

Most people believe inequality has increased due to the pandemic

Nearly six in ten people believe the pandemic has increased the gulf between social classes, according to a new poll from the Social Mobility Commission.

The Social Mobility Barometer, 2021, unveils deep concern that social division in Britain has increased as a result of the COVID-19 outbreak. Four in five adults (79%) now believe there is a large gap between different social classes and over half the public (56%) think the pandemic has increased social inequality.

A third (33%) say that inequality has increased by a lot, and 23% by a little, according to the survey of 4,693 adults in the UK, carried out by YouGov.

The findings coincide with growing evidence that those from the most disadvantaged backgrounds are being most affected by the pandemic. Young people from the poorest backgrounds are losing their jobs, while families are trapped in cramped housing, sometimes unable to afford basic necessities. Children from disadvantaged families, often without digital access, are falling behind at school.

Our annual Barometer also shows significant public concern about mental health. 55% of UK adults think the pandemic has had the most impact on mental health, while 44% say difficulties caused by a lack of social contact. 26% believe employment opportunities have been most affected with 22% citing access to education.

When asked, however, what the government's key priorities should be in any pandemic recovery plan, the largest number of respondents said employment opportunities (47%) followed by addressing mental health issues (46%) and improving access to education (33%).

In general, two-thirds (64%) of the public believe those who are 'just about managing' are not getting enough support from the government. Similarly, more than half (52%) the public think those who are the least well off are not getting enough government support.

Steven Cooper, interim Co-Chair of the Social Mobility Commission, says:

The pandemic has had a devastating impact on jobs, training and mental health, particularly among the most disadvantaged groups. This poll dramatically underlines public concern about growing social inequality. Government, employers and educators should listen and act. The most disadvantaged – at home, school or work – should now be put centre stage in any recovery plan.

Regional differences are also laid bare. Overall 74% of people think there are large differences in opportunities across Britain. Within England there is still a stark north/south divide in terms of how people feel about their prospects. Only 31% of people in the north-east believe opportunities to progress in their area are 'good', compared to 74% in London.

The poll comes just before the Social Mobility Commission moves to the Cabinet Office. This arm's length body hopes to use its new location to inform the government's levelling up agenda to create a more equal society, particularly in the regions. This year the Commission is planning to work with central government, local leaders and metro mayors to share best practice and encourage more targeted action in the "coldest spots" across England.

Other key findings include:

- Only a third (35%) of adults across the UK believe everyone has a fair chance to go as far as their hard work will take them. Only one in four (25%) people from black and ethnic minority groups believe we live in a fair society.
- On average 39% of the public think it is getting harder for people from less advantaged families to move up in British society (28% think it is the same as it was and 23% think it is getting easier). 42% of those aged 25 to 49 think it is getting harder.
- Nearly half the public (48%) consider themselves to be working class, and 36% middle class. Those aged 50-64 are most likely to think of themselves as working class (54%).
- People tend to think they are better off than their parents in terms of education (64%), financial situation (49%), standard of living (48%) and housing (37%). But they believe they are worse off in terms of job security with 33% saying they have experienced less job security than their parents.
- People say that central (53%) and local (42%) government should be doing more to improve social mobility and provide opportunities for everyone.
- An increasing number of people think that employers should have to take action to improve social mobility – 42% in 2021 compared with 31% in 2019. Ethnic minorities are more likely than average to say that employers should act (58%).
- Generation X (born in the 1960s and 1970s) is seen to have enjoyed the best financial situation (25%) and access to good housing (33%). Generation Z (born since 2000) is thought to have the least job security.

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