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Perceptions of Inequality and the Pandemic Vary Drastically Among Californians

The unequal impact of COVID-19 is becoming increasingly clear as unemployment rates skyrocket and as those in the working class and working poor who remain in their jobs are more likely to do so at greater risk than other groups.¹ Further, disaggregated racial data on COVID-19 cases and deaths in California and across the nation show that African-Americans make up a much larger share of COVID-19 cases than their proportion of the population, and are much more likely to die of the illness.² Some states, including California, have also reported that Latinos are overrepresented in COVID-19 cases.³

Do Californians perceive these inequalities? Between April 16 and 20, 2020, the Institute of Governmental Studies (IGS) and California Institute of Health Equity and Access (Cal-IHEA), polled 8,800 registered voters about COVID-19. The IGS Poll data shows that the overwhelming majority of Californians (70%) believe that COVID-19 is “increasing inequality in the United States,” while less than 1% strongly disagreed, and 8% disagreed, with that statement. Similarly, most Californians agreed that there were racial disparities in the impact of COVID-19, with respect to blacks. Fifty-nine percent either somewhat agreed or strongly agreed that COVID-19 “impacts black people more than other groups,” whereas less than 2% strongly disagreed. However, Californians’ perceptions of inequality varied, with Democrats, those who disapprove of Trump, the more educated, and those living in the Bay Area and Los Angeles perceiving inequality at much higher rates than their counterparts.

¹ <https://www.thenation.com/article/society/inequality-and-poverty-were-destroying-america-well-before-COVID-19/>; IGS Poll #2020-06 released May 6, 2020.

² <https://www.thenation.com/article/society/COVID-19-racial-disparities/>
<https://www.kff.org/coronavirus-policy-watch/growing-data-underscore-communities-color-harder-hit-COVID-19/>
<https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2020-04-16/state-data-shows-coronavirus-is-killing-black-californians-in-disproportionate-numbers;>

³ <https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2020-04-25/coronavirus-takes-a-larger-toll-on-younger-african-americans-and-latinos-in-california>

Partisan Divisions and the Trump Effect

The largest differences in perceptions of inequality and COVID-19 among Californians surveyed were partisan differences. Democrats were more than three times as likely as Republicans to strongly agree that COVID-19 is increasing inequality in the United States, 51% and 15%, respectively. Additionally, 36% of Independents and 43% of those that identified as “something else” strongly agreed with the same statement.

Table 1: COVID-19 Increasing Inequality by Political Party

	Total	Democrat	Republican	Independent	Something Else
	%	%	%	%	%
1 (Strongly Disagree)	0.6	0.5	0.5	0.7	1.3
2 (Somewhat Disagree)	7.5	2.8	19.5	8.9	6.3
3 (Neither Agree nor Disagree)	22.2	14.5	40.1	24.5	24.2
4 (Somewhat Agree)	29.1	30.7	25.0	29.9	24.9
5 (Strongly Agree)	40.7	51.4	15.0	36.1	43.2

Democrats were also more than four times as likely as Republicans to strongly agree that COVID- 19 is having a disproportionate impact on Blacks.

Table 2: COVID-19 Affecting Blacks More than Other Groups - Political Party

	Total	Democrat	Republican	Independent	Something Else
	%	%	%	%	%
1 (Strongly Disagree)	1.9	2.2	1.6	1.3	3.1
2 (Somewhat Disagree)	8.4	6.1	14.1	9.0	7.6
3 (Neither Agree nor Disagree)	30.9	23.4	46.8	32.0	34.3
4 (Somewhat Agree)	33.5	34.3	29.1	36.6	28.2
5 (Strongly Agree)	25.2	34.0	8.5	21.1	26.8

The gap between those that support Trump and those that do not was even larger. The poll asked respondents if they approved or disapproved of the way Donald Trump was “handling his job as President.” Among those who strongly approve of Trump, only 11% “strongly agreed” that

COVID-19 was increasing inequality in the country. This compared to 55% of those who strongly disapproved of Trump.

Table 3: COVID-19 Increasing Inequality – Trump Approval

	Total	Disapprove Strongly of the way Donald Trump is handling his job as President	Disapprove Somewhat	Neither Approve nor Disapprove	Approve Somewhat	Approve Strongly
	%	%	%	%	%	%
1 (Strongly Disagree)	0.6	0.1	1	0.9	2.5	1.4
2 (Somewhat Disagree)	7.5	2.7	6.7	5.7	17.2	24.3
3 (Neither Agree nor Disagree)	22.3	13.3	25.1	37.1	35.7	44.1
4 (Somewhat Agree)	29.1	28.6	42	32.9	29.8	18.9
5 (Strongly Agree)	40.6	55.4	25.2	23.4	14.8	11.2

Likewise, Trump supporters were much less likely to believe that COVID-19 impacted black people more than other groups; half responded that they neither agree nor disagree. In fact, those who strongly disapproved of the way Trump is handling his job as President were more than four times as likely (36%) as those that strongly approved of Trump (8%) to feel that blacks were impacted more by the pandemic than other groups.

Table 4: COVID-19 Affecting Blacks More than Other Groups - Trump Approval

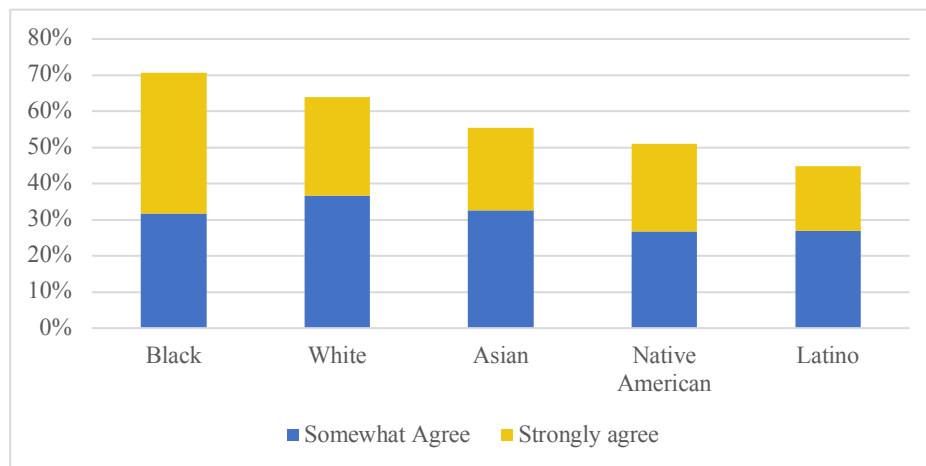
	Total	Disapprove Strongly of the way Donald Trump is handling his job as President	Disapprove Somewhat	Neither Approve nor Disapprove	Approve Somewhat	Approve Strongly
	%	%	%	%	%	%
1 (Strongly Disagree)	1.9	1.2	1.9	6.7	3.6	2.0
2 (Disagree)	8.4	4.9	14.2	10.7	17.0	12.4
3 (Neither Agree nor Disagree)	30.9	20.1	38.3	49.8	45.5	50.7
4 (Agree)	33.5	37.4	33.6	24.7	26.5	26.7
5 (Strongly Agree)	25.2	36.4	12.0	8.1	7.4	8.3

This suggests a deep ideological divide around how Californians are understanding the impact of inequality and COVID-19. While Republicans, and especially Trump’s staunch supporters are much more likely to believe that COVID-19 is not having a differential impact on particular groups, Democrats and those who disapprove strongly of Trump were much more likely to see COVID-19 as exacerbating inequality, and racial inequality in particular.

A Latino-Black Gap in Perceptions of COVID-19’s Impact on Blacks

Some of the racial differences in perceptions of inequality and COVID-19 were expected, while others were not. Unsurprisingly, Black Californians were the most likely to agree that COVID-19 impacted black people more than other groups, with 32% saying they somewhat agree and an additional 39% reporting they strongly agreed. The majority of whites, AAPIs and Native Americans believed that COVID-19 affected black people disproportionately, and roughly a quarter of them reported they strongly agreed. Latinos were the least likely to believe that blacks were disproportionately impacted by COVID-19, with only 18% strongly agreeing, and 27% somewhat agreeing.

Graph 1: Agree that COVID-19 Affects Blacks More than Other Groups – by Race



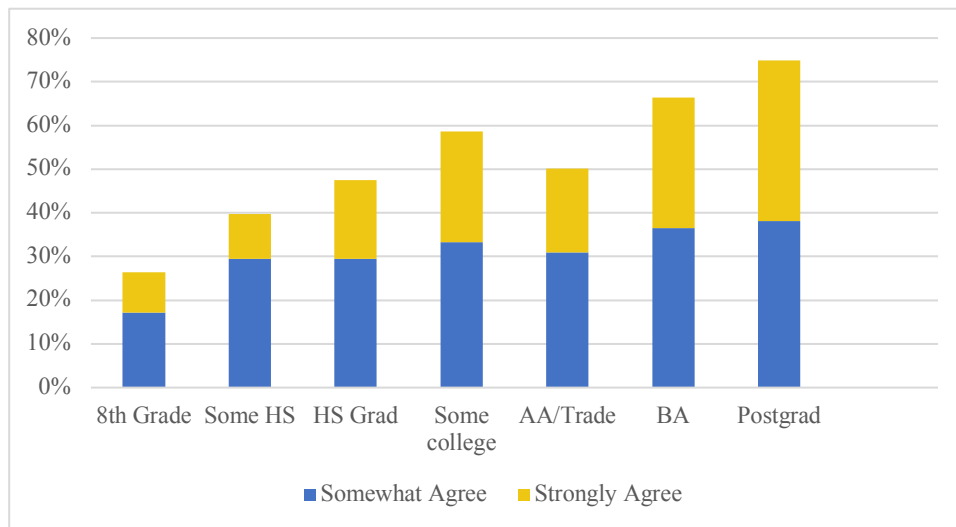
Latinos were also most likely to strongly disagree that blacks are harder hit by the pandemic: 9% of them fell into this category, while the percent of whites, blacks and Asians who strongly disagree with that statement was either zero percent or near zero. This large opinion gap between Latinos and Blacks was even more pronounced when disaggregated by gender. While black men were the most likely group to strongly agree (42%), Latino men were the most likely to strongly disagree (16%). At the same time, an overwhelming majority of Latinos surveyed believe that COVID-19 is exacerbating inequality (67%) and they were also the most likely group to strongly agree with the statement “COVID-19 affects everyone equally.” One possible reason for this may be that Latino respondents may be seeing the unequal impact of the pandemic in economic rather than racial terms. Another explanation might be that Latinos do perceive racial disparities, but believe that they themselves are impacted more than blacks. The Latino population in California is more than seven times the Black population in the state, and in the same IGS poll, Latinos were the least likely to report having family members working from home. This all may suggest they see themselves as on the front lines and taking disproportionate risks during this pandemic.⁴

The More Educated are More Likely to See Inequality

One of the clearest patterns in the data on perceptions of inequality was that Californians with more education were more likely to believe that COVID-19 differentially affects black people. With the exception of the AA/trade respondents, with each additional level of education, Californians were more likely to somewhat agree or to agree strongly that black people are affected by COVID-19 more than other groups. While 73% of those with a postgraduate education either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, only 40% of their counterparts with some high school did.

⁴ IGS Poll #2020-06 released May 6, 2020.

Graph 2: Agree that COVID-19 Affects Blacks More than Other Groups – by Education



Similarly, when it came to opinions about COVID-19 increasing inequalities in the United States, the more educated perceived inequality at higher rates. Indeed, Californians with a postgraduate degree were the most likely to strongly agree with that statement (51%), whereas those with some high school and high school graduates were the least likely to strongly agree, 31% of both fell into this category.

Red California, Blue California

The majority of Californians across all regions in the state agreed that COVID-19 is exacerbating existing inequalities in the country. Even so, there were also notable regional differences that mirror deep fissures between the political leanings of California’s two largest metropolitan areas, and the more conservative regions in the state. Forty-six percent of individuals polled in the Bay Area and 45% in Los Angeles reported they strongly agreed that COVID-19 was increasing inequality in the country, while only 33% of their Central Valley and 34% of their Inland Empire counterparts agreed strongly.

Table 5: COVID-19 is increasing inequality in the United States

Total	Total	Bay Area	Central Valley	Inland Empire	LA County	Other Norcal	Other SoCal	San Diego
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
1 (Strongly Disagree)	0.6	0.2	0.6	1.3	0.5	0.0	0.9	1.0
2 (Somewhat Disagree)	7.5	5.9	9.1	10.6	5.4	10.8	9.4	8.2
3 (Neither Agree nor Disagree)	22.3	16.3	30.8	27.9	20.5	20.9	23.7	21.2
4 (Somewhat Agree)	29.1	32.0	26.7	26.3	28.4	25.8	28.4	31.4
5 (Strongly Agree)	40.6	45.6	32.9	33.9	45.2	42.5	37.6	38.3

The data revealed a similar, though less pronounced, finding with regard to opinions about COVID-19's impact on the black community. Whereas 30% of residents of the Bay Area strongly agreed with that statement, only 20% of residents of the Inland Empire, Southern California (without LA), and San Diego fit into that category. Other regions were in-between.

In a separate analysis, we found that these regional differences in perceptions of inequality still held when we controlled for political party, support for Trump, and a number of other demographic factors. This suggests that there may be ideological leanings that shape perceptions of inequality that are embedded in the fabric of different places in California, and which go beyond those measured by political party, conservatism/liberal scales, or approval/disapproval for specific politicians like Trump.

Policy Implications

The IGS Poll data suggests that there is broad agreement among Californians that COVID-19 is increasing inequality; a large majority also believe that racial inequality is at least one aspect of the uneven outcomes that COVID-19 is producing. Studies have suggested that individuals' perceptions of inequality can shape their support for redistributive policies.⁵ These findings might be encouraging for the prospect of future policies aimed at combating inequalities worsened by this pandemic. Perceiving COVID-19's differential impact on particular communities could be a building block for broader support for targeted policies addressing this unevenness. However, it is also possible that many Californians view these inequalities as an issue of individual responsibility, rather than government accountability. The data also suggests that even if Californians support targeted policies, they may have very different ideas about who the groups most affected by the pandemic actually are.

For media inquiries or further questions, please contact igs@berkeley.edu.

About the Survey

The findings in this report are based on a Berkeley IGS Poll completed by the Institute of Governmental Studies (IGS) at the University of California, Berkeley in conjunction with the California Institute of Health Equity and Access. The poll was administered online in English and Spanish between April 16 and 20 among 8,800 registered voters statewide.

The survey was administered by distributing email invitations to stratified random samples of the state's registered voters. Once the questionnaire and email invitations had been finalized, they were translated into the Spanish and reviewed for cultural appropriateness. Each email included an invitation for invited voters to participate in a nonpartisan survey and provided a link to the IGS website where the survey was housed. Reminder emails were distributed to non responding voters and an opt out link was provided for voters not wishing to participate and not wanting to receive future emails from IGS about the survey.

⁵ <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2352250X17300465>

Samples of registered voters with email addresses were provided to IGS by Political Data, Inc., a leading supplier of registered voter lists in California. The email addresses of voters were derived from information contained on the state's official voter registration rolls. The overall sample of registered voters with email addresses was stratified in an attempt to obtain a proper balance of survey respondents across major segments of the registered voter population.

To protect the anonymity of survey respondents, voters' email addresses and all other personally identifiable information were purged from the data file and replaced with a unique and anonymous identification number during data processing. At the conclusion of the data processing phase, post stratification weights were applied to align the sample to population characteristics of the state's overall registered voter population. The sampling error associated with the results from the survey are difficult to calculate precisely due to the effects of sample stratification and the poststratification weighting. Nevertheless, it is likely that the results are subject to a sampling error of approximately +/-3 percentage points at the 95% confidence level. Results based on subgroups of this population would be subject to larger margins of sampling error.

About the Institute of Governmental Studies

The Institute of Governmental Studies (IGS) is an interdisciplinary organized research unit that pursues a vigorous program of research, education, publication and public service. A component of the University of California (UC) system's flagship Berkeley campus, IGS is the oldest organized research unit in the UC system and the oldest public policy research center in the state. The co-directors of the Institute of Governmental Studies are Professor Eric Schickler and Associate Professor Cristina Mora.

IGS conducts periodic surveys of public opinion in California on matters of politics and public policy through its *Berkeley IGS Poll*. The poll, which is disseminated widely, seeks to provide a broad measure of contemporary public opinion, and to generate data for subsequent scholarly analysis. The director of the *Berkeley IGS Poll* is Mark DiCamillo. For a complete listing of stories issued by the *Berkeley IGS Poll* go to <https://igs.berkeley.edu/igs-poll/berkeley-igs-poll>.