

The economic impact of COVID-19 for ethnic minorities

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Introduction

A recession, or economic downturn, is when economic activity declines for at least two consecutive quarters, affecting the gross domestic product (GDP) of a country (Rodeck, 2020). Although, this definition has been revised and expanded by the National Bureau of Economic Research (NBER), so a recession can now be defined as a significant decline in economic activity spread across the economy for at least a few months (Amadeo, 2020). This expansion of the definition is most likely due to the Coronavirus pandemic, and its subsequent recessions.

Recessions can cause an increase in unemployment and a decrease in average household income, limiting economic activity further. These short-term impacts can have long term side effects, such as a decrease in educational achievement and opportunity (Irons, 2009), especially if you belong to a particular group of society.

Something to investigate concerning the economy is the impact recessions have on the BAME community, 'an abbreviation for Black, Asian, and minority ethnic: used to refer to people in the UK who are not white' (Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary and Thesaurus). This is relevant due to the historic social and economic repression of minorities which is a factor in the extent to which they are impacted by recessions and other issues. Of the millions of people that reside in the UK, 14% of the population are from the BAME community, and for the City of Bristol, 16% of the population identify as BAME (ONS, 2011); this is the latest data available for.

The Coronavirus pandemic has had many impacts across the globe which differ from previous recessions, but one thing that has not changed is how minorities are impacted more than their white counterparts. In the age of the Black Lives Matter Protests and increased racial tensions, it is increasingly more important to discuss how and why members of the BAME community are disproportionately affected by the economic downturn as this is a key time in history where people are willing to listen and educate themselves on issues that do not directly affect them, creating a more conscious society.

A systems view is taken to understand the causes of most recessions and help to visualise the similarities and differences between the COVID-19 recessions and previous instances.

Previous recessions

Recessions and economic downturns are caused by several factors, which are usually not mutually exclusive; one event occurs and triggers an onset of other events and responses to the initial issue. The most well-known economic downturns in modern history are the Great Depression (1930-31), the Great Recession following the 2007-08 financial crisis, and the COVID-19 recession (2020-present). Each of these instances had their causes, some of which were exclusive to the point in time they occurred.

The Great Depression

The Great Depression was a global depression lasting several months at the beginning of the 1930s. It was initially caused the US Stock Market Crash in October 1929 and increasing debt in the US, leading to a reduction in the demand for UK exports as the taxes became too expensive (Segal, 2020). Additionally, the gold standard was still in place at this time, meaning the monetary wealth of a country was based solely off of its gold reserves; the continuation of the gold standard encouraged high-interest rates to defend it (Lioudis, 2020). In the UK, these factors led to 2.75 million unemployed people and a significant decline in exports, with the working class being heavily affected (Brain, n.d.).

Mid-1970s recession

The Mid-1970s recession occurred after the 1973 Arab Oil Crisis, where the 12 countries that made up the OPEC (Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries) agreed to an embargo to stop exporting oil to the United States in protest of US military support for Israel during the Yom Kippur War (Myre, 2013). This caused the price of oil to quadruple within six months (Amadeo, 2020). This embargo contributed to stagflation, which is stagnant economic growth, high unemployment and inflation (Estevez, 2020). This is caused by conflicting fiscal policies and is somewhat of a rarity as inflation normally does not occur in a weak economy and usually makes the economy even weaker (Amadeo, 2020).

Additionally, in 1972 British miners went on strike in demand of pay rises, resulting in nationwide blackouts known as the three-day week (BBC, 2008), where electricity

was shut off for between six and nine hours every day to conserve energy as the Government and Central Electricity Governing Board were unsure of how long the strike would last. Britain was already experiencing a decline in its traditional industries, but this nationwide blackout caused for more businesses and factories to close, with over 1.2 million workers being made redundant (BBC, 2008). While this was resolved after seven weeks, another rolling blackout was introduced in January of 1974 after more tension with miners to conserve energy once again (The Guardian, 2009), with commercial energy users limited to 3-consecutive days of energy consumption, thus the three-day week.

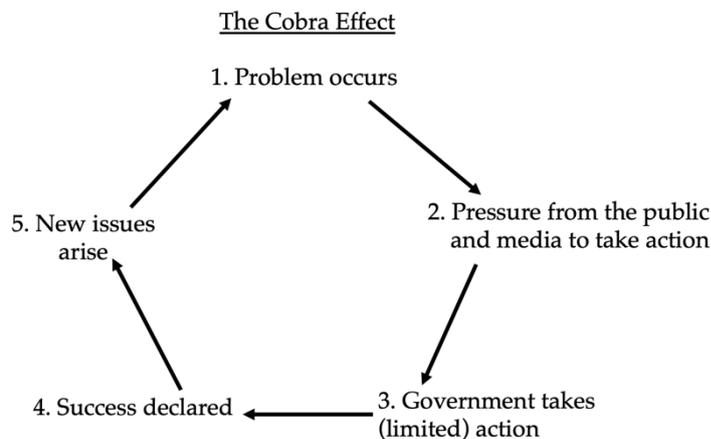
The Great Recession

The Great Recession followed the financial crisis of 2007-08, triggered by a rise in global commodity prices, a credit crunch and subprime mortgage crisis which infiltrated the British Banking sector (Pettinger, 2019). As a result of the recession, unemployment in the UK rose to 8.3% by 2011 (Coulter, 2016), partly due to many companies, such as Woolworths, going into administration and was eventually dissolved. The role of the government and the welfare services available had improved since the Depression of the 1930s, so the impact of the Great Recession was much different (Jenkins, 2012). The greatest impact of the recession was on Young families and ethnic minority groups (Vaitilingam, 2009). There is much evidence to show that members of the BAME community were disproportionately impacted by this recession, with people from ethnic minority backgrounds more likely to see work prospects suffer (Jenkins, 2012). While unemployment rose across the entire population, the rise for members across the Black Caribbean and Black African communities was much greater than the national average, rising to 20.1% in 2009 (Runnymede Trust, 2010). Additionally, Black African and Black Caribbean owned business are more likely to feel discouraged from applying for financial assistance as they are more likely to be rejected for loans than White or Asian owned businesses (Runnymede Trust, 2010).

Economic boom and the Cobra Effect

While economic downturns are fairly regular, with an occurrence every 5 to 10 years since the Second World War, there have also been instances of an economic boom in between these times. Following an instance of economic downturn, in almost every decade since the 1950s, it has been followed by an apparent economic boom (World Bank, 2020). However, almost immediately after, the country was back in a period of

economic downturn. Arguably, this could be due to the practice of ‘Stop-Go Economics’, where the government cut interest rates to allow the spending of more disposable income and promote economic growth, which caused inflation and an unstable economic boom, so they tighten economic restrictions in attempts to



rebalance the economy (Pettinger, n.d.). This is an example of the *Cobra Effect*, which is essentially a never-ending problem-solving cycle.

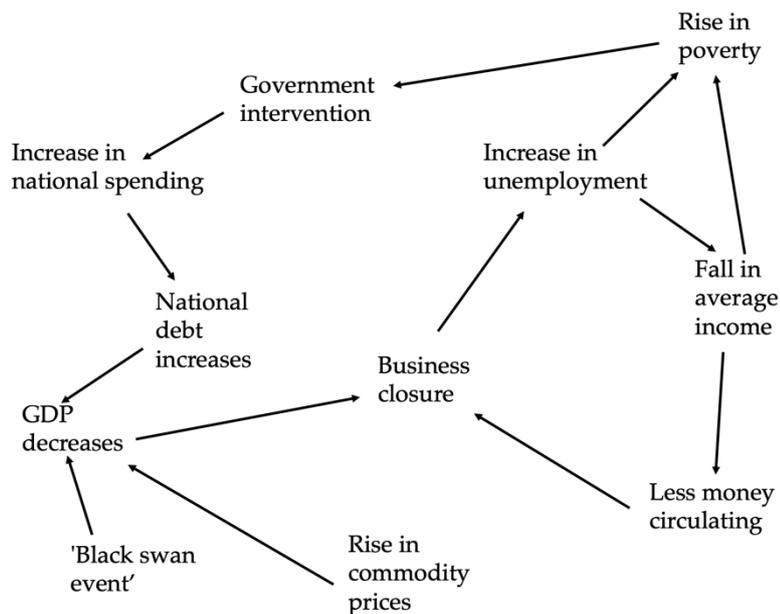
When a problem occurs, there is often pressure from the public and media for the government to ‘take action’ and solve the issue, which is normally followed by economic policies which are often just short-term solutions with negative long-term impacts, so new problems arise alongside the existing problems (Ison and Straw, 2020). This is one explanation as to why economic boom and downturn occur so close together and so often because the initial problem or cause was never fully resolved.

Summary of recessions

It can be concluded that While all these recessions had their triggers which were unique to the time in which they occurred, they did have one uniform trigger, being they were escalated by external geopolitical factors, such as the 1973 oil embargo which did not directly include the UK.

The causal loop diagram below displays the main triggers of a recession, which most often is the occurrence of a ‘black swan event’, an unpredictable event (Pettinger, 2019). Most recessions follow this pattern of accelerated economic decline within the system. The diagram also demonstrates that While the initial trigger may differ, the events that follow are mostly the same, with the same steps being taken which can harm the situation.

Generic Recession Causal Loop Diagram



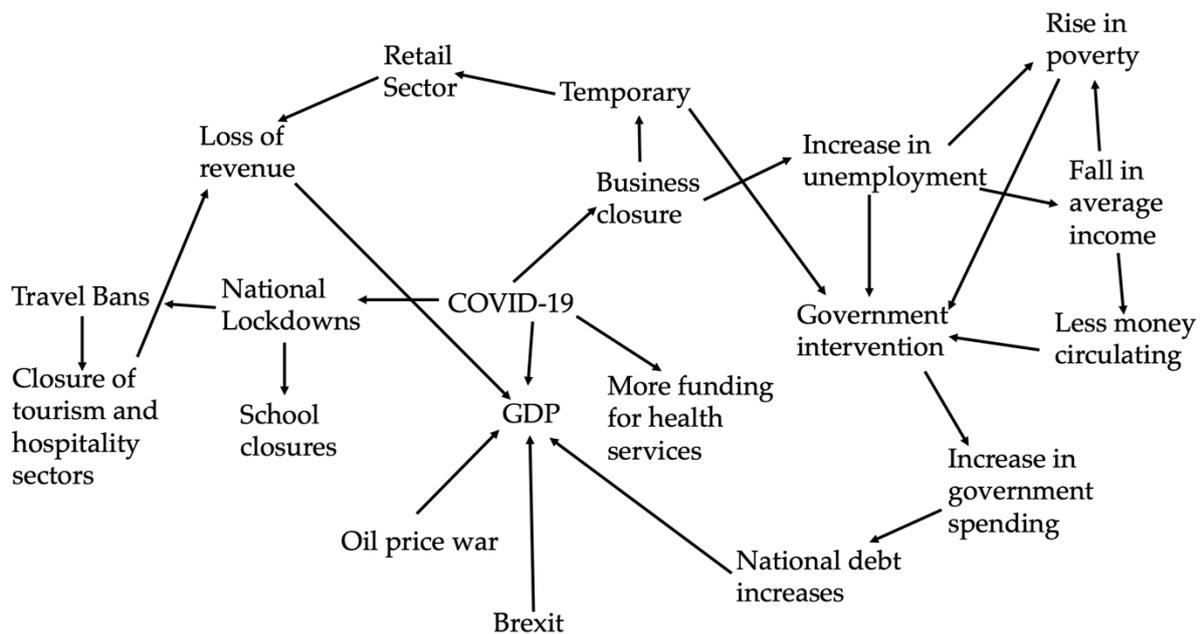
COVID-19 recession

The COVID-19 recession was caused due to the 2020 Coronavirus pandemic, which led to strict lockdowns all over the globe, impacting 'non-essential' work sectors, such as retail and hospitality, putting many out of work. Due to the pandemic, international travel bans were put in place to help control the spread of the virus between countries, however, this led to a decline in the travel and tourism sector (Pololikashvili, 2020), an essential source of income for many countries and certain parts of the UK. Additionally, the 2020 Russia-Saudi Arabia oil price war took a toll on the economy as the price of oil dropped dramatically at a time when the petroleum industry was already struggling as a result of Coronavirus and its subsequent lockdowns (KVB Prime, 2020).

What makes this recession different than others is that the effects of it cannot be fixed by a previously used strategy as the economy has grown much more than it was before, and the economy is being dictated by a virus, which is then impacting the stock markets and the way that business would regularly function.

As seen in the causal loop diagram below, the COVID-19 recession follows a similar pattern to previous recessions. It highlights the complete loops within the system as well as how the system is accelerated by other external factors and mitigation attempts which often lead to a cobra effect.

COVID-19 Recession Causal Loop Diagram



Which groups are disproportionately affected?

When it comes to an economic downturn, most people will be somewhat impacted. However, certain groups are affected more than others in these times as a result of the systems in place, predominantly people within the working class, people of colour and young people (Dorling, 2009; Nesvisky, 2012). The impact for people of colour is very evident as pre-existing disparities between the different races are often highlighted during times recessions, exposing the racial discrimination within the system (Amodio, 2017).

There is evidence to show that during the 2008 recession, people from ethnic minority groups had a worse time than their white counterparts due to 'subsequent austerity, higher unemployment rates, lower-earning and higher housing costs' (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2015). This is a result of the historically strong relationship between poverty and ethnicity. The average income of all minority groups fell While housing costs increased, resulting in Pakistani and Bangladeshi groups being more likely to live in persistent poverty, shortly followed by Black Africans and Black Caribbean's (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2015). Ethnic minorities are often overqualified for the jobs they work, with 40% of Black African and 39% of Bangladeshi graduates being overqualified compared to just 25% of white graduates (Weekes-Bernard, 2017); this is a contributing factor to minorities and poverty.

COVID-19 has had an interesting impact on ethnic minorities as it is twofold: the historical economic impact due to systemic oppression, and the public health impact. People from ethnic backgrounds are three times as likely to contract COVID-19 and five times more likely to experience serious outcomes (Lally, 2020). Lockdown measures also disproportionately affect Bangladeshi and Black African communities due to much financial insecurity or lack of mental health care in these communities (Lally, 2020). Additionally, almost all ethnic minority groups are more likely to live in urban and deprived areas, which have been most affected by COVID-19 as there are higher rates of infection because people are living in closer proximity (Lally, 2020). People from Bangladeshi and Black African groups reported a greater loss of income since COVID-19 than White people (Haque et al., 2020). Essentially, the global Coronavirus Pandemic has highlighted and even amplified inequalities between the races (Hlatshwayo, 2020).

As previously mentioned, the hospitality sector was heavily impacted by the pandemic. Some of the most crucial jobs within society are done by the lowest paid, who also happen to be more at risk and potentially die from the virus (New Scientist, 2020). During the pandemic, Healthcare workers are at a greater risk of catching the virus; 43.6% of Black people from both African and Caribbean backgrounds work in the Public admin, education or health sectors (ONS, 2020). Additionally, 24.7% of people from Pakistani and Bangladeshi are reported to work in Distribution, hotels and restaurants category (ONS, 2020), which happens to be one of the most impacted sectors due to lockdown and the tiered system. This shows that the sectors that most ethnic minorities work in are more at risk either due to health or from an economic standpoint.

Unemployment is one of the main impacts of an economic recession and there is usually much disparity in how it affects different ethnic groups. Bristol is ranked 55th for unemployment inequality between White British and ethnic minorities, with people from Black African, Other and Black Caribbean groups having the highest level of unemployment (Runnymede Trust, 2017). This shows that even within a somewhat diverse city like Bristol, the inequalities between the different ethnic groups is clear, and they are only being further exposed by the impacts of COVID-19.

Responses to the recession

In an attempt to lessen the economic impacts of the Coronavirus, the UK government introduced a variety of schemes to help the individual and boost the economy by encouraging the circulation of money.

Furlough Scheme

One of the first schemes implemented at the start of the pandemic was the Furlough Scheme. As many sectors closed during the first lockdown and people were encouraged to work from home, the Government provided 80% of the salaries for employees as businesses were not making their usual revenue (gov.uk, 2020), which would normally result in redundancies, as experienced in the 2008 recession. The scheme was originally supposed to end in October 2020 but has been extended until March 2021 (gov.uk, 2020) due to the introduction of the tiered system (gov.uk, 2020), in which different areas of England face different restriction based on the severity of the virus in that area, as well as the Second National Lockdown, lasting from November 5th until December 2nd, 2020.

Eat Out to Help Out

Another scheme was 'Eat out to Help out', where for the entire month of August, restaurants were able to offer a 50% discount, up to £10 per person, between Monday and Wednesday as the government subsidised the bill (gov.uk, 2020). This was introduced to encourage more people to eat out and jumpstart the hospitality sector and the economy by encouraging the circulation of money.

Many people were encouraged by this scheme to begin eating out again, causing some local Bristol business to continue the scheme without Government support as people were more enticed to go due to the 50% off discount (Shaw, 2020). Other places not participating in the continuation offered discounts on apps like Deliveroo and Uber Eats, encouraging people to 'Eat in to Help Out' (Barr, 2020).

Free School Meals provision

One of the most debated programs was the provision of meals for children eligible for free school meals during the lockdown and even after as many parents had lost jobs so relied heavily on this type of support to look after their children. Children are eligible for free school meals if they live in a household in receipt of income-related benefits whose annual household income does not exceed £7,400 after tax (BBC, 2020). The government provided food vouchers for eligible pupils during the first lockdown but sought to end the provision until Footballer Marcus Rashford actively campaigned for the additional support for low-income families (BBC, 2020); the provision of free

meals was then extended until the end of the winter holidays, with Rashford demanding it is extended until at least Easter 2021.

In January 2020, it was reported that 1.4 million pupils were eligible for free school meals (Farquharson, 2020) including children of all ethnic backgrounds. There is evidence to show that ethnic minorities are more likely to be eligible for free school meals, with just 17.2% of White pupils who received a grade 5 or above at GCSE having eligibility, compared to 23.1% for Indian pupils, 38.9% for Bangladeshi pupils and 33.7% for Black African pupils (Department for Education, 2019).

Bristol specific

Bristol City Council has implemented many local schemes and support programs during the pandemic, such as resources for vulnerable people with the help of volunteers, recruitment campaign for emergency foster carers and helplines for those unable to leave the house due to shielding (Bristol.gov.uk, 2020).

Alongside these programs to benefit the community as a whole, there were also schemes targeted to support the BAME population. The first of which was run by Bristol's Black South West Network, supporting BAME led businesses, organisation and communities by offering advice and carried out data collection to reporting the impact of coronavirus on BAME communities (Bristol.gov.uk, 2020). Another scheme directed at the BAME community was the *91 Ways to Build a Global City* social enterprise which provided food parcels for BAME communities and provided information for additional support (Bristol.gov.uk, 2020).

How will this impact the response to an economic downturn in the future?

Recently, there has been much discussion on how the COVID-19 recession will impact future times of economic downturn. For many years, the focus has been on GDP growth, leading to policies prioritising financial return on capital through short-term goals, rather than tackling the historical social inequalities and economic oppression of specific groups (Jackson, 2020). Many believe we need to completely revamp society and the economy due to what has been exposed due to COVID-19. A complete revolution could be unorganised, especially if there is not a set agenda of what needs to be changed and achieved. A set of realistic goals and a time frame would need to be set out; so focusing on fewer issues in more detail would be more beneficial than addressing everything at once. A more structured response could include a 'Green

and Social New Deal' (Jackson, 2020) similar to that which was introduced in the United States after the Great Recession, with a list of specific objectives to help better society, the economy and the environment. Although, as discussed by Ostrom (2018), there is no 'one-size-fits-all approach to common resource management' (cited in Ison and Straw, 2020). This means that as different groups are affected differently, they will require different aid and resources to recover, so blanket policies are often ineffective as people from different groups, often ethnic minorities, still do not reap the same benefits as others from this aid. This can relate to the power and control relationship and the idea of voice in participatory and deliberative democracies (Ison and Straw, 2020). Directly elected officials can be incentivised to change policy and advocate the need of key groups if they believe they will receive support or votes in the future (Hirschman, 1970), allowing them to retain power and control.

Due to the current climate regarding race across the globe, and the increasing acknowledgement that minorities are disproportionately affected by an economic downturn, it is likely that after this recession, more care will be taken to ensure legislation or schemes, passed, or neglected, do not appear to ignore the plight of the BAME community as most issues regarding low income and poverty affect many those who belong to this community. This could also have an impact on who retains or gains power, a major incentive for elected officials.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 recession is unique from previous modern economic downturns. The virus has dictated the economy and taken precedence over other aspects of life. This recession has shown many how disproportionate the impact of the recession is on people from different ethnic groups and why this occurs. While Bristol is slightly more diverse than the national average and is typically more progressive, there is still a lot of work needed to undo decades of economic suppression which is highlighted in times like this.

There have a been several schemes, such as the nationwide furlough scheme and Bristol specific support programs, introduced in an attempt to lessen the impact of the virus and help jumpstart the economy again, but they have not come without their controversy. There are instances where members of the BAME community continue to be affected as most are unaware of the number of people that rely on state support from the state.

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