

COVID-19: Local Leaders Respond

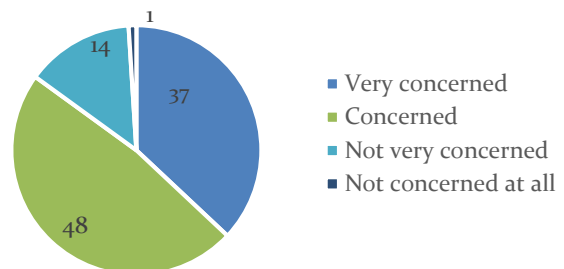
The Benjamin Center recently asked 233 randomly selected New York State county, city, town, and village elected officials, representative of local elected leaders across the state, about how they and their communities are handling the COVID-19 crisis. Here's what they told us.

Key findings:

- **COVID-19 has presented major challenges to all classes of localities** 85 percent of local government leaders fear their community's ability to respond effectively.
- **Local leaders are expecting precipitous declines in revenue** Nearly every local leader said they are concerned about the fiscal impacts of COVID-19, including 76 percent who are very concerned. Ninety-four percent say budget gaps are likely, including 76 percent who say revenue shortfalls are very likely.
- **Fifty-eight percent of leaders say what they need the most right now is federal aid** due to the revenue shortfalls that are a direct result of the COVID-19 pandemic; the vast majority say the deficits will be due to precipitous drops in tax revenues, in particular, sales tax, and many say now is not the time to raise taxes.
- **Nearly half (45 percent) of local leaders see themselves primarily as communicators and translators of a fast-changing information**, and 28 percent say this is currently their greatest challenge. Two-thirds (34 percent) say they could use more help with this from their county government, and 27 percent say the state needs to be clearer in its communications coming out of Albany.
- **Local leaders applaud Governor Cuomo's and their County Executive's response, but give mixed marks to federal leadership** Nine in ten local leaders approve of their County Executive's handling of this crisis and 81 percent approve of Governor Cuomo's COVID-19 response. Nine in ten also approve of Dr. Anthony Fauci's approach. In contrast, 43 percent approve of how President Trump is managing the crisis.

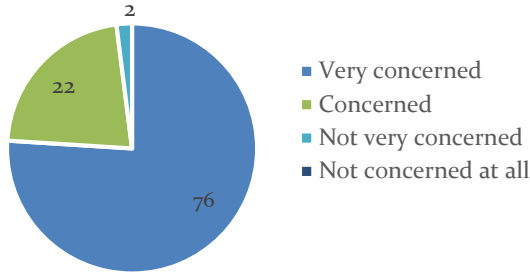
Responding to COVID-19

Eighty-five percent of local leaders are concerned about their community's ability to effectively respond to the COVID-19 pandemic, including 37 percent of elected leaders who are very concerned.

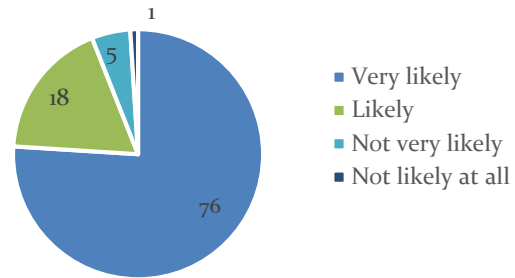


How concerned about you about your community's ability to effectively respond to the COVID-19 pandemic?

Potential Impacts on Local Government Finances

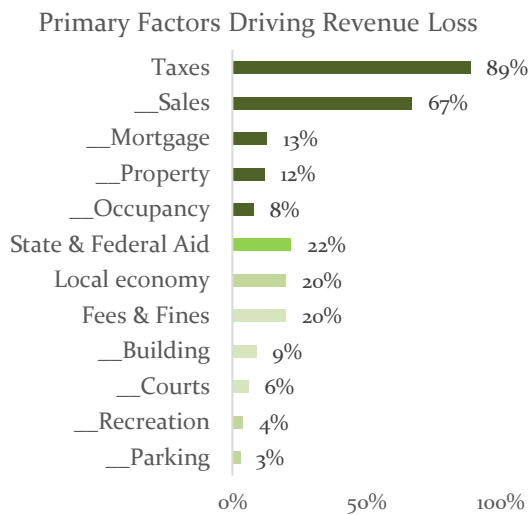


How concerned about the fiscal impacts of the COVID-19 crisis?



How likely is it that you will have revenue shortfalls as a result of the COVID-19 crisis?

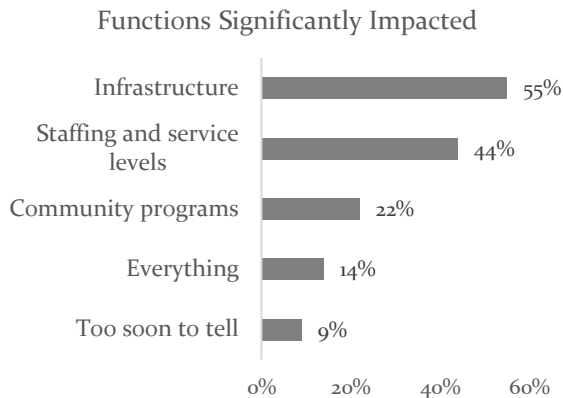
Nearly every local leader expressed concern about the fiscal impacts of COVID-19, including 76 percent who are very concerned. And nearly all leaders report expected revenue shortfalls: 94 percent say budget gaps are likely, including 76 percent who say revenue shortfalls are very likely.



What are the primary factors driving your shortfall? Note: questions were asked open-ended and coded into categories with the possibility of multiple answers so totals do not add to 100. Select verbatim responses are displayed in callouts.



The vast majority (89 percent) of local leaders say that they expect shortfalls to be driven primarily by reduced tax revenues. Two-thirds of leaders point to expected declines in sales tax. Twenty-two percent of leaders anticipate reduced state and federal aid to be the main driver of revenue losses; 20 percent say reduced local economic activity will generally diminish incoming revenues. One in five leaders identified a reduction in fees and fines to be a driving factor of revenue shortfalls.



What government functions do you anticipate being significantly affected by revenue shortfalls? Note: questions were asked open-ended and coded into categories with the possibility of multiple answers so totals do not add to 100. Select verbatim responses are displayed in callouts



A majority (55 percent) say that infrastructure improvements and maintenance will be hardest hit by loss of local revenue. Forty-four percent report that staffing and service levels will be significantly affected by revenue shortfalls. Fourteen percent claim that all budget lines will be affected. Nine percent said it is too soon to tell.

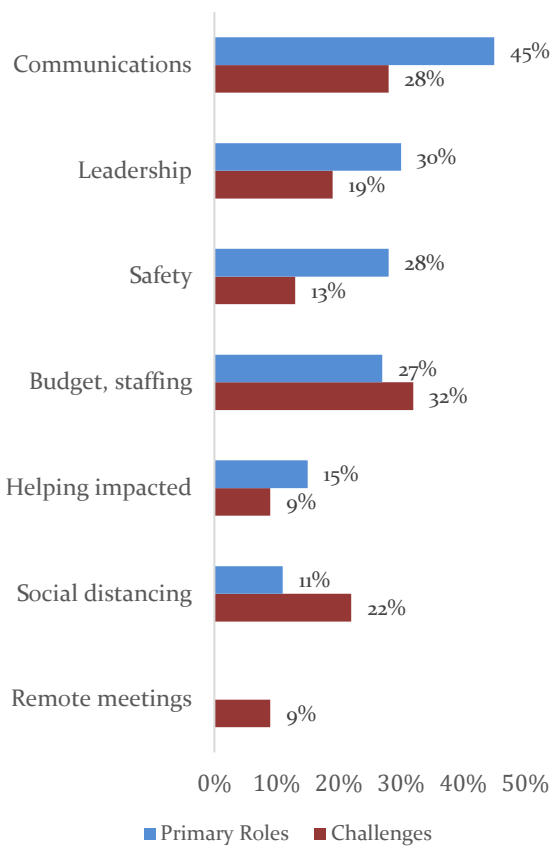


What actions do you anticipate you will have to take to make up revenue shortfalls? Note: questions were asked open-ended and coded into categories with the possibility of multiple answers so totals do not add to 100. Select verbatim responses are displayed in callouts



About two-thirds (65 percent) say they anticipate having to make budget cuts in response to COVID-related deficits. Over one-third (36 percent) are planning to defer projects and 32 percent are considering workforce reductions. Only 15 percent of the elected leaders mentioned use of reserve funds and only 11 percent are contemplating raising taxes. About one in twenty expect to take on more or refinance debt.

Primary Roles and Challenges

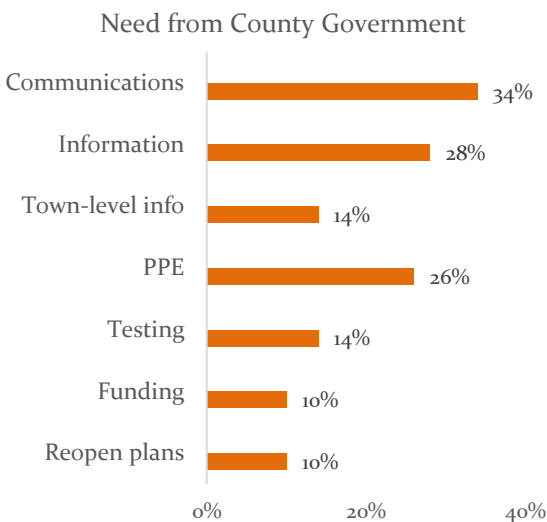


What do you consider your primary role as a local elected leader in dealing with this pandemic? As a local leader, what have been your greatest challenges in responding to the COVID-19 pandemic? Note: questions were asked open-ended and coded into categories with the possibility of multiple answers so totals do not add to 100. Select verbatim responses are displayed in callouts

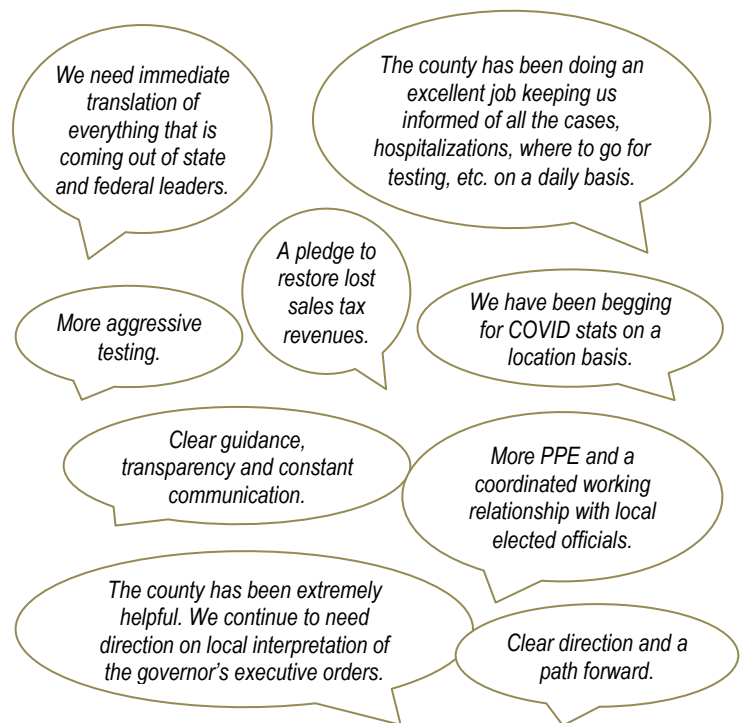
Nearly half (45 percent) of local government leaders told us that they regard their primary role during the COVID-19 crisis as following, interpreting, and communicating to their constituents the constantly changing information and directives received from the state and federal government. Indeed, 28 percent told us this is their greatest challenge right now. Three in ten

said that the most important thing for them to do is to maintain visible, accessible, responsive leadership; approximately one in five (19 percent) say this is the most challenging aspect for them during the COVID-response. Twenty-eight percent cited keeping people and their workers safe as their primary focus, and 32 percent told us this is currently their most difficult duty during the pandemic. About one in four (27 percent) are primarily attending to finances, staffing, and service levels, while about a third (32 percent) said they are struggling the most with this task. Fifteen percent reported a focus on helping those in their communities, both people and businesses, who have been negatively impacted by COVID-19, with 9 percent saying that that is the hardest part of their job right now. Eleven percent said that one of their primary roles is to ensure compliance with social distancing, and about one in five (22 percent) cite this enforcement as the most demanding part of their job right now. Nine percent said setting up remote board meetings has been one of their most significant challenges during the PAUSE.

Local Government Needs



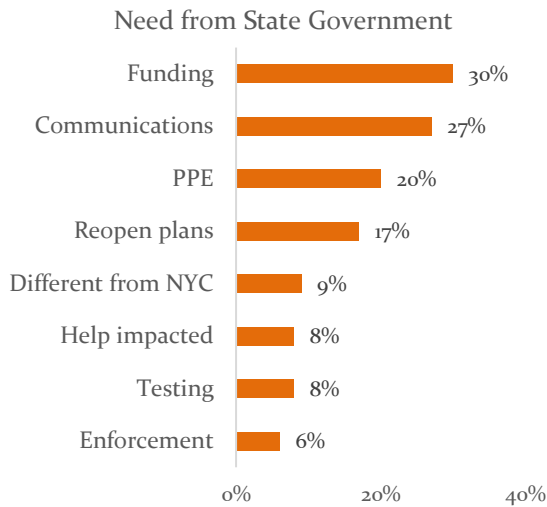
What does your community need most from your county government right now? Note: questions were asked open-ended and coded into categories with the possibility of multiple answers so totals do not add to 100. Select verbatim responses are displayed in callouts



What leaders say they need from their county government About one third (34 percent) of local leaders say they could use more help from their county government with interpreting and communicating the fast-changing information coming from the state and federal government. Twenty-eight percent said they need more information overall; 14 percent mentioned the pressing need for town-level COVID-19 data. About one in four (26 percent) say they still need more PPE (personal protective equipment) for their communities. Fourteen percent want enhanced testing capacity. One in ten cited the need for financial help from their county government; another one

in ten say they are focused on getting more information for reopening when the PAUSE ends in their locales.

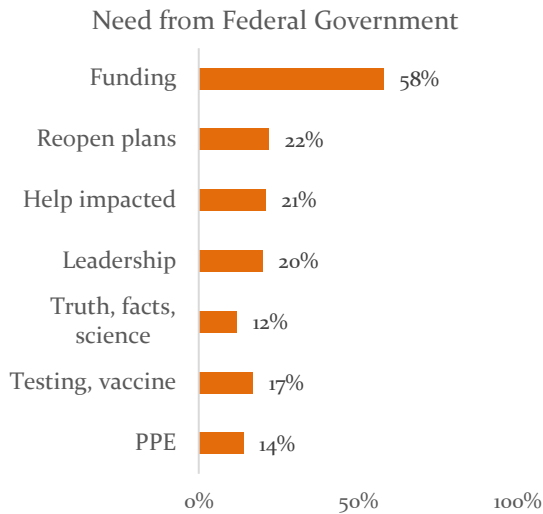
What leaders say they need from our state government Three in ten local leaders voiced the need for state funding to help deal with the budget gaps they are experiencing as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Twenty-seven percent say they need better communication and assistance in interpreting the constantly changing directives from Albany. Twenty percent want more PPE from the state and 8 percent say they need the state to provide more testing. Seventeen percent seek more reopening information, and 9 percent want the state to better tailor its approach to their locales, given that circumstances vary greatly in different parts of NYS. Eight percent want the state to focus more on helping the people and businesses who have been negatively impacted by the pandemic.



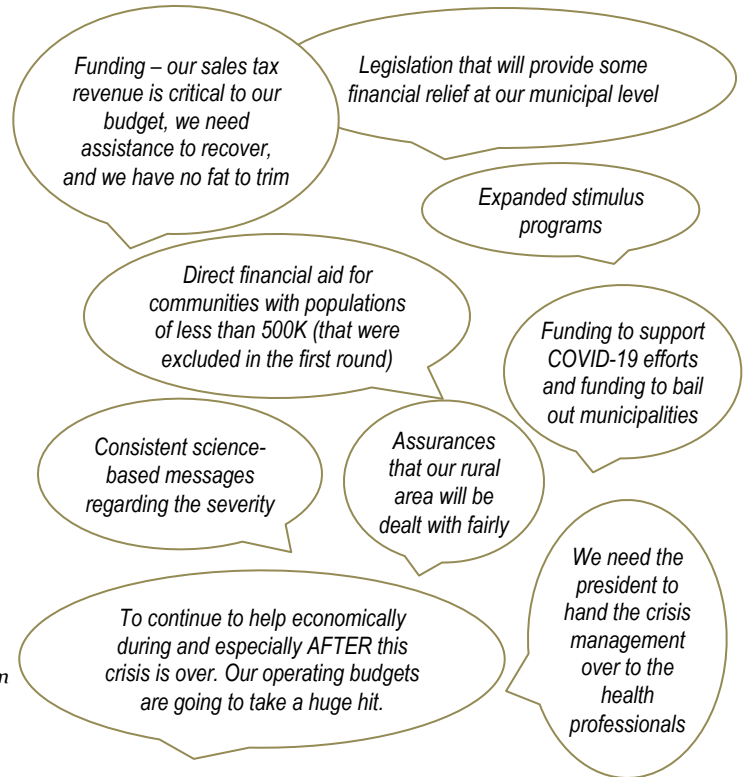
What does your community need most from our state government right now? Note: questions were asked open-ended and coded into categories with the possibility of multiple answers so totals do not add to 100. Select verbatim responses are displayed in callouts

Verbatim responses:

- Financial relief is desperately needed.
- Our governor has been a national leader on bringing common sense to the public discussion of the disease.
- The state has been awesome. Cuomo's orders helped us greatly to control the narrative we wanted here.
- Clear guidance, better communication, assurances of funding.
- We need the governor to understand that we are not NYC, and don't treat us as such.
- PPE and financial stability.
- Guidance that follows the science and stats to determine when we can begin opening the economy.
- We need more tests, more accurate data, contact tracing, PPE, clearer directives, and we need relief.
- Do not relax mitigation protocols until every resident is tested to avoid potential resurgence.



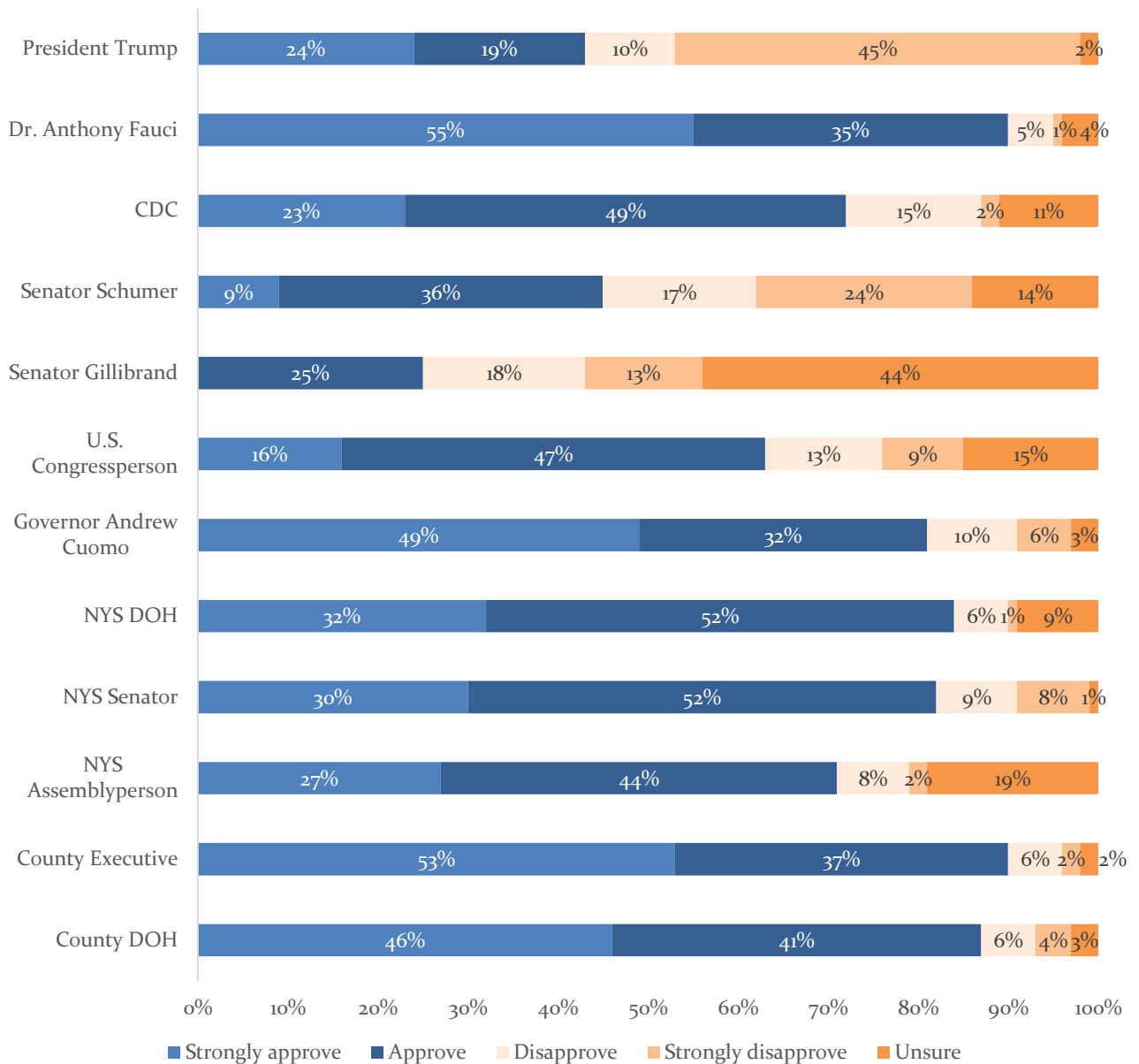
What does your community need most from our federal government right now? Note: questions were asked open-ended and coded into categories with the possibility of multiple answers so totals do not add to 100. Select verbatim responses are displayed in callouts



What leaders say they need from our federal government A majority (58 percent) of local leaders say their most pressing current need is federal funding to make up the revenue shortfalls that are a direct result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Twenty-two percent want more detail about reopening plans and 21 percent say the federal government needs to do more to help the people and businesses who have been hit the hardest. One in five requested a shift in leadership approach, expressing significant displeasure about the leadership coming out of the White House with 12 percent specifically asking for greater reliance on facts and science.

Approval Ratings for Handling of COVID-19 Crisis

Local government elected officials give their County Executives high marks in how they are handling the COVID-19 crisis: nine in ten approve, including 53 percent who strongly approve. Dr. Anthony Fauci also garnered an approval rating of 90 percent. Over eight in ten (81 percent) local leaders approve of the job Governor Andrew Cuomo is doing in response to the COVID-19 crisis, including 49 percent who strongly approve. A majority (55 percent) of these leaders disapprove of President Donald Trump’s COVID-19 job performance, including 45 percent who strongly disapprove.



For each of the following, please tell us if you strongly approve, approve, disapprove, or strongly disapprove of their handling of the COVID-19 crisis.

Methods

This online Benjamin Center survey was conducted from April 9th to April 22nd, 2020, with 233 randomly selected New York State local government leaders. The overall margin of error is +/- 6.4 percentage points. For more information, contact KT Tobin at tobink@newpaltz.edu.

Thank you to the 233 local government leaders who generously took the time to complete our survey during this very challenging and busy time, in the midst of responding to this crisis. All participants have been provided a copy of this report.

The lead researcher on this project is KT Tobin (BenCen Director), who was assisted by Robin Jacobowitz (Director of Education Projects), Gerald Benjamin (Emeritus Founding Director), and Joshua Simons (Senior Research Associate). In addition, the following students contributed to this project: Amanda Drucker (Sociology, Digital Media & Creative Writing '20), Valerie Pereyra (Sociology, Journalism & Black Studies '20), and Marc Thurston (Economics and International Relations '21).