

New briefing highlights damaging impact of COVID-19 on high streets

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In a collaboration between the University's Center on the Dynamics of Ethnicity (CoDE) and The Runnymede Trust, a new briefing has highlighted how the pandemic has impacted the UK's ethnically diverse high streets.

With a focus on Brick Lane, the briefing goes on to show how the

pandemic and subsequent economic disruption has not only led to shop closures but a detrimental impact to livelihoods and the local communities.

This briefing is an update following "[Beyond Banglatown.](#)" a 2020 research project from the Runnymede Trust and CoDE.

With businesses concentrated within the food and hospitality sector and much more likely to be self-employed, the disruption caused by the pandemic has compounded the issues faced by many within Pakistani and Bangladeshi communities. The data gathered from the research shows that Asian restaurants have suffered a decline in trade, while several others have closed permanently.

But while attempts have been made to mitigate some of the economic uncertainty caused by the pandemic, the report details how attempts made at establishing an online presence has often proved difficult, with many finding the costs of using online platforms prohibitive.

Unable to establish themselves online and faced with difficulties in the form of reduced footfall and an inability to find staff, questions are raised about the future facing the restaurants in Brick Lane. But as many businesses struggle to come to terms with the [pandemic](#), the social and cultural nature of Brick Lane is likely to be altered further by ongoing and proposed development plans. The question of how we recognize the cultural life of Brick Lane and pay heed to its history as a center of anti-racist struggle has never been more acute.

With the country still dealing with the effects of COVID-19, the report reveals a stark picture of the conditions experienced:

- Having reopened, Bangladeshi restaurants are currently experiencing trade at 10–30% of turnover compared to previous

years.

- Since 2014, 17 restaurants have closed with only 18 operating in Brick Lane in 2021, down from a high of 35.
- In April 2021, over a quarter of shops had closed (29%). This compares to a figure of 9% in 2019.
- At the time of the study, only 56% of shops remained open, many of them operating under reduced hours or by appointment only.
- 83% of those surveyed stated that they had received some form of government assistance in order to remain in business.

The briefing raises concern over the effect of COVID on ethnically diverse high streets nationally, and offers some recommendations for how best to mitigate the risk to these communities.

"Ethnically diverse high streets are vital spaces that sustain the cultural life of the varied communities that use them. Brick Lane provides a primary focus in this instance for thinking about heritage, livelihoods, and [social justice](#) in the context of COVID-19 and the redevelopment and displacement processes unfolding in London. The recommendations and explorations in this briefing are also more broadly applicable to understanding the impacts of COVID-19 and urban change on our ethnically diverse high streets nationally," says Suzanne Hall, report co-author.

Provided by University of Manchester

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