collect the everyday experience, what really can be said to be the stuff of London. By working directly with communities across London, Londoners themselves are helping to build the London Collection and diversify our wider curatorial practices, thus enriching our understanding of London and the people who shape it. This is more important than ever as we look towards a new Museum of London in the coming years. But the significance of this report for the Museum goes beyond how we collect, research and interpret our collection aiming to contribute to sector-wise debates about the need to build more deeply inclusive museum spaces. This is an ambition we look forward to fulfilling in all sorts of ways.

Sharon Ament
Director of the Museum of London

KING'S COLLEGE LONDON FOREWORD

Amongst the many challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, being separated from others stands out as especially hard, and at times, unfathomably cruel. It is all the more significant, then, that this report is born out of a coming together – the coming together of the Museum of London and Culture, Media & Creative Industries (CMCI), King's College London to respond to the pandemic and the London lives it impacted. Such is a form of collaboration that offers an exciting, authentic and compelling vision for how situated research can be, indeed *should* be done.

As an academic department that has a long and distinctive record of research and publications that pay attention to “whose voices get heard?” CMCI is well-placed to shape thinking and doing around issues of diversity, exclusion and inequality in the museum and heritage sector. But it is through working together with the Museum, in the spirit of the ‘networked approach’ that this report calls for, that this vital work promises to be most impactful. This collaboration has produced rich insights into the lived experiences of working-class Londoners during the pandemic, steering the authors to broadly reflect on the treatment of socio-economic inequalities and class differences in museum work.

Setting the stage for how museums should document, collect and interpret the stories of working-class people in years to come, *Museums, Class and the Pandemic* makes an important intervention. In the process it gives a revealing and much-needed voice to the marginalised. I am so delighted that CMCI has been able to play a pivotal role in this project, and look forward to many more such partnerships in the future.

Professor Nick Wilson
Professor of Culture & Creativity
Head of Department, Culture, Media and Creative Industries, King's College London





INTRODUCTION

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has shone a harsh light on issues of social inequality in our neoliberal contemporary society, particularly around class divisions and racial inequalities. Such an impact has been especially felt in the UK where the class system has historically been, and arguably continues to be, deeply entrenched.

In the UK and elsewhere the pandemic created a novel category of workers that were dubbed essential to the functioning of society. Yet, early in the pandemic the government did not issue an official definition of essential workers. Nonetheless, the Office for National Statistics, based on an interpretation of UK government guidance, estimated that the number of people employed in 2019 in key worker occupations amounted to 33% of the total workforce (ONS 2021a). In 2021, the UK government offered additional guidance by identifying eight key worker occupation groups: health and social care, education, key public services, local and national government, food and other necessary goods, public safety and national security, transport, utilities communication and financial services (UK GOV 2021).

“Essential” or “frontline” workers were depicted in policy and media discourses as a homogenous category comprising those who were risking their lives for the collective good. This overarching narrative concealed significant differences in socio-economic background, ethnicity and gender, to cite a few.

Early in the pandemic, across the UK people took to their doorsteps, balconies and windows to celebrate frontline workers as part of the weekly Thursday evening #clapfourcarers initiative (Brooks and Morris 2020). Whilst this was originally intended to celebrate all frontline workers, it quickly turned into a celebration of NHS staff, and doctors and nurses in particular. Comparatively, other equally essential workers in low-paid occupations received less attention in mainstream discourse.

This group included a large array of low-skilled, low-paid and traditionally disposable workers, from hospitals’ custodial and cleaning staff, to bus and train drivers and other transport sector employees, factory and supermarket workers, food delivery couriers, restaurant and pub staff. A compelling critical account of low-paid health workers during the pandemic was offered by sociologist Angela McRobbie (2020) who reflected upon her own experience of being hospitalised with COVID-19.

The differences in public recognition, and net income, within the broad category of essential workers, and the impact of class dynamics on people’s lived experiences of the pandemic, also challenge the widespread pandemic rhetoric of “we are in this together” (Sobande 2020).

This absurdity seemed to escape many academic commentators and professionals, including those in the museum and heritage sector. This led us to initiate a small collaborative research and collecting project entitled *Inequality, Class and the Pandemic* (ICP), where the attention is turned on “essential workers” in low-paid, low-skilled, working-class jobs beyond the health

and social care sector.

ICP was part of the Museum of London's rapid-response *Collecting COVID* programme. Started in April 2020, this programme aimed to tell future generations what it was like to live in London during the pandemic. The initiative sought to reflect the voices and tell the experiences, both positive and negative, of a broad range of Londoners. It also aimed to record the changes to the urban environment associated with the UK's capital going into, and emerging from, different waves of lockdowns.¹

Using seed funding from both Museum of London and King's College London, we (Dr Serena Iervolino, Lecturer in the Department of Culture, Media and Creative Industries at King's and Dr Domenico Sergi, Senior Curator at the Museum of London) led a small team of research assistants who carried out the project's primary research and conducted a background literature review. The team was coordinated by Stella Toonen and included Nabil Al-Kinani, Thomas Campbell, Karim Mahmoud, Valentina Vavassori and Kirsty Warner.

ICP sought to achieve a number of distinct but interconnected aims. We wanted to shed light on the lived experiences of working-class Londoners during the pandemic, and for them to be represented in the London collection. In this context, we approached ICP as a case study to address much broader museological questions concerning working-class representations in museums. Furthermore, we aimed at demonstrating that museum research and practice focusing on people's lived experience can offer valuable insights to allied disciplines such as sociology, anthropology, geography and urban studies to cite a few.

The notion of "lived experience" has become commonplace in contemporary museum practice. Yet, how such experiences might be researched, documented and collected has received less attention in museum scholarship and practice. This is an area that we will further explore in the 2023 issue of *Museum Worlds* (Iervolino and Sergi *forthcoming*). Since 2018, the Curating London programme has contributed to this debate by undertaking a number of ambitious curatorial projects which have collected both digital and physical objects using a range of research approaches and methodologies, spanning from academic and community-led research to social art commissions.

This report is formed by four sections presenting the multiple and interrelated elements of the project. We begin by problematising the notion of class and addressing its relation to the museum and heritage sector. Our discussion addresses the limited but growing work concerning class in museum theory and practice, drawing attention to the critical work carried out in allied fields including the creative industries, arts management and sociology. Then, we outline how the project came about, its aims, research questions and methodological approach. We discuss a number of project-specific ethical challenges and considerations, which might apply to future research and collecting work in this area.

¹ The Museum of London employed different methodologies to collect both physical and digital objects. For instance, the museum commissioned or recorded the (non)sounds and sights of the empty city during lockdowns. Museum staff worked with individuals and communities to identify and collect significant stories and objects. A call out was issued through which objects could be proposed for acquisition by members of the public. The call received more than 600 responses and included suggestions such as different signs in support of key workers, diaries, masks and photographs. In the end the museum collected over 500 objects.

A significant section of the report then presents the key findings of our research carried out with a small group of Londoners. This section draws extensively on the voices of research participants, which are also emphasised by a few vignettes presented throughout the report. This section will be of particular interest to museum curators and scholars in the fields of sociology, urban studies and geography concerned with contemporary research and collecting on the working classes. Also, those interested in the gig economy will find the experiences of food delivery couriers analysed in this study particularly useful.

The concluding section of the report begins by summarising what emerged in our study of contemporary working-class lives in London. Drawing on this, we address a number of museological questions concerned with working-class representations in museums, moving beyond curatorial and interpretation work. We present a set of recommendations, inspired by research participants' reflections and lived experiences around how museums can better attend to working-class people. We call for a networked approach to support and enhance museum work in this area.

Essential workers

'I remember one day I delivered something to an elderly lady. It's funny and sad at the same time, because they didn't say the lady was blind. It said on the delivery, "Leave by the front door, because it's a contact-free delivery." Then I went there, I left it by the front door, two bags from the supermarket, and I knocked on the door and then walked away. I went to my bike six metres further on the street. Then this lady comes out and the first thing I noticed is that she was blind, because she was looking up, she was not looking down, she was going to trip over the bags. I shouted: "I'm the delivery guy!" She asked: "Where did you put it?" Then I said, "You should go back, I'll drop it inside." "Can you drop it inside my kitchen?" Then what was I supposed to do? I don't suppose I should go inside this lady's house, but if I don't do it, if I don't put it inside the kitchen... I didn't know what to do. So I did what she asked me to do. I went there, put everything on top of her table, the kitchen table, and then she was so pleased and said, "Oh, thank you, the other guy didn't do that, he left it at the door."

“Class”, and the heritage sector.

“Class” is not a neutral construct, but a complex and multifaceted analytical category rooted in the social, economic and political transformations of 18th and 19th century Europe. The concept is heavily indebted to Marxist theory and the overarching belief that class struggle, heightened by the emergence of capitalism, is the primary driver of history. An in-depth analysis of the historical debates on social class and its contemporary permutations is beyond the scope of this report.²

It is now extensively recognised that one’s class is not only shaped by economic variables but also by social and cultural factors, intersecting with variables such as race, gender, sexual orientation, migration and ethnicity (see Brook, O’Brien and Taylor 2020). The need for a more nuanced understanding of working-class lives was discussed by a 2019 Runnymede Trust study which highlighted how white working-class, BME and migrant communities, for example, share significant overlaps in their everyday lived experiences (Snoussi and Mompelat 2019).

Employment is therefore one of the very many indicators that can determine one’s class. At the same time, the profound economic inequities exposed by the pandemic made a focus on the economic dimensions of class all more urgent, leading to our decision to concentrate on essential workers in low-paid, low-skilled occupations. The number and proportion of low-paid jobs rose for more than a decade, since the London Living Wage was first introduced in 2005. In 2021, 17% of London jobs were low-paid, and seven out of ten accommodation and food-service related jobs were low-paid (Trust for London 2022).³ COVID-19 has markedly widened inequalities across the capital. The most deprived areas in London prior to the COVID-19 crisis have seen the largest increases in claims of unemployment benefits (WPI Economics 2021).⁴ A stark reminder of the ongoing nature of place-based inequalities, notoriously captured by Charles Booth’s colour-coded poverty maps of Victorian London, which sit in the Museum of London collection.

Questions of class have long been kept sealed in the UK museum and heritage sectors. In fact, British museums have tended to ignore or obscure class differences, as David Fleming (2022), former Director of National Museums Liverpool, has recently acknowledged. Such a disregard is surprising, as arguably class is one of the most important structuring axes around which British society is organised (Brook, O’Brien and Taylor 2020: 11). This is especially problematic in the context of the current socio-economic crisis, which is set to have a long-term impact “on, and of levels of, inequality” (British Academy 2021: 4). At the time of writing inequalities are being further exacerbated by the cost of living crisis associated with the war in Ukraine and its impact on the UK’s energy supply and the rampant inflation rate.

² For an analysis of how class has been used in sociology and anthropology see Carrier (2012). Refer to Savage et al. (2015) for debates concerning social class in Britain.

³ Across a wide range of indicators, there is a huge gap between Londoners on low incomes and those who are better off. London’s poverty rate increased from 28.8% in the 2019/2020 financial year to 29.3% in Q2 2020, and is then projected to fall to 28.1% by Q2 2022 (Trust for London 2022: 7).

⁴ Specifically, the most deprived 10% of London neighbourhoods have seen their rate of claims for unemployment benefit rise by around 7 percentage points (ibid).



Academic work examining issues of social justice, inclusion/exclusion, inequality or even activism in museums (e.g., Hooper-Greenhill 1997; Sandell 1998; 2002; 2007; Sandell and Nightingale 2012; Sandell and Janes 2019) has tended to prioritise other identity markers such as ethnicity, race, gender or sexuality. Socioeconomic differences have largely been disregarded, and class has been overlooked as an analytical category. A reason behind this is that work under the banner of diversity and inclusion in the museum sector has more often than not followed, rather than led, policy developments in this area. For example, class is not one of the protected characteristics of the UK 2010 Equality Act (Equality and Human Rights Commission 2010), which has guided and focused recent museums' inclusive initiatives. As others have noticed in the field of social psychology, making social class a protected characteristic would be a positive step, albeit a tricky one to legally implement given the difficulty of defining it (Rhodes 2022).

Museum and heritage study scholarship has sporadically analysed "class" as an identity feature in discussions around audience data (e.g., Voase 2013), or in hasty acknowledgments of how museums have traditionally excluded the working classes (Coffee 2008). Academic publications that directly address issues of class still remain scarce (Hill 2005; Carnegie 2006). Worthy of particular note are the recent work on class and classed inequality in UK museum work (Evans 2020) and the volume *Museums and the Working Class* (Chynoweth 2021).

The limited scholarly attention towards class has been met by a comparatively more proactive approach taken by museums. Subjects directly affecting the working classes such as education, new technology, and transport are covered in virtually every social and local history museum across the country. Local history museums have been especially active in this area, foregrounding personal stories and experiences connected to past and present community histories. The Black Country Museum, the Beamish Museum, the Museum of Rural Life and the Food Museum (the former Museum of East Anglian Life) are a few illustrative examples of the many UK institutions which have developed work in this area. Similarly, museums holding social and working history collections, such as the Museum of London, have also played an important part in actively collecting objects and stories relevant to working-class communities.

At the same time, as discussed by Beverley Cook, Social and Working History Curator at the Museum of London,⁵ when addressing subjects surrounding working-class lives, museums have often failed to come to grips with the complexity and gradations of people's lived experiences. In discussions with us, Cook has emphasised that a limitation of working-class representation in museums is their tendency to frame these around narratives of poverty and deprivation. Therefore, displays featuring working-class communities have tended to focus on the very poorest in society, which are usually a small minority and not representative of the multifaceted dimension of working-class lives. A departure from this approach is illustrated by some of the work being developed as part of Showtown, The museum of fun and entertainment, due to open in Blackpool in 2023. Rebecca Titone, Assistant Curator, has noted that the museum's intention is:

⁵ Cook, B. (2022) Private communication, 20th of July.

...to focus on experiences of enjoyment and to spotlight Blackpool as a centre of entertainment for the masses. The planned "Beside the Seaside" gallery, for example, includes a fifteen metre panoramic projection which uses archival resources and contemporary voices to celebrate the stories, people and events that transformed Blackpool into a booming entertainment resort" for the working classes.⁶

Since Bourdieu and Darbel (1991) influential publication around museums and their publics, the link between class and cultural consumption has been an ongoing line of inquiry in audience studies and cognate disciplines. Notable examples are the work of Bennett et al. (2009), analysing the role of cultural capital in relation to modern forms of inequalities across different cultural fields in Britain, and the research by Chan and Goldthorpe (2007) on the social stratification of cultural consumption and how this impacts access to, and participation in, cultural activities.

The homogenous treatment of working-class narratives in museums' exhibitions and displays goes hand in hand with the scarce emphasis placed on people from a working-class background in museums' recruitment strategies and audience development plans. Privilege remains an endemic feature of museums, manifesting itself not only in the composition of museum audiences but also in the workforce (Sandahl 2019: 8). The largely middle-class background of museum workforce, and of curatorial staff in particular, has consequences on the stories that museums choose to tell, and on the type of audiences that institutions tend to attract.

A burgeoning body of literature in allied academic fields, including sociology and cultural and creative industries, has addressed issues of class in creative organisations including museums, focusing especially on employment issues. For instance, in their noteworthy report [Panic! Social Class, Taste and Inequalities in the Creative Industries](#), Brook and her colleagues (2017: 11) explicitly point to the "absence of those from working-class social origins" in the British cultural and creative workforce. The authors discuss issues around exclusion, pay gaps, unpaid labour, and working-class representation in the shaping of cultural values and taste. Recent research also indicates that only 16% of people in creative occupations are from a working-class background, compared to 30% across all occupations (Carey et al. 2020). In the museum sector, working-class people make up only around 20% of curatorial, archivist and librarian jobs (ibid).

The enduring underrepresentation of people from a working-class background in the cultural and creative industries, and in leadership positions in particular, has been also emphasised by the [Creative Majority](#) report (Wreyford, O'Brien and Dent 2021: 35). This publication also notes that social class intersects with other demographic characteristics such as sexuality, gender and disability to create further barriers of access to creative occupations.⁷

⁶ Titone, R. (2022) Private Communication, 8th of August.

⁷ The Creative Majority report is especially notable as it offers creative practitioners and policymakers practical recommendations on how to tackle obstacles to equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) in the creative sector. The report calls for action to affect change in the sector around five guiding principles: greater ambition, allyship, accessibility, adaptability and accountability.

To counter this trend, working-class heritage professionals have established activist organisations nationally and internationally, such as the “[Museum as Muck](#)”, active in both the UK and Ireland. This supportive network of and for working-class museum and gallery professionals (known as “muckers”) was founded in 2018 to improve working-class representation across the sector, and to advocate for a better representation of working-class people in the workforce. Similar endeavours are also being pursued in the wider arts sector by initiatives such as the UK “[Working-Class Creatives Database](#)”, a platform aiming to create a community amongst working-class artists and to encourage greater representation of working-class experiences within the arts.

Interestingly, this important body of scholarship and practice has been scarcely acknowledged in the fields of museum and heritage studies. With this report, and our research more broadly, we aim to move beyond disciplinary silos and to study the lived experiences of working-class Londoners during the pandemic by bringing into dialogue research developed and methodological approaches adopted across different academic disciplines.

In the next section, we introduce ICP to our readers. We begin by exploring recent debates on the impact of the pandemic on the museum sector. Then, we introduce the project’s research questions, and discuss the methodological approach adopted, the ethical challenges experienced, as well as the composition of the research sample.





MUSEUMS, CLASS AND THE PANDEMIC

MUSEUMS, CLASS AND THE PANDEMIC

Upon the introduction of the first lockdown measures, museums and heritage organisations around the world began questioning how to best respond to the crisis. Some museums started to proactively document the pandemic, alongside others which decided to respond to their communities' most urgent needs (Olorunshola 2020).

As noted in *Museums Journal* by Rebecca Atkinson (2020), in the wake of the first lockdown measures, UK museums were particularly active in the area of rapid response collecting. These initiatives sparked intense debates across the sector around the ethics of contemporary collecting.⁸ Early reflections on the breadth and depth of the work undertaken internationally were presented in a Special Issue of *Museums and Society* edited by Amy K. Levin (2020). In 'Museums in the Pandemic: A Survey of Responses on the Current Crisis', published by *Museum Worlds*, Cobley et al. (2022) also offered insights into cultural resilience in action during COVID-19, gathering responses from museum directors, consultants, activists, curators, educators, academics in Canada, China, France, South America, the United Kingdom, and Aotearoa New Zealand (Cobley et al. 2020: 112). Research on the impact of COVID-19 on museums at large and the various institutional responses to the pandemic was also carried out by international museum and heritage bodies (see ICOM 2020; UNESCO 2020; NEMO 2020).

Our project *Inequality, Class and the Pandemic* was conceived with the aim to research, document and collect the lived experiences of working-class Londoners during the pandemic. Prior to the commencement of the study we spent much of the spring and summer of 2020 observing how COVID-19 was affecting London, and its most marginalised communities in particular.

Running throughout much of 2021, ICP was driven by the following research questions:

- How can the Museum of London document, collect and interpret the stories and experiences of working-class Londoners during the pandemic?
- How can this learning inform museums' future engagements with class divides in the UK?

We sought to answer these questions using a combination of methods, as will be further discussed in the methodology section below, including literature reviews, oral history interviews, semi-structured interviews and a focus group. Oral history interviews and a focus group with working-class Londoners in essential jobs were used to answer the first question. The latter question was answered by interviewing working-class professionals.

The decision to conduct a small scale, qualitative piece of scoping research involving a relatively small sample was strategic on our part. We were more interested in reflecting on the process of conducting research with working-class people during the pandemic, rather than

⁸ For a discussion of the ethics of contemporary collecting, see Cordner et al. (forthcoming).

generating a large and somewhat representative data set. Therefore, one of the limitations of this study is that we are unable to draw any general conclusions in relation to the lived experiences of working-class Londoners as a whole. In fact, the insights shared by research participants point to the complexity of the working-class “community”, and to the necessity of attending to its internal differences.

Before reviewing our study’s main findings, we first discuss the methodological approach undertaken, as we believe this is a key aspect to consider when addressing questions concerning class identities.

The Kindness of Strangers

‘There was this guy called George. He was a quiet, older guy and his wife had dementia, so it would be his only outing of the day. And at 6pm we used to reduce all the food. So, it would go down to like really cheap, like 20p for a loaf of bread. He would always come in at the same time every day, because it was like his little outing, and he would be like “where’s all the reduced food?”, because we would normally save it on a little trolley for him. But some days, where it just went straight away, because people would be like seagulls coming in for the reduced food on the rail, he’d get quite upset. But yeah, we would always save him the food [...] and we would always help him at the till to pack all his food and then chat about his day. And he would always be like “get me the longest dates, get me the longest dates on the potatoes, are you sure that’s the longest dates”, and I’d be like “yeah, yeah, that’s the longest dates, I promise, I’ve gone through them all day”.’

Methodological considerations

In our study we chose to employ a qualitative approach and used oral history as a primary method of data collection. The project’s primary research was carried out over the course of six months and included oral history recordings with Londoners in low-paid, low-skilled, working-class jobs, and interviews with colleagues from Museums as Muck and the Working Class Movement Library. The project also included a final workshop where we discussed preliminary findings with some of the research participants.

In this report we chose to foreground the lived experiences of working-class Londoners as they emerged in the oral history recordings. The report presents extracts from the interviews which are framed within a broader contextual analysis. Our intention is to focus on the experiences of socio-economic groups that were overlooked in other COVID-related oral history collecting projects. An example is the “Pandemic Preserved” initiative at the National Nordic Museum in Seattle, USA, which admittedly included a more middle-class sample (Anderson and DeRiemer 2020).

We felt that the researcher team’s own positionality was an important part of the study and that it was essential for the interviewers to share some common ground with research participants. Although this report’s authors’ middle-class occupations are hardly disputable, our personal backgrounds, life trajectories and identities are more complex than might be assumed. Domenico is a cis-man and gay working-class Mediterranean migrant. Serena is a cis-woman and straight Mediterranean migrant brought up by parents in lower middle-class occupations. The experiences, positionalities and identities of the wider research team have been critical to the research design from the very outset of the project. The wider research team included individuals who identify as working-class and/or were working in low-paid occupations at the time of the research.

Oral histories were conducted by two members of the research team who drew extensively on their lived experiences and personal networks to recruit research participants. Their personal experiences were critical to our research design which strived to foster equalitarian and respectful engagements with Londoners. One of the interviewers is a London-born working-class PhD student, and the other is a Middle Eastern migrant who worked as a food delivery courier during the pandemic. As part of the project, they both received relevant training in oral history recording, and built upon their existing skill-set as a doctoral researcher and a trained journalist, respectively.

Reflecting on the ethics of oral history fieldwork during COVID-19, Kelly (2020) argues on the need to place empathy at the core of research design, a matter of crucial importance in times of crisis. A point similarly emphasised by Lee and Springer (2020), who also notice how oral history collecting during the pandemic can be used to shed light on normalised conditions of socio-economic precarity and instability.

All interviews were conducted in accordance with Coronavirus UK government legislation, including social distancing measures. We also followed guidance circulated by the Oral History Society on conducting in-person and remote oral history interviews during the pandemic (Morgan et al. 2020). Given the time-sensitive and critical nature of the study, a special exemption was issued by King's College London and the Museum of London to conduct face-to-face interviews, where applicable. Some interviews were conducted remotely using the cloud-based peer-to-peer software platform "Zoom".

A data sharing agreement was signed by the Museum of London and King's College London to ensure both parties would collect, store and use personal data in line with GDPR legislation. Additionally, a thorough risk assessment was produced for face-to-face interviews to ensure both the physical and emotional safety of both interviewers and interviewees. Oral history recordings were postponed if either the interviewers or interviewees, as well as members of their households, were showing any COVID symptoms in the 24 hours prior to the interview.

Interviews were held in locations that involved as little travel as possible and they were conducted in outdoor areas in pubs, parks or private gardens. Quiet spaces were chosen in order to minimise as much background noise as possible. The latter was particularly important to maximise the "acquisition capital" of the recordings as we hoped that some oral histories could ultimately be part of the museum's permanent collection.

Prior to the interviews, participants received an information pack which outlined the overall scope of the project, and gave further information on how the recordings would be used. The pack also included a copy of the oral history agreement, and information on grief and mental health produced by charities such as *Mind* and the *Samaritans* during the pandemic.

Research participants were compensated for their time in recognition of the loss of income incurred by taking part in the research. At the beginning of the interviews participants were informed of their right to stop at any time and to withdraw sections or the full extent of the interview. At the end of the interview, participants signed an oral history agreement, which enabled them to choose whether to be named, remain anonymous or use pseudonyms. The majority of the people interviewed were happy to be named. Yet, when writing this report we chose to use pseudonyms even when participants opted for their name to be disclosed. Below, we offer more insights into the research participants and the sampling methods in the project.

The research participants

The research participants were selected using a snowball sampling method (Parker, Scott and Geddes 2019). A number of key stakeholders within the research assistants' own personal and professional networks were approached. They each represented a range of low-paid roles, from after school club supervisors to waiting or supermarket staff. Only a handful of these stakeholders were interviewed, as the majority enabled access to other research participants. The final sample of 15 included Londoners in low-paid occupations such as supermarket workers, cleaners, carers, bartenders, retail or teaching assistants as well as food delivery riders. This was a diverse sample with regards to age, nationality and ethnicity. Gender representation was slightly unbalanced by the numbers of interviews with food delivery couriers, which tend to be more male (Wang, Wang and Xu 2021: 5). The people we spoke to were based in the inner and outer London boroughs of Waterloo, Brixton, Richmond, Wimbledon, Hammersmith, Sunbury-on-Thames, Peckham, Bromley, Whitechapel, Putney, Hammersmith, Merton, Camden and Wandsworth.

Over half of the sample is formed by food delivery couriers working for app-based firms such as Uber Eats and Deliveroo. Food delivery couriers were recruited in the field by the research assistant who also worked as a courier. Significantly, the vast majority of food delivery couriers interviewed were recent migrants—something that again Wang, Wang and Xu (2021:10) note in their research—with Brazilians making up the group's largest sample.

Having introduced the project's context, rationale, methodology and research sample, we now turn our attention to the research we conducted on the lived experiences of the less celebrated essential workers in town. We begin by discussing a number of common challenges that emerged across the class divide. If these experiences were shared with the wider population, they arguably affected working-class people and other minoritised groups the most. Thus, our discussion draws attention to the fact that socio-economic inequalities heightened the impact of commonly shared challenges on working-class people.



COMMON CHALLENGES

COMMON CHALLENGES

One of the major challenges mentioned by several interviewees was the **loss of loved ones** during the COVID-19 pandemic. Death spared nobody during the pandemic, with COVID-related deaths taking place across the board. Losing a loved one was a particularly tragic experience when stricter lockdown measures were in place. Restrictions on movements and public gatherings meant that many were unable to be close to their nearest and dearest. The interviewee below, for instance, recounts the difficulties of following their father's illness from afar until they were finally allowed to say their goodbyes.

I lost my dad during the lockdown, he died in June. [...] It wasn't Covid. He had had two strokes previously and then it turned out that he had got pneumonia. He went into the hospital and because of the restrictions we weren't able to go and visit him. So it was only, you know, what you were told over the telephone. So at one point he was very poorly, but then it sounded like he was getting a little better, so we were quite hopeful that he would recover. But then unfortunately he took a downward turn. The hospital was really good then. When they knew that Dad wasn't going to recover and that was his last few hours, they did allow my mum and myself and my brother to all go into the hospital so we were able to say goodbye to him that way. [...] Afterwards, for the funeral, that meant limited numbers as well. (Mary, cleaner)

Several reports show that working-class people were most likely to die from COVID-19 in England and Wales, especially in the most deprived areas (Suleman et al. 2021; ONS 2021a). This is particularly striking if cross-referenced with the higher COVID-19 mortality among ethnic minority groups (Office for National Statistics 2021b) and South Asian and Black African and Caribbean communities (Razieh et al. 2021). The reasons behind such disproportionate impact are multifactorial, with an incidence of occupational factors which exposes these segments of the population to heightened health risks (Khan 2021).

Early in the pandemic it was acknowledged that "key workers" were particularly at risk of infection "through the jobs they do" (Platt and Warwick 2020: 3). Minority ethnic groups were overrepresented amongst key workers, particularly people from Pakistanis, African and Caribbean heritage (Platt and Warwick 2020: 12-13). Razieh et al. (2021) have argued that the excess risk of COVID-19 in South Asian and Black communities could have been substantially reduced by implementing measures striving to tackle material deprivation. Such was understood as resulting from four factors, specifically unemployment, house overcrowding, non-home ownership and non-car ownership, several of which are indicators of working-class extraction. Thus, whilst the loss of loved ones affected people of every class, it clearly affected more less privileged individuals working in low-paid, essential occupations.

Another factor that was mentioned by our interviewees was the disruption of social life and the resulting experience of **social isolation**. Virtually all research participants explained how they struggled with being unable to see their family and friends for a long period of time.

I think the biggest challenge was not being able to see friends, or actually worrying about friends that were living alone. Fortunately, at the time I was still living with family, so I had that comfort of having my family around me. I had friends that hadn't got that. They lived on their own, and they had nothing to do. Ways I've overcome that was by visiting them, cycling, of course, socially distanced, but doing shops for them, bringing food to them, and just generally catching up from the five-foot distance that we had to stand. (Asif, delivery courier)

It can be argued that to a lesser or greater extent this is something that affected virtually everyone during the pandemic, regardless of their class. Yet, some Londoners inevitably suffered more than others, particularly those who were not able to travel to see their families. Due to travel restrictions and the “traffic light system”, overseas migrants occupied a precarious position in this respect, as some were unable to see their families for significant periods of time.

Several of our participants also referred to the psychological effects that the pandemic had had on them, noticing increased levels of **stress and anxiety**. Whilst this is something that many experienced, it is likely to have been more significant for those who were more economically vulnerable and were concerned with making ends meet. The desire to return to “normality” and to overcome what one of the interviewees referred to as a “weird blip” kept emerging in the oral history interviews.

Yet, at the time when the interviews were conducted in the Spring/Summer of 2021, there was still little clarity about what this normality might have looked like. Interestingly, in their research Allington et al. (2021) also found a significant group representing 52% of the UK population, which they called “The Keen”, who were keen to return to normal life and were least likely to have concerns about doing so.

This concern with normality amongst participants was also accompanied by a desire to take back control of, and use effectively, their own **time**. Several interviewees felt that during the pandemic they “had lost time” which they could have in fact invested in more worthwhile and rewarding activities. Some, for instance, considered that they should have achieved or completed something during the pandemic. In most cases, they referred to professional or personal plans that they had to park in order to attend to more pressing needs. This sense of loss of time was particularly felt among the youngest research participants.

Worthy of notice here is that these experiences intersected with a much wider “productivity discourse” which was particularly prominent on social media. Such discourse propounded the idea that one should have learnt something, grown in a significant way or achieved particular merits during the pandemic (North 2021). If this narrative transcended working-class communities, our research indicates that the lack of productivity was particularly felt by working-class individuals who found themselves with free time on their hands when, for instance, being out of work.

The remainder of the report focuses on issues that are specific to the lived experiences of working-class Londoners.





WORKING-CLASS EXPERIENCES

WORKING-CLASS EXPERIENCES

Notably, research participants seldom employed the words “class” and “working-class” to describe their lived experience. The majority of research participants in fact used terms such as “essential worker” and “key worker” to describe their jobs. This particularly emerged in the interviews with food delivery couriers who arguably felt more exposed than others to COVID-19.

This might be the result of our decision to not use leading terminology in the course of the interviews including the words “class” and “working-class”. At the same time, even when these terms were not used, participants consistently read their lived experiences through the lenses of “class struggle” highlighting their precarious low-paid occupations and lack of systemic privileges, as well as the resilience strategies adopted to counter these.

Three main themes emerged as critical in our analysis, which we unpack below. These revolve around the inequalities determined by the job market, the sense of vulnerability experienced during the pandemic, and the feeling of solidarity and individual agency. These are then divided in a number of subthemes. In presenting them we seek to foreground the experiences and voices of our research participants, which we intertwine with our own analysis as a way to highlight the key issues emerging.

Inequalities in the job market

Evidence points to the uneven distribution of COVID-related health risk across the job market (OECD 2022). It was also noticed how due to economic deprivation, people in low-paid employment were less likely to quit their jobs even if these presented a heightened health risk (Rodríguez-Bailón 2020). In line with these contextual factors, one of the most pressing issues that emerged in the interviews was the, often sudden, loss of a secure or at least regular income and the feeling of insecurity and fear that such loss generated. Many emphasised the sense of anxiety determined by having to resort to hard-won savings to meet their needs. A sense of general uncertainty transpired in many of the interviews.

First I lost my job. I had this job [in construction] for like three years, four years. It was good income, no problem at all, every week my wages were there and then suddenly, I lost that thing. Then, okay, we have some little savings there, but things are expensive in London. I was really worried about what was going to happen, how things were going to go. (Miguel, security guard)

In a city like London where the **cost of living** is particularly high (Open Access Government 2021), inevitably, the loss of a stable and secure income was cause of further concern. The sense of uncertainty was higher among those interviewees who were made redundant and had to resort to borrowing money or try to apply for Universal Credit or Job Seekers’ Allowance. A supermarket worker recounts below the especially frustrating and unpleasant process of applying for Job Seekers’ Allowance.

And then I got made redundant. I was struggling to find a job for about six months, so I was claiming Job Seeker's Allowance, because I didn't have any money or savings. I've been struggling. [...] I've been borrowing money off people that when I did get paid, if I did have a job at the time, I'd have to pay back straight away, so I would be in the same situation again. I tried to claim Job Seekers' Allowance, which just has been awful. You can't get through to them at all because I think everyone is just on the phone to them. So yeah, it has been really hard especially when you see that places are opening again and you want to go out and socialise with people and you haven't got the money to. It's just quite depressing really. [...] I wish there was a bit more help financially for all the people that have struggled but there just isn't anything.' (Angela, supermarket worker)

As emphasised in the latter part of the quote, the lack of economic means did not only cause a sense of financial uncertainty but also impacted on people's **capacity to socialise** and meet with friends when lockdown was partially lifted. As is argued in the "Vulnerability" section below, the capacity to socialise was also impacted by working irregular shifts. If the negative impact of lockdown on people's mental health has been emphasised (Pancani et al. 2021), our study points to a particularly heightened feeling of isolation and depression among those who did not have the financial means to socialise with others when businesses started reopening.

The loss of employment and associated financial uncertainty led several interviewees to search for new roles in the same business or, in some cases, to take up a completely new job. Before the pandemic, research participants worked in a variety of roles, including service staff in hotels and restaurants, internet cafes and travel agents, IT specialists, carpenters in building companies and, in one instance, in the accounting sector. If some interviewees stayed in the same industry, others could only secure employment in other sectors and roles including in the food delivery industry. Some interviewees stated that the pandemic obliged them to take up job opportunities in those sectors that thrived during the pandemic, such as the on-demand food delivery industry (Keane 2020). This trend explains our particular interest in the lived experience of food delivery drivers as part of the project.

With restaurants being forced to shut down, gig-economy workers became an asset for online food delivery companies such as Deliveroo and UberEats. Many of the delivery couriers interviewed noticed that easily available work in the food delivery industry offered them a practical and accessible way to keep up with their financial commitments. The majority of the food delivery couriers interviewed took up this job for the first time, or returned to it due to the financial strains determined by the pandemic.

I got laid off from my previous job, and I had no choice but to jump on Deliveroo because it was the next easiest choice and I was in a desperate situation. (Carlos, delivery courier)

...because I need money I went back to work as a delivery courier to be able to pay my bills and continue to live here. (Antonio, delivery courier)

Interestingly, those who had worked as food delivery couriers before the pandemic expressed a lower sense of insecurity and uncertainty, compared to those who took up employment for the first time. Having already worked as a courier proved advantageous, as more experienced

couriers knew the business better and were able to benefit from higher earnings.

For us, it wasn't really too hard to handle it. It was more tiring because it was really, really busy for work, so it was more tiring, but in terms of money or as a living, it didn't change. If it changed, it changed for the better. Not for the worst.' (Asif, delivery driver)

Food delivery couriers in work prior to the pandemic described the exponential growth of new couriers due to the unprecedented increase in demand:

It got busier. [...] A lot of new drivers arrived to the company, a lot, because a lot of people lost their job, or it closed and they suffered, and this is always a good opportunity as a part-time job as well. A lot of people came. That's why, even, we got busier. There's a lot, lot, lot of new drivers.' (Francisca, delivery courier)

I started doing couriers as soon as restaurants started opening. There was a very, very little amount of people out there doing this. I don't think even the number that Deliveroo, or Uber Eats, or Just Eat had recruited was that high. [Since then], there has been an exponential growth in the amount of riders out there. It's phenomenal. It's gone from, you could count them on one hand while you're cycling down the street, to, there is no way you're going to remember how many are out there. There's a lot. It's grown a lot. (John, delivery courier)

Yet, as the number of food delivery couriers grew and the government's guidelines and regulations changed (for instance, lockdown restrictions were lifted), the situation began to shift for the delivery couriers we spoke to. As the earnings of food delivery couriers entirely depend on demand, these changes had a detrimental impact on people's livelihoods.

Some interviewees noted that work started to slowly dry up and to become more competitive. The growing **competition** meant that drivers had to fight against one another to win more of the market share. Similar dynamics have also been noted elsewhere, including in Australia, where couriers employed in the industry prior to the pandemic saw their earnings substantially cut as the number of drivers started exceeding demand (Kassel 2020).

The questionable and exploitative working conditions of delivery couriers have been acknowledged, beyond the pandemic (Li, Miroso and Bremer 2020). Delivery couriers are known to receive modest payments for their labour, which depend on a number of factors including the distance they travel and the desirability of the order (Larson 2021). Arguably, the long and unpaid waiting times must have felt especially frustrating at a time of growing financial uncertainty. This aspect was highlighted by a number of research participants who lamented feeling particularly exploited during the pandemic:

We're not getting paid for waiting for the order. We're getting paid only for the time when we accept the order and then we deliver the order, and that's all. Sometimes, we are really frustrated, when it's busy, and we are waiting in a restaurant for over half an hour. Then in the end, in one hour, let's say they're doing one delivery for £4. We are frustrated as well. (Francisca, delivery courier)

Assets and work equipment

As for other gig-economy workers similarly employed as “independent contractors”, food delivery couriers are responsible for purchasing the most essential equipment needed to perform their duty, namely their vehicle. Many drivers referred to the choice of the vehicle as a critical one to improve both earnings and work conditions, during the pandemic and beyond. Several interviewees explained having started off with a pushbike, as it requires a small capital investment and it is relatively cheap to maintain. Yet, as soon as they save enough money, they often invest in more expensive but cost-effective vehicles by upgrading to an e-bike or a moped to make their work more comfortable and, most importantly, quicker in order to maximise earnings.

I ride a bicycle for a number of reasons, it's much cheaper to maintain, it's much safer and environmentally friendly. I have been cycling for the past three years, it's very simple and I like to cycle. (Naeem, delivery courier)

This is an e-bike. Actually, I was lucky to find one. I started with a normal bike until a month ago, but I was really struggling in the snow and this bad weather. I was getting tired, returned back home destroyed, sometimes I felt like I couldn't work the next day. That's why I had to save some money and invest in myself, in my health, because I was feeling I was getting sick by working like that. With the e-bike it is easier and I don't get sweaty anymore. (Paulo, delivery courier)

As emphasised by the interviewee above, the purchase of an e-bike was not simply an investment made to **increase earnings** but, more broadly, one through which they sought to improve their health and working conditions. Other essential equipment such as a thermal backpack are typically not provided by online food delivery platforms. Providers tend to offer little or no equipment free-of-charge, and usually sell items to their couriers for a fee, effectively taxing future earnings.

Mopeds were a popular choice amongst the sample of food delivery drivers interviewed. Mopeds are more flexible than motorbikes and they are seen as a more suitable means of transport for a busy city such as London. Those who decided to upgrade from a push bike to a moped also referred to the need to complete a Compulsory Basic Training (CBT), which is required in the UK to drive a moped or a motorcycle up to 125 cc. However, a CBT licence is easy to obtain as it does not require a formal test, meaning that there is no risk of failing.

I started with a motorbike. I always have this obsession about the bike. It was really easy for me. I came here [to the UK], I found out that there is this CBT option. In my country, we don't have this. As soon as I had the opportunity, I did it, and then straight away, I started to work with it. (Francisca, delivery courier)

Interestingly, another interviewee mentioned a second motivation for upgrading to an electric or motor vehicle, namely the algorithm management used by delivery platforms to assign work.



After a little bit of internal research on Deliveroo, I started to notice they are prioritising motor vehicles compared to cyclists, especially during non-peak hours. As a cyclist, you'll go from having one to three jobs an hour to absolutely nothing during non-peak times. As a test, I wanted to see if an e-bike would change that, and it has. It seems that they have a priority scale of motor vehicle, e-bike, and then bicycle when they're assigning jobs. (John, delivery courier)

Recent academic research confirms that algorithmic management is employed by food delivery companies to both assign and evaluate work (Griesbach et al. 2019). Whilst it is unclear how the interviewee above conducted their research, their experience indicates that platforms prioritise delivery partners that can ensure faster deliveries. As a consequence, those who invest more capital in acquiring faster vehicles are assigned more deliveries and, as result, can increase earnings. Significantly, however, the more delivery couriers invest in more efficient transports, the longer they need to stay in business to make this a worthwhile investment.

The ownership of different means of transport points to an **internal hierarchy** within the delivery couriers' community. Those with less capital to invest in a faster vehicle and therefore use more environment-friendly transports, are more likely to suffer from economic disadvantage and further exclusion.

Structural privilege

At the other end of the spectrum, delivery couriers described their work as occupying a low position in their perceived social hierarchy of job types. Many stressed how they undertook this job in the absence of more attractive options, and how they hoped to secure more highly regarded and better paid employment. Some shared a sense of frustration, sometimes describing this job as one below their skills, abilities and potential. This sense of frustration clearly came across in the remarks made by the interviewee below:

We had no choice but to work, we didn't have the privilege of being able to work from home, or being put on furlough for example. You know, we still had to literally make the money. [...] Luckily coming from a background of a people understanding struggle, it's obviously not so difficult, but at the same time it kind of eats you up, because you feel like you deserve better and you should be doing better, in terms of having a better job. (Asif, delivery courier)

Although, as we noted above, "class" was barely mentioned by the interviewees, the use of words such as "privilege" and "struggle" points to a lived experience of class struggle.

Notions of **class identity** also implicitly emerge when delivery couriers discuss their work during the pandemic. Some interviewees considered the lockdown a tipping point that changed customers' perceptions, and made them feel more valued. On the other hand, however, other delivery couriers noticed that they felt misunderstood and mistreated, even as their work became essential.

With the pandemic I think delivery started to become essential work, even if people don't see that most of the time. They treat us like animals. You are doing them a favour, but they don't feel like you are in that situation [in the street all day]. You feel like, okay, you are doing your job, you have to do that. But they don't see that we have no options sometimes. That we do this because we want to survive. (Paulo, delivery courier)

As a courier, you're treated as a lower individual, or someone from a lower society. That was the big eye-opener for me. And how some people assume they're better than someone who's a courier, they have no idea of the background. They have no idea of what else we do, who we are as a person. They just see us as, "You are a courier. You're nothing to me. I'm better than you." (John, delivery courier)

As the quotes above show, some delivery couriers felt treated as second-class citizens. They discussed how some customers tended to collapse their complex identities into one dimension, namely their working identity, making assumptions about their skills or abilities.

Interestingly, even when research participants did not report negative experiences with customers, an idea of separation between "us" and "them" emerged in their reflections. Delivery couriers perceived themselves as sharply different from individuals who, during the pandemic, were able to use much of their disposable income to order food from the safety of their homes. It is conceivable for this group to be primarily formed by middle-class people in white-collar jobs, who were able to work remotely and whose income was unaffected by the pandemic, or who could either rely on the furlough scheme or on savings and family support. Francisca's statement below points to the complex class dynamics and the lived experiences of exclusion felt by delivery drivers, during the pandemic and beyond.

I was thinking that it was going to affect my life when this whole lockdown started, because I was thinking, a lot of people are getting way less money, way less hours they're working and that stuff, but no, it was the opposite. I was thinking no one's going to order. No, everyone was actually ordering, and they didn't really say, "We're not spending on food." No, the opposite. "We can't go to the shop. Let's just order." They even ordered their groceries, everything, from us. This stuff that the government is helping the people with, I guess with free food and stuff, it didn't really affect us at all. Nothing. (Francisca, delivery courier)

Alongside this **feeling of separation**, some research participants also discussed more positive experiences with customers, such as the one recounted by a delivery driver during the Holy Month of Ramadan that was celebrated from mid-April to mid-May 2021 in the UK. This is a time when Muslims may choose to fast from sunset to sunrise as an act of obedience and devotion to God. Ramadan can be a particularly challenging period for individuals whose work is physically demanding such as delivery couriers, particularly in the UK and other countries in the Northern hemisphere where the sun sets late. The quote below indicates how small acts of kindness were particularly welcome by delivery drivers in this period.

It was during the month of Ramadan and I was fasting. I delivered to a person in Roehampton, so it was a bit of a far delivery. Once I got there and gave them their delivery, I realised it was time to break my fast and I didn't really have any sort of water on me, so I asked them kindly if I could get some water. And I knew it was a bit of a silly demand, because of the whole pandemic and not wanting to share cups with strangers, but the lady was very nice and she poured some water in the bottle and gave it to me. (Asif, delivery courier)

Other delivery food drivers similarly reported customers showing **gratitude and appreciation** for their work. This was reflected in the amount of tips delivery drivers received, particularly at the beginning of the first lockdown.

I think one of the biggest [changes] was in tips, I think tips increased a lot. People were very grateful, especially in the early stages of the lockdown. They were very grateful for people that were actually out there, and you could say, risking your life, because there was a point where no one knew what was happening and people were still trying to understand how bad the virus was, and I think that was the biggest concern for a lot of people. (John, delivery courier)

When I started at the end of April, May, last year, some people were saying, "Oh, thank you, thank you for delivering my food!" But now it comes back to normal, like it was before. [...] It's so different how they are now. Before, they used to be so grateful that they are getting warm food delivered to their door safely, because we're wearing masks all the time and knocking on the door leaving things by the front door, waiting for them to pick it up. (Carlos, delivery courier)

Thus, it should be noted that if many delivery couriers, as well as other participants in low-paid, working-class roles did experience both racism and discrimination, others had more positive experiences of support and care not only within their own communities, but also with individuals of different classes, belief systems and life experiences.



Vulnerability

Research participants across different working-class occupations consistently reported a sense of vulnerability determined by their customer-facing roles and their associated health risks. These circumstances were particularly felt at the beginning of the pandemic when little or no information was available about the virus transmission.

Food delivery couriers occupied a particularly precarious position being subjected to both health risks and societal assumptions on the role they supposedly played in spreading the virus. As argued by Gregory (2021), platformed labour naturally presents a set of risks ranging from physical risk and bodily harm to financial and epistemic risks. The pandemic only highlighted the physical and financial risks faced by food couriers, as many continued to work in the absence of formal health and safety regulations, despite being identified as key workers (329).

We are doing deliveries all day and meeting like 50 different people with close contact, so we needed to know and learn as well how we can stay the safest for ourselves and for them as well. For this everyone needed some time to keep to the rules. (Francisca, delivery courier)

During the pandemic a lot of people were scared, and I don't blame them. They really don't want to make any contact with you. Sometimes they really hide behind the door and tell to drop the food on the floor. (Asif, delivery courier)

Some people get so scared of you, they will say to you, "did you touch that?" Of course, I touched that because I have to. [laughs] Oh, God. (Carlos, delivery courier)

This sense of vulnerability is also further exacerbated by the fact that couriers are expected to take up their own **personal insurance**, raising fundamental questions about the working conditions in the sector. An interviewee suggested that the delivery companies could do more to take away some of the risks associated to their jobs:

We would appreciate that if the delivery companies, big ones like Deliveroo or Uber, could help us on that. Like we instead of paying 100 quid a week in insurance, to get cover for that. 20 or 25 quid would make sense, because nobody is free of having an accident working with a motorcycle in London. We work in a good area, and when I say good, I mean easy. Some people work in central London and they are in more danger. [...] [The food delivery employers] offer us insurance, but I don't know anyone who got insurance from them. A friend of mine had an accident and he's supposed to have insurance from Uber. I was talking to him the other day and he had to stay home 45 days, because he broke his feet and he didn't get any help from Uber, unfortunately. We used to put 10, 20 quid every week on his account and when he came back he says, "Wow, man, that helped me a lot." He said to us, "I had some money for the rent." (Carlos, delivery courier)

Housing was another factor mentioned by several interviewees as having an impact on their sense of vulnerability. This was particularly felt by people living in small households, where there was no option to self-isolate: when one member of the household contracted COVID-19, it was often the case that the whole household tested positive. Sharing with family introduced a particular set of challenges heightened by the reduction of income and changes to lifestyle, leading to tension and conflict within the household.

My dad's an Uber driver and there were no jobs in the beginning. Nobody was ordering cars and so on, so he was at home [...] Yeah you can slowly see the frustration in my dad and that obviously trickled down to my mum and so there were a lot of mini arguments in the beginning. (Miguel, security guard)

An aspect contributing to people's sense of vulnerability was the anger and dismay interviewees often faced when tasked to enforce government rules on social distancing and mask wearing. Several participants referred to the frustration experienced by effectively operating as **"state agents"**. A consistent theme of the oral history recorded with bar or pub staff was the public breaking, or attempting to break, regulations when the lockdown measures were lifted. When members of the same household were finally allowed to sit inside at a bar or restaurant, one bartender recounts feeling a little helpless in their dealings with customers:

It was so clear that some people were lying, but there's nothing you can do about it and that really stressed me out. We started asking them like, okay what's your post code, and then asking the other person what's your post code, and then they'd always be like "Oh well I just moved in, so I don't know the post code" or something like that. One night as people were leaving, we heard them say "well it was really nice meeting you". (David, bartender)

The Scotch egg

Boris Johnson was like, "Oh, a substantial meal." We had this one woman who came in. I actually moved to another Fuller's pub in Greenwich by then, because I was moved back home. She was like, "Oh, can we have a scotch egg so I can have my bottle of wine." We were like, "We don't sell scotch eggs." "Oh. No Boris Johnson said you must sell scotch eggs." We were like, "We don't make scotch eggs, mate." Flipping out. "You can buy a fish and chips." "No, I don't want fish and chips, I want my scotch egg." The manager had to come downstairs, was really nice, like, "Oh, I'm sorry, we don't sell it." She was like, "No, you're not sorry, you don't care." Started swearing at him. We were like, "You need to leave." We were like, "You're going nuts over a scotch egg, what's wrong with you, mate?"

Emotional Labour

For some participants, this feeling of helplessness was also associated with them taking up new job roles they were not equipped to perform. This was particularly the case for the three bar staff interviewed, who were suddenly asked to become “door supervisors” to ensure customers respected COVID-19 regulations when entering the premises. Interviewees highlighted the increased **emotional labour** associated to this task, which sometimes led to unpleasant interactions with customers:

Guests would say that they “have been going there for the past 20 years” or whatever, and “you can’t tell me that I can’t come in and sit with my friend”, or that “I always come in here and sit with them”. (David, bartender)

I get shouted at quite a lot. If I tell people that just holding their t-shirt over their face isn’t a mask and that you need to wear a mask, they get really angry at me, because they don’t have a mask. That happens all the time. It can be quite emotionally draining, I think because I’m obviously used to difficult customers, but it’s just been a lot worse since Covid. (Amy, bartender)

Right now [May 2021], I’m usually working on the door, so greeting people as they come in, informing them about the COVID rules, making sure they’re wearing a mask. I’ve taken a lot of flak from people who don’t like being told the rules. (Dana, bartender)

A similar experience of emotional labour was also shared by workers employed as travel administrators during the pandemic, such as the participant below, who had to deal with customers’ anger for having their holidays cancelled.

Basically, we were having to phone the salespeople and tell them what we were doing about their customers’ cancelled holidays. Half the time they’d have their customers in front of them yelling at them, so they’d be super stressed on the phone, asking “What are we doing about this? Can they get their refunds?” We didn’t know what we were doing, we’d be getting pieces of paper with what to tell them every hour and we would tell them one thing and then they called back a few hours later and we would have to be like “okay, well actually it’s this now”. (Lucy, travel administrator)

As this quote shows, the general uncertainty and changes of government rules caused great distress among research participants employed in customer-service roles. This example clearly exposes the often unacknowledged emotional labour working class are burdened with, beyond the pandemic.

Significantly, the experience of the travel administrator above once again reveals a deeply rooted class dynamic, whereby staff in low-paid employment had to attend to the anger and frustration of individuals with strikingly different sets of concerns (e.g., around cancelled holidays).

Mental health

Some interviewees felt that their jobs had an impact on their mental health, leaving them feeling drained. A few interviewees explained that to better manage the mental and emotional burden they were experiencing, they decided to change careers and opted for a job that required little intellectual engagement. For instance, the interviewee below opted to take up a cleaning role, rather than continuing to work as a teaching assistant, a role they had held prior to the pandemic.

So, I think it was a lot for me to take. I think I just felt that it would have been too demanding to go into the school with how I felt at that particular time. So, when I saw the cleaning job advertised, I thought it was just a job that I could kind of go in and get on with and I don’t have to take any responsibility home. (Mary, cleaner)

Particularly those interviewees who took up additional jobs to make ends meet during the pandemic noted the negative impact of these roles on their mental health and their chances to socialise with others. This is an area which was also discussed in the “The job market” section above. For instance, one interviewee noted that, prior to the pandemic, they had worked as a travel administrator in an office and took up a job in a supermarket. The interviewee noted that their new supermarket job had negatively impacted their personal and social life due to its irregular shifts and unsocial hours, as opposed to their previous 9-to-5 office role which left more time for socialising.

[I worked] weekends, 6am till 2pm. Sometimes they would ask you to stay later. Then in the evenings I did 1pm to 9pm, so then I wouldn’t be getting home till about 10 o’clock. So, my evenings were just gone and then you would be waiting the whole day to start work. So, your days would just be waiting to go to work, working and then the day was gone, because it was the evening. (Angela, supermarket worker)

This shift in working practice changed the interviewee’s perception and use of time, particularly of their leisure time, showing how the ability to socialise and engage in meaningful social activities is critical to people’s mental health. Interestingly, however, some interviewees who were furloughed indicated how the lack of a regular work routine caused them to feel purposeless and without a structure. This was something that was particularly discussed by one of the bartenders we spoke to:

Mentally, it was really tough to just be. I had no structure to my day. I’m not really good at making my own routine. I rely on my shifts to give me a routine and then I just didn’t have them anymore, so the days just start to blend into one. It was just very isolating. (Amy, bartender)

Solidarity and Agency

Our research indicates that if the pandemic caused some to experience social isolation, it also fostered a great deal of solidarity among essential workers with the creation and strengthening of support networks and communities of care. Particularly oral histories with food delivery couriers reveal a strong sense of community experienced beyond the pandemic. Similar findings have also emerged in the work of Gregory (2021) among on-demand food couriers in Edinburgh, where the author notices how the forging of communities of support is one of the strategies adopted by couriers to manage work risks. Several interviewees discussed how this **community feel** is often expressed through simple gestures, such as “a nod and look” exchanged when crossing another courier in the street. While waiting for their orders, delivery drivers tend to gather at local hotspots, which become spaces for banter or to share a coffee or a snack. These areas also serve as places of intimacies to share concerns and seek help if needed.

The one thing I've noticed is that the community is very close. The simple wave when you're cycling past another rider, or the simple acknowledgement, a little nod, something as simple as that. There is definitely a sense of community with the other couriers out there, regardless of what platform they work for. It's the same mutual respect, you could say. I built amazing relationships with some of the restaurants I go to, some of the staff that work in the restaurants. There are other riders. It's a nice community out there. (John, delivery courier)

You don't even know their names, most of it, but you know them, you talk to them every day, you don't know their names. If something happens to them, definitely, we're going to help each other. (Carlos, delivery courier)

The sense of community experienced in the physical space is mirrored by the interactions taking place online and through social media:

There's Facebook groups that have been created where people talk about things, ask questions, ask for advice, ask for help. It's incredible to see how many responses there are. Someone will ask, "I've had a puncture on my bike. Can anyone give me an idea of what's the best tyre to use because I keep wearing them down?" You have 40, 50, 60 within one hour. People give them links to different types of tyres, something as simple as that. That definitely is a really good sense of community in the courier ecosystem, you could say. (John, delivery courier)

Solidarity among workers was similarly felt by working-class staff in other sectors. This is the case of the bartenders we interviewed who formed support bubbles with their colleagues.

I feel like it's probably made people closer even though everybody was at home because we were the ones who knew what we were going through. The Zoom chats and messages and stuff, and the manager checking in on people just to make sure they're okay. Then we would come back like we're all experiencing it together. I think it's probably brought people in the team closer together. (David, bartender)



The flat tyre

'I like to work with these guys, you see nice people here. These couriers, most of them are good guys. When something bad happens, you see how everybody goes around, they help each other. Even if you have a flat tyre, there are more people trying to help you than you need. Happened to me one day, I got a flat tyre. Then one guy came, "Do you need help?" "I have this delivery to do, can you do it for me?" Then he got my phone, delivery was around the corner, goes ahead to do it. When he came back with the delivery done, he handed back my phone, there were two other guys there. Man, I never had a tyre fixed so fast. I didn't do it. Somebody did it for me. The only thing you need to say, "thank you man, because when you need me, I'll be there". That's the only thing I can say, that these guys, they don't expect anything else.'

Agency

Despite the challenges presented by COVID-19, the pandemic also created opportunities for personal and professional development. This emerged clearly in a number of oral histories recorded. Alongside a sense of frustration some food delivery couriers experienced, others emphasised the flexibility and independence afforded by their jobs. As self-employed workers, a key advantage often referred to is the possibility to choose when, where and how long to work for.

I enjoy it. I've got the flexibility of going online [on the app], and doing it when I want, where I want, for how long I want. If I want to stop, I just stop and put the bag down and go for a cycle without the bag. If I'm meeting friends, I go offline, leave the bag at home and meet some friends. (John, delivery courier)

Whilst it is undeniable that working as a delivery courier offers some flexibility, this must be considered against the backdrop of the disadvantages explored in the sections above. If most couriers considered their jobs as temporary, rather than a distinct career choice, as we discussed above, John was the only interviewee who expressed a wish to work as a food delivery driver for a longer period of time. Yet, such a positive outlook may be due to the fact that at the time of the interview, John's primary source of income and professional gratification was a job in IT, and that he worked as a courier to save up for a **house deposit**.

At the moment, I'm a software engineer, which is my primary job, Monday to Friday, nine to five. Easy lifestyle in an office environment. I don't see it as work, because I love what I do. It's a passion of mine. Going in is like going in to do a hobby and getting paid

for it. Then the other thing I do is as a courier, with various different companies out there...The effect that the pandemic had on me is that it has given me my future. I was able to save my money really well, making money on the side as well with Deliveroo, which managed to pay for all my bills, the tax, and the mortgage I was paying with my parents. And now, it has enabled me to buy a house. It has given me my future. (John, delivery courier)

On a similar vein, other interviewees considered delivery work as an opportunity to improve their personal finances and to invest in their future. For example, Naeem's motivation to work as a food delivery courier was to put savings aside for **university**.

I wanted to work during my summer, pandemic or not. I still hope to go to university next year and this is to get some money on the side.' (Naeem, delivery courier)

The consistent, if reduced wage, received by furloughed workers such as the bartenders and retail workers interviewed also enabled some to pause and focus on their future goals and career prospects.

This time really gave me a lot of time to focus on myself, when otherwise I would have been caught up with the day to day, I call them the ones and twos of life. Focusing on where you're going and what you're doing, who you're talking to [...] instead of looking at yourself and reflecting and thinking what am I going to do? Who am I as a person? So, the pandemic's really given me a lot of time to get to know myself, to know what I like and what I don't like [...] and who I want to be. It's been quite beneficial and it's allowed me to grow up very quickly. (Mary, cleaner)

The examples above indicate that many research participants had taken a proactive, if not entrepreneurial, approach to managing their lives during the pandemic. Some used strategically the opportunities offered by the pandemic to plan their next career move, further their education or increase their savings.

New career prospects

Some interviewees discussed how the pandemic was an eye-opener, forcing them to acknowledge the volatile nature of the industry they worked in. This led some people to seek a career change, either within the same industry or beyond it. An interesting example is offered by the interviewee below, who had been working in the commodity market, but took a job as a train station employee during the pandemic. The disruption caused by the pandemic made him envisaging a career change within the rail industry:

Initially, I never thought about a career in the rail industry in terms of being a train driver or working as a signaller or something. So, at the beginning of the pandemic, I wasn't working in a customer service role, but through the pandemic and working at the station it has opened up my mind to a possible career in the rail industry. [...] With commodities [which I worked in before], the payment is commission-based so [it would affect my income] when the commission or the deals would not go through. The decision to leave was lingering on my mind, because I wasn't making enough money

to support myself and the bills I have to pay [...] So I wanted to change jobs to this role because they were working though the pandemic, they still had work. Because Covid happened, I actually had a 9-to-5. So it was more of getting used to that, [...] that was the main challenge, just getting used to working [and] having a salary at the end of the month. That's not what I was used to, so that's a benefit for me. Like I know what the working life is, instead of relying on commissions and working on projects for a couple months, this is more of an everyday. I have to wake up, put the work in, and get paid. (Miguel, security guard)

Yet, for some others the pandemic halted their self-development plans. For instance, Donato was training to be an electrician, but his studies were put on hold during the pandemic, thus further delaying his career development plans.

Last year, I was studying to be an electrician. I was finishing my theoretical test and then I was going to start doing the practical in March-April. I had to do one more test, I passed all the other tests only one and this didn't happen, and then the school closed. Now it's open again but there's so many restrictions, I'm not going there. The school is far from here, it's like 20-25 miles from London. I used to just go there on Saturday and Sunday, Saturday and Sunday. Then in March, they closed down and then there was nothing clear when they are going to open again. For me nothing happened since then. I'm still not qualified yet. I haven't finished what I had to do, but I'm going to do it one day this year, probably. (Carlos, delivery courier)

This example shows how, for some interviewees, the pandemic sparked a process of self-reflection about their current employment. Some started considering a move to a different sector or a career that could ensure a more stable and consistent income. Other workers tried to improve their working circumstances by securing new roles within companies where internal growth was possible through promotion.

In the section “Working-class experiences” above, we have presented key findings from our research into the lived experiences of Londoners in low-paid, low-skilled, essential employment during the pandemic. By drawing extensively on the voices and perspectives of the research participants, we have strived to offer a concrete example of how museums can carry out research-led contemporary collecting projects which place people’s lived experiences at their core.

More significantly, our analysis of the experiences shared by research participants brings attention to the nuances of contemporary working-class lives and communities in a global city such as London. Experiences of economic struggle, powerlessness, vulnerability, racism and injustice were noted, alongside those of agency, solidarity, community support and care. Our study emphasises the complexity of representing working-class lives in London, offering insights which can be of interest beyond the field of museum theory and practice.

In the concluding section, we draw on these considerations to share our reflections and recommendations on how museums in Britain and elsewhere might approach questions concerning socio-economic inequalities and class differences in a new light.





CONCLUSION

WORKING-CLASS EXPERIENCES

This report seeks to contribute to recent debates across the museum and heritage sector about the role and purpose of contemporary collecting with an emphasis on people's lived experience. The COVID-19 pandemic provided a fertile ground to reflect upon whose stories and experiences are foregrounded or silenced in times of crisis in museums and beyond. *Inequality, Class and the Pandemic* explored the lived experiences of working-class Londoners, a subject area that has been largely neglected by museum scholarship. Our small-scale project sheds light on the unacknowledged burden shouldered by working-class communities during the pandemic. By focusing our analysis on the UK, with a particular emphasis on London, we offer a ground-level examination of the lived experiences of the less celebrated essential and frontline workers in low-paid, low-skilled jobs during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Almost overnight, workers such as food delivery couriers or supermarket staff, normally undervalued and more often forgotten, became essential to the functioning of the city; yet, they continued to receive low incomes, albeit shouldering heightened health risks. Despite the rich profusion of support towards "essential" workers in policy and media discourses, the differing socio-economic positionalities of this segment of society have yet to be carefully analysed.

Our research and collecting project unequivocally shows the incidence of class dynamics in shaping the lived experiences of the individuals we spoke to. In so doing, the research challenges the predominant and homogenising narrative of 'We are in this together' (Sobande 2020), which circulated throughout the pandemic. It also shows that the diverse experiences of those low-paid individuals in essential jobs deserve critical attention, beyond the context of the pandemic.

A focus on a megalopolis such as London also allowed us to create a permanent record of the lived experiences of working-class Londoners in a range of low-paid, "essential" jobs resulting in the acquisition of nine oral histories in the Museum of London's permanent collection. Thus, our small-scale project clearly demonstrates that museums have the capacity and, we argue, have a social responsibility to research, document and collect more nuanced experiences of working-class communities - an issue to which we will return in the next section. Such responsibility will only become more urgent due to the ongoing cost of living crisis and the rising inflation in the UK and internationally.

In this concluding section we reflect upon the main issues that emerged in the project and have a much wider significance beyond the pandemic. In doing so, we strive to contribute to broader questions concerning UK museums' wider engagement with issues of class dynamics and class identities. We start by reflecting on the differing factors that shaped the lived experiences of the working-class Londoners interviewed. Drawing on these insights, we then reflect on how museums can better engage with issues of class in the UK and beyond.

We focus our attention particularly on two research issues that require careful consideration

and to which our study can make a significant contribution, namely the ethical and methodological challenges that museums might encounter in documenting and collecting the lived experiences of working-class people. Finally, we consider a number of organisational issues that museums should address when seeking more meaningful engagement with working-class experiences. We then put forward a number of recommendations for museums to start fostering the conditions to care about/with/for the working classes.

On being working class in London

In this study we intentionally chose to prioritise labour and, more specifically, low-paid employment when defining and studying working-class experiences in the context of the pandemic. We conducted oral histories with a small sample of Londoners in a range of low-paid, essential roles working across different sectors including supermarket workers, cleaners, carers, bartenders, pub staff, retail or teaching assistants, as well as food delivery riders working for web-based applications. The paradoxical context engendered by the pandemic, whereby working-class roles became critical to the functioning of society, made a focus on low-paid employment particularly urgent.

Such a focus on low-paid employment is of course not inconsequential, as it excludes from our investigation those Londoners in middle-class professional or managerial jobs from working-class backgrounds who might still identify as working class, irrespective of their current employment. Arguably, however, the experiences of these middle-class professionals differ significantly from those who participated in this study.

At the same time, prioritising low-paid employment has offered rich insights into the lived experiences of working-class communities. A focus on labour is especially significant in the context of the ongoing cost of living crisis, which will continue to affect the most disadvantaged members of society in the months and years to come. Yet, as it emerged through our interviews, other intersecting factors also require critical attention. For instance, people's gender, ethnicity or migration status is likely to have jeopardised their existing experiences of isolation, exclusion and disempowerment.

The oral history interviews we conducted highlighted a range of experiences shared by virtually all members of society, and not exclusively relevant to the research participants' socio-economic circumstances and working-class occupations. These include experiences of loss, social isolation, anxiety and stress, as well as a desire to return to some sort of "normality". Albeit these feelings and experiences were commonplace across the class divide, they undoubtedly impacted working-class Londoners the most.

At the same time, the oral history interviews revealed a number of issues specific to working-class lives and experiences that the museum sector needs to carefully consider and attend to, beyond the pandemic. In this report, we have clustered these issues around three main themes which we used to organise our discussion: inequalities in the job market, vulnerability, solidarity and agency.

First, there were a number of structural factors connected to the job market which research

participants had little or no control over, and which impacted on their overall sense of security. Examples include the reduction of working hours, loss of employment or regular income. These were particularly felt among those who were unable to rely on the safety net provided by the government's furlough scheme. Those who lacked personal savings and/or family financial had to resort to borrowing money or applying for Universal Credit or Job Seekers' Allowance. The resulting sense of insecurity was exacerbated by the high costs of living in London, one of the most expensive cities in the world.

Despite these impinging structural factors, several research participants also valued the opportunities which arose from the pandemic. If loss of employment made some feel powerless, others sought to take control over their lives by taking up work in sectors that were particularly thriving during the pandemic, such as the food delivery industry. This enabled them to secure relatively stable incomes and to exert more agency over their work and leisure time. A few interviewees sought new employment opportunities or career changes, thus manifesting an entrepreneurial spirit.

In particular, delivery couriers discussed their efforts to improve their working conditions by purchasing "assets" such as electric bikes or mopeds to increase earnings and to improve their health. Yet, the differing purchasing power within the delivery courier community produced an internal hierarchy which inevitably generated further inequalities. We expect that similar internal hierarchies exist within other low-paid, self-employed jobs in the gig economy, whereby workers are responsible for purchasing their own working assets.

The efforts to exercise one's agency collided with the sense of powerlessness, vulnerability, racism and injustice that other participants experienced. If some interviewees felt that the pandemic had improved the public's attitude towards them, others reported to have felt misunderstood, mistreated and generally undervalued, even as their work became essential to the functioning of the city.

Several participants voiced their perceived class differences and experiences of class struggle, even when the word "class" was barely mentioned in the interviews. Food delivery couriers in particular, expressed ideas of class struggle through the opposition between "us" (the couriers) and "them" (those in middle-class employment who worked from home). It is therefore unsurprising that class solidarity, in the form of support networks and communities of care, emerged as a narrative in the interviews with delivery drivers. The lack of explicit reference to class identity may have also stemmed from our decision to not use the word "working class" in our questions.

A complex and nuanced image of working-class communities in London emerges from our study, as well as an implicit language around working-class identities. We argue that such complexity needs to be attended to by museums in the UK and elsewhere, not only through dedicated public programmes, curatorial projects and exhibition displays but also through more wide organisational change.

Moving forward: Museums and Class

Museums, due to their public function and catalyst role in informing and enabling debates on social issues, are especially well-placed to research, document and collect objects and stories concerned with Britain's ever increasing socio-economic inequalities and class differences. We believe that this shouldn't be the prerogative of a few, small or medium, specialist organisations holding historical or contemporary working-class collections. Rather we argue that such endeavour should be pursued more widely across the sector, including by more generalist museums and large national institutions. We urge museums of every kind to embrace their social responsibility in this area, and come up with imaginative and institutionally relevant ways to address working-class stories drawing on the distinctive opportunities afforded by their collection, institutional history, locality and current and potential audiences.

Parallel to this, museum study research and scholarship surrounding questions of diversity, inclusion and social justice need to be more receptive to conversations around class dynamics and identities in contemporary neo-liberal societies. In this report, we have maintained that this is particularly important in Britain where class is a determining factor pervading all sectors of society. As we discussed at the 26th ICOM General Conference in Prague, socially inclusive practices foregrounding ethnicity, race, gender or sexuality to cite a few, need to be complemented by urgent debates on class, "the elephant in the room" in British museums (Iervolino and Sergi 2022). Yet, similar research should be carried out beyond the UK.

The interdisciplinary research on class we call for is especially urgent as it can make an important contribution to current debates in museum theory and practice around decolonial practice. Reflections on how museums can address the working-classes—some of the most disadvantaged members of our neoliberal societies—cohere with current de-colonial efforts striving to grapple with museums' violent histories and to address their discriminatory, racist and exclusive stance.

In this respect, we argue that museums scholars and practitioners alike need to carefully consider the intersectional nature of class both as an analytical category and as a lived experience. This is an area that we are looking forward to exploring in more depth as part of a Collaborative Doctoral Award funded by the UK's Arts and Humanities Research Council which we will co-supervise, entitled "The working-class museum: exploring the lived experiences of 21st century working-class Londoners".

Scholarly discussions need to go hand in hand with a sector-wide effort to design initiatives effectively targeting working-class audiences, following approaches developed with other minoritised communities. This undertaking can only be sustainable in the long-term if it spans across a number of museum functions, from curatorial and engagement work to recruitment, public programming and marketing, to cite a few. Nonetheless, efforts to develop dedicated collecting, exhibition and other public programmes are not sufficient, unless they are accompanied by processes of organisational change and targeted interventions in relation to the workforce.



Indeed, a central part of this endeavour is to adopt recruitment strategies which support museums in attracting, and most importantly retaining, working-class museum professionals, and curatorial and interpretation staff in particular. A more diverse workforce is critical to the diversification of collections and narratives, as is the diversification of governance bodies including Boards. Whilst this is not a new claim, we regard this as especially important in a context where precarity and low salaries make the museum sector less attractive to the least privileged, as recently confirmed by the Museums Association's Salary Research and Recommendations (Heal 2022).

This situation calls for a networked approach that builds upon the excellent work being carried out by colleagues in the sector, such as "Museums as Muck". Universities are another key actor in this networked approach, particularly those training the museum and arts professionals of the future. Their role is especially significant as these institutions largely attract a more middle-class, privileged and often white student body. We believe that there is an urgent need to build constructive collaborative research and networking initiatives bringing together museum professionals, scholars and activists to foster further reflection in this area. The partnership between the Museum of London and King's College London, which we initiated and plan to further expand, is a step in this direction.

Partnerships between museums and Higher Education (HE) institutions such as universities can prove particularly useful for small and medium-size museums that might lack research capacity and/or may not have opportunities to engage in research-led collecting projects. HE partners have access to relevant secondary resources and can bring the knowledge and expertise necessary to navigate complex questions surrounding class identity in specific local contexts.

In an increasingly adverse funding landscape, university-museum partnerships can also be an effective tool for museums to match-fund for projects, and in so doing to potentially increase available budgets. This is precisely what we did with *Inequality, Class and the Pandemic*. Yet, this approach requires museums and universities to develop in unison new types of research collaborations and mechanisms which can effectively support new collaborative ways of working. These partnerships should recognise different institutional priorities with respect to research, documentation, collecting and dissemination activities.

In the area of collecting, we invite museums and heritage organisations to take a more proactive approach in documenting and collecting 21st century working-class narratives, in order to ensure their long-lasting legacy and preservation. Importantly, museums and heritage organisations need to develop long-term strategies to actively research, document and collect the tangible and intangible heritage of working-class communities. In this context, one of the challenges of representing contemporary working-class experiences is the general lack of visual and material culture associated with present-day working-class lives. Thus, museums have to think more creatively about how to access or permanently acquire materials to best represent this community and their experiences.

This operation goes hand in hand with the need to profile working-class narratives and experiences through public programs and displays. As clearly transpired in our oral history

interviews, it is particularly important not to overshadow working-class' ingenuity, agency, sense of community and solidarity. This is not to undermine the structural factors determining working-class experiences, but rather to counter the pervasive rhetoric of poverty and struggle which more often than not have projected a narrow and stereotypical view of working-class experiences.

For this operation to be effective, we believe it is necessary to place people's lived experiences at the heart of the curatorial process. This also applies not only to how working-class lives should be addressed in museum narratives, but significantly to the researchers' own positionalities. In our project, the research team included individuals from a working-class background and/or with experiences in low-paid jobs, who were able to closely relate to interviewees' lived experiences. Our decision to prioritise oral history interviews enabled us to compile more authentic narratives of working-class experiences during the pandemic in London.

With its focus on a time of social crisis, *Inequality, Class and the Pandemic* began to scratch the surface of the urgent work that museums and heritage organisations need to undertake in order to better care for working-class communities. The project also raised a number of critical questions that need further attention and we wish to share in concluding this report. Perhaps the most critical question is how the working-class can be defined in 21st century Britain, and beyond, and how such a definition might impact museum practice. This is a question that kept percolating through our research and we are currently attending through further research. Other questions include: What differences or similarities might be found between museums in a "superdiverse" (Vertovec 2007) global city such as London and in other cities, in the UK and internationally? How would museums' engagement with working-class communities differ in urban and rural contexts? What roles might more specialised and generalist organisations play? What difference might be encountered between national, local and regional museums and heritage sites? And what challenges would museums encounter in addressing class across different countries?

These are some of the issues that we are currently pondering about and we plan to explore through further research. We believe that there is scope here in joining forces with colleagues across the sector to move this agenda forward. We look forward to establishing collaborations and partnerships in the near future.

AFTERWORD

As a working class woman brought up in London, now navigating a career as a museum professional, I welcome this research. Of course, many of us were very aware of and living inequality since before the pandemic but the global event has brought a wider attention to and, unfortunately, deepened the challenges facing those from low social, cultural and economic backgrounds. This project captures the voice of those who have been historically excluded from museum collections and hopefully is just the springboard for documenting voices of the marginalised.

The class conversation was critically lacking in museums until recently and this failure led me to create Museum as Muck (MaM) in 2018. MaM works hard to bring awareness and give people the tools, language, and knowledge to address class issues in the museums, galleries and heritage sectors.

Our museums nod to working class stories in local and social history narratives but we agree that museums need to work to do this more explicitly across collections. As stated in our Manifesto, without representative communities being the owners and producers of their stories, our museums are not serving their civic purpose to be open to all. Class is a complicated and difficult subject to talk about for a lot of people and can be uncomfortable for them. MaM works with museums to provide broad and authentic working class interpretation. We also advocate for documenting and sharing stories of working class joy – being working class is complex and at times traumatic but our diverse experiences can also hold softness and happiness.

Museum as Muck conducted our own research in light of the pandemic. We wanted to know how it affected our members, all of whom are working class museum professionals. From over 100 respondents, the themes that emerged echo those in this report. Many had vulnerable health situations and caring responsibilities. Substandard living conditions including lack of space made it even more difficult to cope. A large amount faced job insecurity and loss of finances without savings or family support as backup. Mental health was the most purported issue across the network. Amidst all of this, our members reported lack of employer support. The sector has responsibilities as an employer and can enable structural change that can contribute to easing difficulties. The pandemic isn't over, the sector is losing more and more working class people. Ongoing obstacles such as the cost of living crisis are making the sector even more inaccessible.

As recommended in this report, MaM is open and enthusiastic to work collaboratively with partners and institutions. We offer support in furthering their work to remove class barriers within the workforce, collecting and interpretation. Class pervades all aspects of our society so should be included and documented in the same way in our museums.

Michelle McGrath, Founder of Museum as Muck



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