



“You always think about what other people be thinking”: Black men and barriers to cycling in London

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ABSTRACT

The climate crisis and coronavirus pandemic have highlighted the need and potential to increase cycling, alongside inequalities in current cycling levels. In London, UK, groups including women, ethnic minority communities, and disabled people are under-represented. While gender-based marginalisation within cycling is more widely discussed, racial exclusions remain under-researched, and no other study focuses on experiences of cycling among Black men. This small qualitative study recruited Black male Londoners, a group whose cycling rates remain low compared to White males, although they have relatively high cycling potential and expressed demand for cycling. Speaking to Black men who cycle at least occasionally, it explored their experiences of and feelings about cycling, and the barriers that prevent them from cycling more. The analysis identifies barriers associated with direct discrimination or marginalisation, and barriers more connected to London's wider structural inequalities in areas such as employment, poverty, and housing. Among the former are racism, stop and search, and lack of visual representation; among the latter are access to infrastructure, secure parking, and the Cycle to Work scheme. Some interviewees suggest a Black cycling eco-system is needed to address a problematic dynamic of invisibility/visibility among Black men with respect to cycling.

1. Introduction: a new dawn for cycling?

Planners increasingly recognise multiple benefits of a modal shift towards active travel modes, such as cycling (Woodcock et al., 2021). In many contexts, including England, cycling levels are now much lower than they have been in the past, with multiple inequalities in participation including by age, disability, gender, and ethnicity (Goodman and Aldred, 2018; Pucher and Buehler, 2008). The COVID-19 pandemic increased levels of cycling, and many transport authorities sought to encourage this and avert a car-based recovery (Kraus and Koch, 2021). There is some evidence that cycling in England not only grew, but also diversified during the pandemic, at least with regards to gender (Department for Transport, 2021).

In London, 45% of the population is White British, while 37% is classed as Black, Asian, or Minority Ethnic (BAME), including 13.3% who are Black. Hence, if as Goel et al. (2022) argue there is no path to mass cycling without women, in superdiverse cities such as London, there is no path to mass cycling without Black and other ethnic minority people. One barrier to knowledge and policy change is an ongoing lack of data broken down by multiple and meaningful categories. However,

we do know that a substantial ‘ethnicity gap’ exists in London as in England more widely. Cycling mode share in London is 1.2% for BAME men, compared to 3.8% for White men (and 1.4% for White women). This is within a wider context in which cycling mode share has doubled over twenty years (Transport for London, 2020).

Encouragingly, in 2021 a Transport for London (2021) survey suggested that Black and White Londoners were equally likely to have cycled in the past year. This may be linked to differential growth in cycling during the pandemic, but we do not know if it is reflected in proportions of cycle trips nor if it will be sustained. There is substantial scope to grow cycling among Black Londoners. A TfL (2010) analysis found they made up only 8% of frequent and 10% of infrequent cyclists, but 13% of potential cyclists. This supports evidence that many groups under-represented in cycling in England have more ‘cycleable’ trips than their proportionally over-represented counterparts, in terms of distance (Woodcock et al., 2021). There is a similar pattern for expressed demand. Transport for London (2021) found that among Londoners who had not cycled in London, 19% of Whites were ‘open to cycling’, compared to 30% of Black Londoners.

Although there is a growing body of research on the phenomenon of

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'Biking While Black' in North America (e.g. Barajas, 2020), there remains little narrative data about Black men's cycling experiences in other contexts. This is particularly stark given the participation gap and the substantial scope to engage this group. Instead, much research on cycling equity focuses on gender and (often implicitly) on White women. This paper focuses on Black men living in London. Such a frame allows us to explore how and why members of this group - otherwise potentially more predisposed to cycling given other correlations, being male and having low car access, for instance - are being excluded from this type of transport. While a small and exploratory study, our analysis helps to start to fill what remains a substantial research gap.

2. Cycling for all? Race, ethnicity, and racism in cycling

Unusually among a literature that has paid relatively little attention to ethnicity, Steinbach et al.'s (2011) London-based study investigated how meanings of cycling resonate differently across diverse urban, gendered, ethnic and class identities. Their findings highlighted images, discourses, and stereotypes that disproportionately exclude some groups, such as perceived (and racialised) associations between youth crime and cycling. Experiences of overt racism, however, are not discussed, and rather than focus on experiences of marginalised cyclists, the analysis concentrates on interviewees' (many of whom were non-cyclists or at most occasional cyclists) perceptions of cycling and of cyclists.

Our analysis by contrast starts from the experiences of Black men who cycle. It draws on themes within Black geographies: including what Hawthorne (2019:5) describes as the way in which "anti-Blackness [often functions] by positing Blackness as perpetually 'out of place'" (including through racialised surveillance practices), and the importance of environmental justice concerns. A Black man (or anyone else) on a bike moves through the city 'under their own steam', using a method of transport that in congested cities can be fast, free, and flexible; if frequently stigmatised (Aldred, 2013). And as Cresswell (2016) notes, forms of bodily mobility (including being forced to move and being prohibited from moving) have been central to the construction of Black masculinities in both affirmative and negative ways.

In North America, research has recently focused on police harassment of Black cyclists and inequalities in road injury risk. In Minneapolis, Black cyclists made up almost half of those with an incident or arrest report after being stopped for a bicycling citation, despite making up only 18% of the total population (Cox, 2016, see also Roe, 2020; Linovski and Snider, 2021). Barajas (2021) found that cycling citations (e.g. for footway riding) were issued disproportionately in Chicago's Black and Latino neighbourhoods, from which cycle infrastructure was disproportionately absent. Policing not only failed to protect Black and Latino cyclists from harm, but also aggravated harms produced through racist infrastructure planning. While little similar work on policing of cyclists by ethnicity exists in the UK context, London's Metropolitan Police Service is widely viewed as institutionally racist, with 44% of Britons agreeing to this against only 29% disagreeing.¹

While the above studies use quantitative data to compare rates of policing, infrastructure provision, and injury risk, some recent research has analysed views of cyclists from Black and other minority groups. Lubitow et al. (2019) interviewed thirty women and/or people of colour in Portland, Oregon: a city that sees itself as a cycling leader, yet where, Lubitow et al. (2019) found, people of colour felt their priorities were marginalised by 'historically problematic urban planning practices, inequitable cycling infrastructure investments, and the privileging of White cycling priorities'. Through 19 interviews with residents and

stakeholders in Grenoble (another 'cycling-friendly' city), Vietinghoff (2021) uncovered experiences of racism through direct harassment or abuse, or differential access to services, such as spatial inequalities in access to secure bicycle storage.

These studies highlight the need for more research that critically addresses issues of race and racism. As Hylton comments (2018:119), applying a critical lens to cycling 'necessitates an approach that acknowledges that racial power relations are at play and if left uncontested will remain to thrive.' Identifying and challenging these power relations is a justice issue for many reasons. One is the inferior access that Black Londoners have to dominant transport modes: only 30% own a car, compared to 43% of White Londoners and 38% of Asian Londoners (TfL, 2013). Yet there is no other research that speaks to Black male Londoners to examine their specific experiences of cycling and explore why, despite high levels of apparent need and expressed demand for cycling, many in this group continue to be excluded from the city's much-vaunted cycling revolution. This small-scale qualitative research begins to fill that gap.

3. Methodology

The approach taken in this study is qualitative and exploratory. Specifically, we conducted interviews and a focus group with Black or mixed Black men who live in Greater London and are aged between 18 and 64 years. Ten men were individually interviewed and four took part in the focus group. Focus groups offer the opportunity to explore the extent to which themes expressed in the context of an individual interview also appear in group interactions, and vice versa (Morgan, 1996). This also provided participants with the chance to choose their type of interview, with some preferring a group discussion and others preferring to speak to the interviewer on their own.

The focus group schedule (see Appendix) was a curtailed version of the interview schedule, with less attempt to explore details of individual cycling trajectories. We found that themes were common to both types of interview setting, with the focus group providing a chance for participants to refine and deepen concepts put forward by others (for instance, stereotypes of cyclists, many of whom were at least implicitly White).

Participants were recruited via convenience sampling, using social media accounts (primarily Twitter and Instagram, initially via the lead author's account, shared by colleagues). An example message used is as follows:

Tweet - I'm doing research on barriers to cycling for Black men in London.

Still need more Black men (18+) to join a focus group (1-2h) or be interviewed (30-45 min). Shopping vouchers will be given as a thank you!

Note that we did not specify nationality. While this did not come up as a theme, Black men who are not British may experience additional concerns about surveillance and state violence, which could be explored in further research.

There was a mix of cycling levels, from one participant who rarely cycled to (more commonly) others who rode weekly to daily. This meant that as in Lubitow et al. (2019) we could study constraints experienced by those who had some access to, and experience of cycling.

Interviews lasted between 30 min to over two hours. The focus group session lasted 2 h with 4 participants. All were conducted via Microsoft Teams video software and were audio recorded and transcribed. Ethical approval was granted by Westminster University. The lead author who conducted the interviews and focus group is a young Black British male who occasionally cycles. This may have made research participants feel more at ease and more likely to share their experiences, including feeling comfortable to explore how racism affects their experiences of cycling. Conversely, the lead author did not disclose any personal information during the interviews unless explicitly asked. This may have limited the amount of information gained on other intersectionalities such as class and sexuality, although intersections with age and gender were raised, for instance in discussions of stop and search.

¹ <https://yougov.co.uk/topics/politics/trackers/is-the-metropolitan-police-institutionally-racist>. This figure is additionally striking as the survey base is British people, who are 78% White, rather than much more ethnically diverse Londoners alone.

The key limitation is the small sample size, with only fourteen participants. There was also no opportunity to compare barriers experienced by Black men with barriers cited by men or women from other ethnic groups.² However, the study complements Lubitow et al.'s (2019) work which focuses more on women's experiences (although not exclusively so) and which recruited a more homogenous group, providing different strengths and limitations compared to a more diverse and diffuse mix of genders, ethnicities, and roles (as in Vieinghoff, 2021).

3.1. Data analysis

The interviews and focus group were analysed using iterative content analysis methods. While the focus group data was produced through group interaction, individual comments generally stand alone and hence are analysed here as such alongside interview quotes (see Morgan, 2010). Conceptual categories emerging from both types of data were established following the barriers to cycling mentioned by participants via the following methods:

1. Initial read-through of transcripts to develop initial conceptual framework.
2. Use of NVivo qualitative software to code data into thematic categories, using codes already developed in (1) but also adding new codes inductively.
3. Modification of conceptual framework using new codes.
4. Comparison of codes between different participants to better understand diverse experiences. Examples of codes include "police", "class" and "community".

Table 1 below illustrates the cycling frequency and age range of the participants involved. Eight of the fourteen participants were aged 20–29, while two were aged 30–39, two 40–49, one 50–59 and one 60–64. Most (ten) cycled at least once a week, although four were more occasional cyclists.

4. Findings

This section presents findings from the interviews and the focus group. These have been organised into themes reflecting the coding developed during data analysis. This narrative is explored and analysed for further discussion, including related to diversity and difference be-

Table 1
Sample characteristics.

Pseudonym	Age range	Cycle frequency	Participation method
George	40–49	More than 3 times a week	Focus group
Ben	40–49	1–3 times a week	Focus group
Damon	20–29	A few times a month	Focus group
Marlon	20–29	1–3 times a week	Focus group
David	20–29	More than 3 times a week	Interview
Mario	30–39	1–3 times a week	Interview
Daniel	20–29	1–3 times a week	Interview
Chris	50–59	More than 3 times a week	Interview
Tion	20–29	1–3 times a week	Interview
Troy	60–65	Once a month	Interview
Tinashe	20–29	Less than a few times a year	Interview
Chizi	20–29	Once a month	Interview
Brandon	20–29	More than 3 times a week	Interview
Matthew	30–39	More than 3 times a week	Interview

² Indeed, in the UK Black people are largely classed as from African, Caribbean or "other" descent (NOMIS, 2013), but the limited sample size here did not enable a comparison to be made between diverse groups of Black men.

tween the Black men involved as research participants. We note that with a small sample size, the findings and discussion below should be taken as somewhat provisional, and we would encourage further research on this and other minority groups.

4.1. 'A white man's thing to do'? Status, class and affordability

Interviewees reflected on intersections between images of cycling, car use, status, class, and ethnicity, and how these could act as a barrier for Black men (and others). Within the UK, as in other low-cycling contexts, cycling is marginalised in differing and contradictory ways (Aldred, 2013). One specific way that this works is through the construction of cycling as associated with poverty, and not being able to afford a car. Chris explained further:

"If you're from a community that's traditionally marginalised or [grew] up like on a council estate, being able to show that you've got through and you've got a bit of status, you can't attach that same status to having a bike."

This view was echoed by Tion who said that "people feel like if you're cycling, especially as a black person, then you haven't stepped up in life". Ben agreed that "the status afforded to you from having a car is definitely something that's a thing in the Black community" and that it "is looked upon favourably by other members of family and peers". David goes on further in that cycling may not provide the same status as a car as cycling is a "free" mode of transport and requires "exerting physical effort". However, interviewees disagreed as to whether cycling was viewed negatively in relation to social status. Whilst Ben said "no one's gonna make fun of you" for cycling, Tion recalled a personal experience of people mocking him that contradicted this point of view: "[they] saw me cycling and they were laughing... So they weren't really saying it, but because they were in the car they were like 'are you serious?' sort of thing".

George picked up on how he noticed that some of his Black friends may experience peer pressure to buy a car rather than to cycle:

"There is sometimes a bit of peer pressure from their friends, not to get on a bike because it's not perceived as cool because of the whole kind of MAMIL [middle-aged man in Lycra] thing. You know? Because it's perceived as a white man's thing to do, I guess."

Indeed, when asked what the typical London cyclist looks like, most initially said something similar to the following remark made by Marlon: "your standard looking white guy... wearing lycra."

This image being unavailable to Black men meant cycling can be problematic and a potential identity threat. Alongside this, despite cycling being a low-cost method of transport, affordability was raised as a barrier. Interviewees talked about having used the national Cycle to Work scheme (a tax break which allows deferred payment for a cycle and equipment over a period of months) to reduce the cost of cycling and save money. However, the Cycle to Work scheme is not available to all, as it relies upon an employer signing up and an employee being eligible (e.g. having a specific length contract) and committing to monthly salary deductions. Damon noted how "BAME and black people in general [are] not always in a position to have well paying jobs, which can offer such a sort of salary sacrifice". Some participants, such as Ben, recalled a choice between purchasing a bike or a car although he was also not sure if this was an issue "that relates more to Black guys than to anyone else".

Relatedly, interviewees raised the problem of cycle theft and secure cycle parking, including at home. While this may not immediately appear to be a racialised exclusion, among Black Londoners, 55.3% live in flats (compared to 41.0% of White Londoners and 37.4% of Asian Londoners).³ Interviewees highlighted council estates, especially tower blocks as being difficult to access and store bikes. Brandon said that

³ https://www.nomisweb.co.uk/census/2011/DC2121EW/view/201326592??rows=c_ethpuk11&cols=c_typaccomm

there were no cycle parking spaces left where he lived and that even if they were available, they would be expensive.

Conversely, Black men that *can* afford and choose to purchase more expensive bikes may be subject to negative stereotypes, involving perceptions that they had not acquired them legitimately, as discussed by Tion:

“If you had like the top end of a mountain bike or hybrid bike, then like you’ve probably stolen that, or you use it to sell drugs or stuff like that? Because that’s not what the average person could afford, especially in the Black community.”

The data above suggests that affordability and cost could act negatively in several ways: firstly, the stereotype of the bicycle as ‘cheap’ could itself be threatening (while buying an expensive cycle could itself lead to problems). Secondly, the actual cost of a bicycle and the risk of theft could deter people from cycling, especially for those not in secure employment and lacking access to England’s national Cycle to Work scheme, and/or people living in flats without access to secure bike parking.

4.2. ‘Every time you hear a police siren, you think it’s for you’: Stop and search

Exploring areas or cycling around came with challenges and threats, including being stopped and searched by the police; a theme also prevalent in the North American literature (Barajas, 2021). Stop and search rates in London are disproportionately high for Black people (Ashby, 2020). Per 1000 people, there are 72 stops annually among London’s Black community, compared to 26 for Asians and 18 for Whites. Given that stop and searches are skewed towards males (more than 90%⁴) and those aged under 35, the experience would not be unusual for some of the participants in this study.

All participants were asked if they had been stopped by police whilst on a bike. Some had, while others like Matthew were “waiting for it”. Chizi noted that he had not been stopped whilst cycling, although he knew of three men that had been stopped and “they were all Black”. One respondent, Brandon, was stopped by police on the day he was interviewed. He referred to previous experiences of being stopped for cycling around in a ‘suspicious’ manner:

“I was actually around my own area, they were like ‘we’ve seen you cycling around here quite a few times, it is quite suspicious’. I was like I live here... I live down the road. And yeah, it was very vexing, it was very vexing. Ridiculous, wasting my time. Ruined my bike ride, I went home, you know. There’s no point in continuing. You know when you leave your house for peace of mind, and then you come out and these guys disturb your peace of mind, might as well go home.”

Brandon noted how stop and search is an issue for Black men within public space, regardless of what they are doing. This can be an additional psychological stressor on top of other barriers to cycling. Brandon spoke of how “every time you hear a police siren, you think it’s for you. [...] The psychological damage is very deep.”

However, not all participants were worried about police stops. Troy, aged over sixty, said that he would be “surprised” if the police stopped someone for riding a bicycle, unless they were riding fast or dangerously. Troy’s views were not shared by other participants, and may reflect the perception (and reality) that the older one is, the less likely that they will be targeted by the police, as Chris (in his fifties) explained:

“They may not stop older Black men, as much... But also because I’m older, I’m less likely to do things that might infringe [the law]. So I’ll still try and get there as quick as I can, but I won’t be going super fast. Yeah, ‘cause I can’t go super fast... For years I’ve never gone through lights” [i.e., never cycled through a red light].

Daniel spoke on how his age and size intersected to make him less

fearful of the police:

“I’m a grown man. Police are less likely to try and pick on me or try and bully me. They see my size, they see my face. They recognize that I’m not some little kid that you can intimidate or ... but I do feel it for the younger generation who particularly aren’t doing anything wrong.”

Chris described being targeted as a Black man in a public space, regardless of what activity or transport mode he was using:

“It’s not necessarily because you’re on a bike, it’s just because you’re Black and you’re doing something in public space.”

Chris went on to discuss how the fear of being stopped by police in public space meant he tried to ensure he did everything possible to prevent this from occurring:

“You have to go that extra bit [whether driving or cycling] because if you get stopped as a Black person and you’ve got one fault, they’re more likely to punish you for that fault than if you’ve got stopped as a White person.”

This risk averse behaviour was shared by some other participants. Matthew reflected on his fear that if he cycled through a red light, that he would be most likely to be stopped by the police ahead of other cyclists:

“[At a red light] I alighted from my bike and nipped across the junction, then got back on my bike. Everyone behind me cycled through and they were White. And I kind of think to myself, did I get off the bike and go across the road because there could be police around me, they might stop me in particular?”

Participants noted various other factors that they feared could make them more liable to being stopped by police, such as clothing worn while cycling. Chizi, 25 stated that whilst being stopped by police is not something that is always on his mind, he was aware that wearing tracksuits may make him more liable to being stopped:

“I wear trackies and stuff quite often these days, ‘cause it’s more comfortable, and it’s [being stopped and searched] more likely to happen if you wear trackies.”

This statement was echoed by Tinashe, who when recalling being stopped whilst wearing tracksuits said:

“Sometimes you get stopped, but that’s purely because of... our ethnicity and also how we dress. This kind of perception, which is really weird, because it’s ... what I’m comfortable in. Sorry I’m not wearing whatever White cyclists wear.”

Tion was “surprised” that he hadn’t been stopped by police whilst cycling yet. He stated that this might however be because he rides a racing bike, rather than a mountain bike (and hence looks more like a leisure cyclist with a ‘legitimate’ purpose):

“I have a racing bike. I don’t know if it’s true or not, maybe it’s my perception, but I feel like when the police are targeting any black person, ‘cause of how things are, I feel like they’re looking for people on certain types of bicycles.”

Matthew said that he did not fear being stopped by the police as he looks like a “lawyer... who works in the City” and “looks boring”. This statement supports earlier comments made on how age and dress, alongside ethnicity and gender, may affect likelihood of being stopped by police. Matthew wondered whether he would be more likely to be stopped if he was in “a really cool racing road bike nipping through [red traffic] lights”.

Tinashe stated that riding in a large group of Black men would make them a target for being stopped. This would be affected by the gender as well as the ethnicity of the group.

“Oh yeah, 4 Black guys is danger. You’ll be stopped a few times...I feel like if I was just by myself with other people like cycling to work it would be fine. [...] I think gender is a massive thing as well, definitely. I think 4 guys are definitely different to me being the only guy and three other girls. Yeah yeah. I think that if it was that it would be fine. But 4 guys they definitely stop us.”

This links to the reflection by Hylton (2018: 115) on his experience as a Black cyclist; and how cycling in a group in the English countryside with Black friends the *group* became hyper-visible and subject to

⁴ <https://www.theguardian.com/law/2020/dec/03/young-black-males-in-london-19-times-more-likely-to-be-stopped-and-searched>

hostility, whereas as a Black man cycling with White friends any hostility was more muted.

4.3. *'I just feel a bit more disposable': Racism in wider society*

As well as highlighting police mistreatment, participants had experienced harassment and abuse from other road users. Damon described his experience of racism while riding:

"A couple of times, I've been on a commute, and I've sort of suffered a bit of abuse, either from drivers or other cyclists. And, you know, there have been some racial slurs slung at me as well. It's happened quite a few times. It tends to be sort of van drivers who, as they're driving past, say something out their window."

As well as specific overt incidents, Damon and others spoke of a more diffuse sense of mistreatment by drivers, which they felt was greater than that experienced by White cyclists.

"I do feel like people get really close to me sometimes. And I do wonder if they would do the same thing if it was, you know, a White person. [...] And I'm like, is that just bad driving? Or is that just me overthinking it? I don't know."

David spoke of feeling 'a bit more disposable'. In the UK cyclists in general experience high rates of near misses (Aldred and Croweller, 2015), but for Black men cycling, the intersection of poor driver behaviour and racism was perceived to create particularly toxic experiences. While there is little research on this, a study by Goddard et al. (2015) found racial bias among drivers in their willingness to yield to pedestrians at crossings. Hence if similar processes operate in the UK and regarding cyclists, David may be right.

"I just feel a bit more disposable. I feel like people see us as a bit more disposable whilst on the bikes, that there is less care for our concern. Particularly drivers, as opposed to if I was a middle aged White guy in full gear. Just even in terms of just like little unsafe things that drivers do, like taking a turn without indicating or like coming, like right up behind me and making noise, or even sometimes the way that people overtake."

Tion spoke about the "double consequence" that would result from reacting angrily to driver aggression, as a Black man:

"People will frustrate you whilst you are cycling. Sometimes I am very careful as to how I react because I know there's a double concept of being Black and being male in this country. I know there's a double consequence. Typically the consequence for your action is a lot more severe than for any other racial or ethnic group."

Like many issues that affect Black men, not everyone is affected in the same way. Two mixed race participants explained how colourism meant that they may be less a target of racism, with lighter skin tones. George explained this further:

"I can be mistaken for not being a person of Caribbean descent easily. But in some respects that can actually give me a pass to a certain extent, but I got afro hair, or whatever, you know, I've got Black features, but it can give me a pass and I can recognise that, which then sometimes subconsciously by me, I try and get away with stuff. But at the same time, I know that I'm a person of colour, and I know I can be discriminated against as well."

While racism was a shared experience that affected all participants in different ways, one respondent, Ben, specifically stated that "my safety fears come about through how the roads have been laid out more than the colour of my skin", citing the lack of bike lanes. Nevertheless, racism affects the likelihood of Black men cycling and the places that they feel are safe for them to cycle. One participant, Brandon, noted how he avoids cycling through predominantly White areas like Chelsea as he fears he will be stereotyped as a drug dealer:

"Certain places you don't feel like you fit in. OK, if I was to cycle down to Chelsea or some shit like that...it wouldn't be comfortable. I wouldn't be anyway... 'cause you know what? You know, how people kind of look at you init. 'You come over here from whatever ends to deal drugs, to do this, that and the third'. You always think about what other

people be thinking."

This double standard was referenced when David spoke about how when he and his Black friends were kids they were not "afforded the same level of grace" as other children due to their race. He felt they received harsher treatment when they did "mischievous" acts, whether cycling or "running around". Unlike fear of street crime (which interviewees spoke about as something that predominantly affected them as teenagers), racism and discriminatory treatment from other members of the public or the police continued to affect them as adults.

Finally, Chris spoke about how until racism is tackled in wider society then it will remain an issue in any activity, including cycling:

"We are in a systemically racist society and that has to change, otherwise we will never stop or get real progress in any activity, including cycling."

4.4. *Infrastructure and culture: "it made me think [...] that's actually a viable option"*

When participants were asked about what they perceive the typical London cyclist to look like, most said something similar to Ben: "White, middle-aged dude, all lycra'ed up." However, the data demonstrated nuances and different stereotypes or images of cycling beyond the MAMIL [middle-aged men in Lycra]. Ben went on to say that that image is "not necessarily what [he sees in his] neighbourhood". Other participants spoke about how specific parts of London might have cyclists who did not fit the stereotype. Tion highlighted the diversity found among delivery cyclists, while other interviewees said that a greater diversity of male cyclists could be found using BMX bikes in London Bridge, Brixton and Regent's Park.

In particular, parts of East London were spoken of as having a more diverse cycling community. This could change at a very localised level, from one borough to the next. Chris reflected on how his current cycle commute via Enfield differed from a previous route through Waltham Forest (a neighbouring borough).

"Going to Enfield, you know I don't see as many cyclists going this way. Couple of people, they are mainly White, I think that's probably the predominant thing I could say that they're mainly White and very male. But when I used to cycle the other way, it was a bit more diverse, especially Walthamstow. You know there's a cycling group here that works with Muslim women and they'll go out on cycle rides and there'll be 20 of them all in hijabs."

The Walthamstow area and the wider Southern part of the London Borough of Waltham Forest experienced substantial investment as part of Transport for London's 'mini-Holland' programme (Aldred et al., 2019). Some participants noted that the cycling infrastructure is better there and in some other parts of East London compared to the rest of London. Chizi expressed his views on why cycling in East London was a pleasant experience for him:

"Cycling in East London in particular was really, really nice 'cause the roads are just really nicely laid out for cyclists. The cycle paths themselves are relatively wide. There's signs in terms of where to go."

There seemed to be agreement in the focus group that "the cycling infrastructure around East London is by far much, much better. And it's much easier to get around there" (Ben). George said he thought that once the infrastructure is built then more cyclists will appear:

"Yeah, build it and they will come for sure. I mean, the cycling around Walthamstow is pretty cool, to be honest, having, having ridden around there."

Ben then shared his own account of his cycling experience and how infrastructure made him reconsider cycling:

"In conjunction with ride to work schemes, an expansion of bike lanes into Tottenham actually made me consider riding to Canary Wharf, which is something I wouldn't normally consider. Because it's riding on the road, and as confident as a rider I am, I am not comfortable riding on the road because it feels dangerous."

Participants were asked about their ideal cycling environment.

Tinashe said that the “most important thing would be consistency in the kind of segregated cycle lanes”. Chizi said that South London has a lot of Black communities yet lacks access to bike hire schemes, cycle lanes and other bike related infrastructure, especially compared to other parts of London.

Marlon similarly said that bike lanes in South London areas like Brixton were needed. Generally there was agreement that improved cycle infrastructure would help increase cycling among Black men, and a concern that currently such infrastructure (and supporting measures like bicycle hire and cycle parking, as discussed earlier) was currently disproportionately lacking in some parts of London with larger Black populations.

4.5. ‘All you see is White men and White women cycling’: Representation and invisibility

Black men spoke both of experiencing problematic visibility (harassment or abuse, and/or a more diffuse sense of being unwelcome) alongside feeling invisible or un-represented in cycling cultures (see [Lubitow et al., 2019](#); [Hylton, 2018](#)). As Chris puts it, Black men are “underrepresented in the whole cycling world”, from cycling as a commuter or for leisure to cycling as sport. Mario recalled how the lack of Black cyclists made him stand out when he and other Black males went on a group cycle ride:

“so we’re cycling in the same area and everyone noticed. And these White women were like, ‘well, there goes one there goes another one’... It’s usually White [people cycling], especially in my area... or a few Asians, so to see 10 Black men cycling together like that, it was a bit of a ‘ohhhh’, yeah I mean so a shock maybe for them...I didn’t care to be honest.”

Interviewees spoke of challenging the assumption that Black men do not normally cycle through example and positive representation. As Chris said:

“I feel like it’s great for me to be seen as much as possible by people. I took my bike to protests...I cycled up there to be seen as a Black cyclist. This is one of the things that I’m promoting. And then if I need to talk to anybody [like] journalists, it’s a good thing that we see that Black people cycle as well.”

Matthew explained further:

“The image of [cycling] needs to be broken down, I think it’s overwhelmingly seen as an activity that White people do. You need to have visibility, so there needs to be some Black men to see other Black men cycling. [Otherwise] why would you do it? Because all you see is White men and White women cycling.”

Many interviewees had ideas for encouraging positive representations, through various pathways, for instance Brandon suggested:

“Go around and talk to schools in Hackney or where the kids are predominantly Black and show them ‘I’m a Black man, I know how to fix bikes and ... I can feed my family, pay my bills, pay the tax man that comes at the end of the year.’”

Chris recalled several Black bike mechanics in London but said that their existence was not widely known. Some participants cited the small but growing number of cycling clubs for Black cyclists. George explained the importance of these cycling clubs for him:

“I didn’t feel comfortable joining a group near to me because of that perception of white middle-aged men in lycra on expensive bikes. So I joined a club or a network of riders, who kind of looked like me. And that made me a little bit more comfortable. And then when I became more competent and more confident, I felt skilled enough to venture into one of those other groups.”

Mario highlighted the director of the Black Cyclist Network (BCN⁵) as a role model, helping people “like me” see that “I can do it”. George spoke of the “sense of community” such groups provide and the potential

for leaving a legacy of future Black cyclists. He noted that such groups help members to “feel confident” and learn maintenance skills from bike mechanics, allowing them to pass their new found skills and love of cycling to their children.

Daniel suggested that growth in the numbers of Black people cycling in London meant that people were now more likely to see Black people on bikes, helping to challenge assumptions:

“I think for me it’s better now just ‘cause there’s a bit more representation. you could be waiting for a bus and see a Black cyclist commuting to work. You know? I mean, when I was growing up that wasn’t really a thing.”

Some participants recognised the need to further diversify and expand clubs and initiatives that target Black cyclists. Daniel noted that the BCN is “brilliant” but also said he wished there was a way to join such clubs “without getting all the gear and clobber”, an issue that resonated with Marlon who called for Black cycling clubs for “very casual cyclists”. Meanwhile George highlighted the lack of Black cycling groups for young people and the need for their outreach to not “just rely on social media”.

David and Tinashe both spoke about how they felt they still needed to see more Black cyclists in order to feel more “comfortable” when cycling. David said that at present, he felt like “an anomaly”, making him more visible and therefore exposing “how much of a beginner” he is. This links to the debate in [Aldred \(2013\)](#) about tensions between being “incompetent” or “too competent” as a cyclist in a low-cycling context. For Black men in London, surrounded by a predominantly White cycling scene, unwelcome visibility may be directly racialised or it may invoke (as with the White women quoted in [Aldred \(2013\)](#)) perceptions of incompetence due to the person visibly not matching the stereotypical cyclist.

4.6. Culture and community: ‘A cycling ecosystem for the Black community’

Attitudes to cycling within the Black community in London was raised spontaneously by most participants, including becoming a topic of discussion within the focus groups. Tinashe suggested that as cycling is not common within London’s Black communities, it is not passed down through generations, whereas sports such as football are more actively encouraged. Discussing this further, Tinashe suggested that Black parents could “teach [children] how to cycle very early on”, and that universities could help encourage cycling among Black students through African Caribbean societies existing at most UK Universities.

Mario highlighted the importance of encouragement from parents and among those “who you socialise with”. He suggested that more Black men needed to try activities that are seen as unusual within the community and overcome the “uncomfortable” feelings of doing so.

“Yeah, we put barriers on ourselves not to try certain things. We put our thoughts out ‘People don’t swim, Black people don’t cycle or Black people don’t snowboard’. Whereas that is a negative thought to really have in the first place and you don’t know what you’re good at.”

Like Mario, Daniel and Tinashe, Matthew spoke of learning to fear cycling, often by adults trying to protect children. However, Daniel said he thought newer generations are more open minded to cycling especially as there is “a bit more representation”. Nevertheless, fear of cycling remains. Daniel spoke of how families try to protect Black boys due to “other issues that happened to the Black community”, in particular racism and stop and search. He reflected:

“I think yeah, there’s a level of protection of oneself, which I understand. But also there is a level of fear, which I don’t think is helpful within the Black community.”

Whilst many respondents cited lack of encouragement among families, Ben spoke of his experience that he and his friends grew up with bikes, but as adults transitioned into car use:

“Black guys, we like riding bikes. We don’t necessarily view it as a main mode of transport once you get to a certain age, and you get cars

⁵ <https://www.blackcyclistsnetwork.cc/>

and stuff like that. But we grew up riding bikes all the time.”

Tinashe said that currently, his Black friends did not cycle, and he had felt encouraged to cycle by his White friends. Tinashe did not talk about cycling with his Black friends, as it was not something they had in common:

“A lot of my friends go to the gym, so you talk about the gym and... all of these different aspects that surround the gym. You don't have this conversation when it comes to cycling. Yeah, I don't with my Black friends anyway, so that's what's missing. Is that conversation about like 'Oh yeah, I cycle to work as well'. What do you wear? What high viz. jacket do you wear? What helmet do you have? You know what's the best for?

As someone with dreadlocks, he felt the lack of other Black men to talk to about practicalities of cycling:

“Someone else who has long hair as well, like 'oh, how do you wear a helmet as well?' ... Does it fit your head properly? ... all of these kind of conversations... Those conversations just aren't happening so I just feel discouraged, period.”

Tinashe talked about cycle tours for Black people being a way to encourage networking and the sharing of similar experiences. He also suggested organising family rides, saying that if the event is planned with the ease of parents in mind so that all they have to do is “wake [the] family up” and turn up then “it will encourage Black people to get into it where you know we're creating a community, social aspects”. Daniel suggested targeting places where Black men socialise, to offer free bike workshops and other similar initiatives. Similarly, George spoke of the need to “go out into the community” whilst Brandon called for school cycling workshops. These ideas could be summarised in Tion's call for an ‘ecosystem for cycling’ in the Black community which includes Black cycling groups and Black owned bike shops, a suggestion also made by Brandon and discussed in the focus group. He explains the importance of such an ecosystem further:

“So yeah for the Black community, I think building an ecosystem for bicycles that we know we can go here to get our bicycles fixed... so then, tying back to race, we don't feel racially profiled or stereotyped if we go into certain spaces, certain cycling groups. Some people may feel uncomfortable. They may feel, uh, they do get racially abused or stereotyped and stuff like that. So I think, yeah, I think a cycling ecosystem for the Black community.”

5. Discussion

In this final section we bring together some of the key findings, linking these back to the academic literature, reflect on the limitations of our study and make suggestions for future research. While a small-scale study, our findings highlight the interconnected barriers acting to discourage Black men in London from cycling and the need for change at a range of levels to ensure cycling in London is accessible to all. It also provides some insights into ways in which broader structural oppressions (such as those related to the labour market or to housing) may interact with ‘race-blind’ cycling policies to exacerbate exclusion.

Many interviewees felt invisible in that they did not see themselves reflected in London's cycling communities and networks, from clubs, to commuters, to bike shops (Hylton, 2018). Participants often felt problematically visible when they did use their bikes, alone or in groups with other Black men. Many had experienced harassment from the police via stop and search, and spoke of hyper-awareness of clothing, cycles, and where and how they chose to ride in relation to this (c.f. Hawthorne, 2019 on being made to feel ‘out-of-place’ in public). Participants spoke about both overt abuse from other road users and a pervasive sense of being doubly ‘disposable’ as cyclists in a cycling-hostile system and Black men within a racist system. Some suggested that infrastructure and services for cycling was lacking in London's Black communities, compared to Whiter areas.

In relation to the London context, there is a lack of quantitative analysis and sometimes data related to these issues, which could form a

useful focus of further research alongside further qualitative research into this and other groups. London Assembly member Siân Berry asked in, 2020 for data on Metropolitan Police stops of cyclists by race, age, and gender, and was told that this information was not held.⁶ England's national injury statistics do not contain demographic data on ethnicity of road victims, although some police-recorded data is held by Transport for London. Despite the lack of quantitative data from London, literature from North America (Barajas, 2021; Lowry, 2021; Goddard et al. 2015) suggests that a toxic combination of infrastructure under-provision, racialised policing, and racism from drivers and other road users may (as participants feared) put Black men at higher risk of negative incidents of various types, from harassment to injury.

Researchers and policymakers must also consider the impact of less proximal exclusions on participation in cycling. London's Black population has disproportionately been excluded from better-paid jobs in which Whites are over-represented. Currently 33% of Black residents in employment are low paid, compared to 19% of White residents,⁷ while only 65% of Black Londoners of working age are employed at all, compared to 80% of Whites.⁸ Hence Black Londoners have lower access on average to England's national Cycle to Work scheme providing staged and subsidised cycle purchase, which requires a stable job and a participating employer. Due to historic inequalities in housing provision, Black Londoners are more likely to live in flats than White Londoners, meaning that they may disproportionately experience problems with cycle parking, and hence theft. Clearly, an equity-focused cycling policy on its own cannot redress these injustices, but should do what it can to mitigate them, such as setting up cycle loan schemes that target those without access to Cycle to Work.

Finally, some participants spoke of the value of a Black cycling ecosystem. The best people to get Black men cycling are most likely other Black men – whether as mentors and role models in communities, or as planners and policymakers. Alongside addressing the issues above, authorities could support networks of mentors, and outreach to community venues and events not primarily focused on cycling, as well as strengthening their diversity processes to increase representation in planning and policy. Our participants highlighted how important it was to see and hear from people like themselves who cycled. While cycling rates remain low among Black men and women, there are examples of individuals and organisations which could be supported to create more diverse images and practices of cycling.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Akwesi Osei: Conceptualization, Methodology, Formal analysis, Investigation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.
Rachel Aldred: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

Declaration of Competing Interest

None.

Data availability

The data that has been used is confidential.

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⁶ <https://www.london.gov.uk/questions/2020/0437>

⁷ <https://www.trustforlondon.org.uk/data/low-paid-Londoners/>

⁸ <https://data.london.gov.uk/dataset/employment-rates-by-ethnicity>

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jtrangeo.2023.103576>.

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