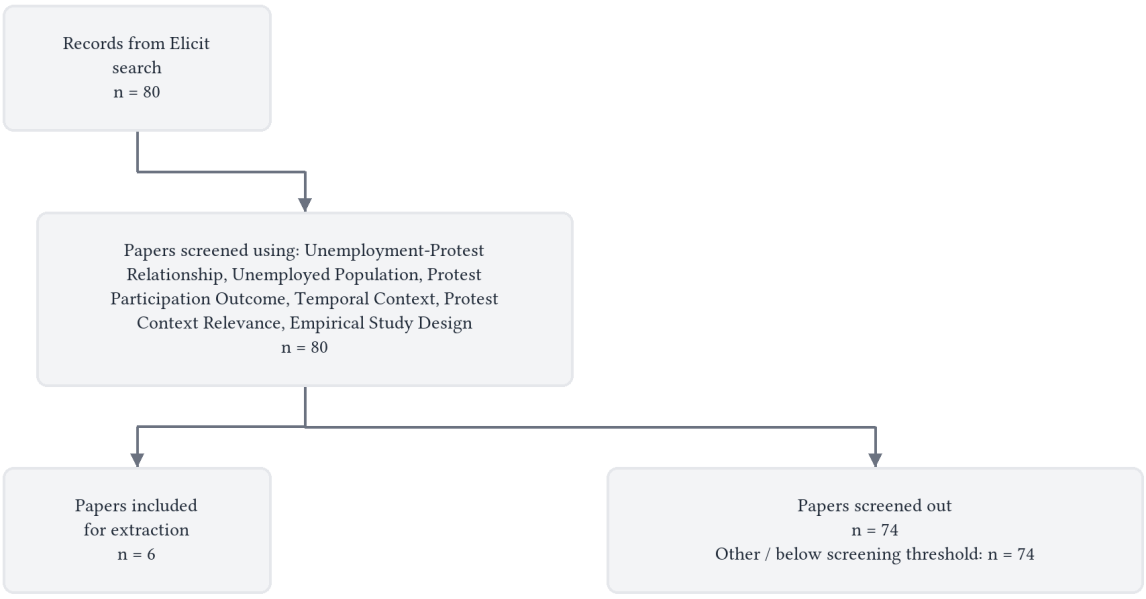
Does unemployment increase protest participation? Evidence from the 2020 George Floyd BLM protests during COVID-19, including the role of biographical availability, health insurance decoupling, and economic shock on social movement mobilization.

Yes—sudden pandemic unemployment increased BLM protest participation through economic shock effects that heightened racial grievances, amplified by biographical availability from lockdowns, though health insurance decoupling received minimal empirical testing.

Abstract

Unemployment increased protest participation in the 2020 George Floyd/BLM protests, but the relationship was specific to sudden economic shocks rather than chronic unemployment. Each 1 percentage point decrease in employment was associated with a 7.5% increase in the odds of a BLM protest occurring and a 2.2% increase in protest attendance rates [1], while long-term unemployment from 2019 showed a negative relationship with protest attendance [1]. Unemployment search trends predicted BLM participation with a five-day temporal lag, explaining 32.7% of variation [2]. Economic shock effects on grievances received robust support across studies [1–3], with sudden job loss heightening motivations to protest, particularly in counties with pre-existing high inequality [3]. The COVID-19 pandemic amplified this relationship by increasing the salience of racial inequalities in economic outcomes [4], providing biographical availability through lockdowns [1], and creating conditions where protest signaled commitment despite health risks [4]. Resource mobilization effects were complex, with liquid assets negatively associated and homeownership positively associated with protesting [5, 6], though these relationships largely disappeared when controlling for economic vulnerability [5]. Health insurance decoupling was mentioned as a potential mechanism but received minimal empirical testing [1]. The relationship between employment loss and protest attendance was specific to BLM protests and not observed for other protests during the pandemic [1], indicating that unemployment activated specifically racialized economic grievances rather than generalized discontent.

Flow Diagram



Paper search

We performed a semantic search across over 138 million academic papers from the Elicit search engine, which includes all of Semantic Scholar and OpenAlex.

We ran this query: "Does unemployment increase protest participation? Evidence from the 2020 George Floyd BLM protests during COVID-19, including the role of biographical availability, health insurance decoupling, and economic shock on social movement mobilization."

The search returned 80 total results from Elicit.

We retrieved 80 papers most relevant to the query for screening.

Screening

We screened in sources based on their abstracts that met these criteria:

- **Unemployment-Protest Relationship**: Does this study examine the relationship between unemployment/job loss and protest participation or social movement engagement?
- **Unemployed Population**: Does this study include unemployed individuals or those who experienced job loss as part of the study population?
- **Protest Participation Outcome**: Does this study measure or examine protest participation or social movement engagement as an outcome variable?

- **Temporal Context**: Does this study focus on the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests following George Floyd's death or protests during the COVID-19 pandemic period (2020-2021)?
- **Protest Context Relevance**: Does this study focus on protests related to racial justice, police brutality, or the Black Lives Matter movement (rather than solely on unrelated protest topics)?
- **Empirical Study Design**: Is this a quantitative, qualitative, or mixed-methods empirical study (rather than a theoretical paper, opinion piece, or commentary without empirical data)?

We considered all screening questions together and made a holistic judgement about whether to screen in each paper.

At abstract screening, the number of papers excluded for each primary reason was:

- **Other / below screening threshold**: n = 74

Data extraction

We asked a large language model to extract each data column below from each paper. We gave the model the extraction instructions shown below for each column.

- **Unemployment Measurement**:

  Extract how unemployment or economic distress was measured in relation to 2020 BLM protests, including:

- Specific unemployment indicators used (unemployment rate, job loss, income reduction, etc.)
- Data source for unemployment measures (government data, survey data, etc.)
- Geographic and temporal scope of unemployment measurement
- Whether unemployment was measured at individual or aggregate level (county, zip code, etc.)
- Time period of unemployment measurement relative to protests

- **Protest Participation Measurement**:

  Extract how protest participation was measured specifically for 2020 George Floyd/BLM protests, including:

- Definition of protest participation used (attendance, frequency, duration, etc.)
- Data source for protest measurement (surveys, observational data, news reports, etc.)
- Geographic scope of protest measurement
- Time period covered for protest activity
- Whether individual or aggregate-level participation was measured

- **Causal Evidence**:

  Extract evidence for causal relationship between unemployment and protest participation in 2020 BLM protests, including:

- Statistical methods used to establish causality (natural experiments, instrumental variables, etc.)
- Key findings on direction and magnitude of unemployment effects on protest participation
- Statistical significance and effect sizes reported
- Whether correlation vs. causation was addressed and how
- Robustness checks or sensitivity analyses performed

- **Theoretical Mechanisms**:

  Extract evidence for specific theoretical mechanisms linking unemployment to protest participation, including:

- Biographical availability (how unemployment affects time/freedom to protest)

- Health insurance decoupling (loss of employer-provided benefits)
- Economic shock effects on grievances or motivations
- Resource mobilization effects (financial constraints vs. freedom)
- Any other mechanisms tested (salience, signaling value, etc.)
- Which mechanisms were supported or refuted by evidence

- **COVID-19 Context**:

  Extract how the COVID-19 pandemic specifically influenced the unemployment-protest relationship, including:

- Pandemic-related unemployment vs. general unemployment effects
- Health restrictions' impact on protest participation
- COVID-19 as moderator of unemployment-protest relationship
- Pandemic timing relative to George Floyd murder and protests
- Unique aspects of 2020 context vs. historical unemployment-protest patterns

- **Study Population**:

  Extract details about who and where was studied in relation to unemployment and 2020 BLM protest participation, including:

- Geographic scope (national, state, county, city level)
- Population characteristics (demographics, socioeconomic status)
- Sample size and time period covered
- Data collection method and timing
- Whether focus was on protesters, general population, or specific communities

- **Moderating Factors**:

  Extract factors that modified the relationship between unemployment and protest participation in 2020 BLM protests, including:

- Demographic moderators (race, age, income, education)
- Geographic moderators (urban vs. rural, inequality levels, Black population share)
- Social/political moderators (social trust, political trust, civic engagement)
- Economic moderators (types of wealth, homeownership, liquid assets)
- How these factors strengthened, weakened, or conditioned unemployment effects

- **Alternative Explanations**:

  Extract how studies addressed alternative explanations for protest participation beyond unemployment, including:

- Other economic factors considered (income, wealth, poverty)
- Non-economic factors tested (racial grievances, political attitudes, social networks)
- How unemployment effects were isolated from other causes
- Competing theories or mechanisms ruled out
- Whether unemployment was primary, secondary, or one of multiple causes identified

Results

Characteristics of Included Studies

Study	Full text retrieved?	Study Type	Geographic Scope	Sample Size	Time Period	Unemployment Measure	Protest Measure
Habr & Pullen-Blasnik, 2025	Yes	Primary study	491 Core-Based Statistical Areas (CBSAs) in US [1]	491 CBSAs covering ~83% of US population [1]	Employment: Jan-May 2020; Protests: May 25-Aug 31, 2020 [1, 1]	Change in employment levels from Opportunity Insights Economic Tracker [1]	Crowd Counting Consortium (CCC) protest attendance data [1]
Gifford & Oliver, 2021	Yes	Primary study	National (United States) [2]	Google Trends users (sample size not specified) [2]	2020 [2]	Unemployment search trends from Google Trends API [2]	BLM search queries from Google Trends API [2]
Miller et al., 2024	No	Primary study	National (United States) [5]	Not specified [5]	Summer 2020 protests [5]	Not specified; measures of economic vulnerability mentioned [5]	National survey administered during protests [5]
Iacoella et al., 2021	Yes	Primary study	3,142 US counties [3]	3,142 counties across 50 states and DC [3]	Jan-Dec 2020 [3]	Opportunity Insights Economic Tracker and Bureau of Labor Statistics [3]	US Crisis Monitor (ACLED and Bridging Divides Initiative) [3]
Avetian et al., 2021	No	Primary study	County-day level [4]	Not specified [4]	Not specified [4]	Not specified [4]	County-day level variation in protest behavior [4]

Study	Full text retrieved?	Study Type	Geographic Scope	Sample Size	Time Period	Unemployment Measure	Protest Measure
Miller et al., 2022	No	Primary study	National (United States) [6]	Not specified [6]	Summer 2020 [6]	Not specified; measures of economic vulnerability mentioned [6]	National survey administered during protests [6]

The six included studies examined the relationship between economic conditions and protest participation during the 2020 George Floyd/BLM protests, though they varied considerably in their data sources and measurement approaches. Three studies had full text available (Habr & Pullen-Blasnik 2025, Gifford & Oliver 2021, Iacoella et al. 2021), while three were available only as abstracts (Miller et al. 2024 and 2022, Avetian et al. 2021). Studies spanned multiple geographic levels, from individual-level national surveys to county-level and CBSA-level aggregate analyses. Two studies used the Opportunity Insights Economic Tracker for unemployment measurement [1, 3], one used Google Trends search data as a proxy [2], and the remaining three did not specify their unemployment measures in available text [4–6].

Effects of Unemployment on Protest Participation

All studies with available data reported positive associations between economic distress and protest participation, though they measured these constructs differently and found varying effect magnitudes.

Study	Unemployment Indicator	Direction of Effect	Statistical Significance	Effect Size/Magnitude
Habr & Pullen-Blasnik, 2025	Change in employment levels (Jan-May 2020) [1]	Positive [1]	Statistically significant [1]	1 percentage point decrease in employment → 7.5% increase in odds of protest occurrence; 2.2% increase in protest attendance rate [1]
Gifford & Oliver, 2021	Unemployment search trends [2]	Positive [2]	Significant (null hypothesis rejected) [2]	Unemployment searches explain 32.7% of variation in BLM search participation five days before BLM increase [2]

Study	Unemployment Indicator	Direction of Effect	Statistical Significance	Effect Size/Magnitude
Iacoella et al., 2021	County-level unemployment (from policy stringency) [3]	Positive in high-inequality counties [3]	Statistically significant [3]	Policy stringency → increased unemployment → increased protests in high-inequality counties; specific effect sizes not detailed [3]

Habr and Pullen-Blasnik (2025) provided the most precise quantification, finding that each 1 percentage point decrease in employment was associated with a 7.5% increase in the odds of a BLM protest occurring and a 2.2% increase in the protest attendance rate [1]. These effects remained significant after controlling for relevant covariates and performing robustness checks including removing outliers and using robust standard errors [1]. Notably, the study found that baseline unemployment rates from 2019 showed a large negative relationship to protest attendance, indicating that sudden employment loss had a distinct effect from long-term unemployment trends [1].

Gifford and Oliver (2021) used a different approach, employing Granger causal testing with Google Trends data to establish temporal precedence. Their Vector Autoregressive model showed that unemployment search trends were a significant predictor of BLM search participation, explaining 32.7% of the variation five days before the increase in BLM searches [2]. This temporal lag provided evidence for a directional relationship where unemployment concerns preceded and predicted BLM engagement [2].

Iacoella et al. (2021) took an indirect approach, using instrumental variables to examine how COVID-19 policy stringency affected unemployment, which in turn influenced protests. Their analysis showed that more stringent policies led to increased unemployment and reduced economic activities in counties with high inequality, which then increased protest participation [3]. They used the number of COVID-19 cases in neighboring states as an instrument to isolate the causal effect of policy stringency on unemployment and protests [3].

The studies not available in full text provided less detail on effect sizes. Avetian et al. (2021) found that counties more affected by the pandemic experienced an increase in protest behavior [4], using super spreader events as a source of plausible exogenous variation and conducting multiple alternative identification strategies and robustness checks [4]. The Miller studies (2024, 2022) examined wealth and assets rather than unemployment specifically, finding that economic vulnerability measures were associated with protest participation, though these relationships largely disappeared when controlling for economic vulnerability [5, 6].

Theoretical Mechanisms Linking Unemployment to Protest Participation

Studies tested several theoretical mechanisms through which unemployment might influence protest participation, with varying degrees of empirical support.

Economic Shock Effects on Grievances

Multiple studies found support for economic shock effects, where sudden unemployment increases grievances and motivates protest participation. Habr and Pullen-Blasnik (2025) provided evidence that sudden employment loss was significantly related to increased protest attendance, suggesting that the jarring effects of rapid economic change

heightened motivation to protest [1]. This contrasted with their finding that long-term unemployment in 2019 had a large negative relationship with protest attendance, indicating that sudden shocks have different mobilizing effects than persistent economic hardship [1].

Gifford and Oliver (2021) found that unemployment search trends predicted BLM search participation, explaining 32.7% of variation, which they interpreted as evidence for economic deprivation increasing perceived strain and motivating social movement participation [2]. Iacoella et al. (2021) explicitly tested the economic downturn hypothesis, finding that lockdowns and restrictive measures led to job losses that stimulated grievances and feelings of injustice, particularly in low-skilled jobs [3].

Resource Mobilization Effects

The evidence on resource mobilization was mixed, with different studies finding seemingly contradictory patterns. Avetian et al. (2021) tested availability of resources and opportunity costs of protesting as mechanisms, finding support for both [4]. However, they also identified a "protest poverty trap" in which counties most severely affected by the pandemic and with large Black population shares were caught between wanting to protest and being economically constrained from doing so [4].

The Miller studies (2024, 2022) provided nuanced evidence on different types of wealth. They found that liquid assets were negatively associated with protesting while homeownership was positively associated, and investment assets showed a non-linear relationship [5, 6]. These relationships held when controlling for income, demographics, and ideology, but largely disappeared when controlling for economic vulnerability measures [5, 6]. This suggests that it was economic vulnerability rather than absolute wealth levels that drove protest participation.

Health Insurance Decoupling

Only one study explicitly mentioned health insurance decoupling as a mechanism. Habr and Pullen-Blasnik (2025) noted that the jarring effects of unemployment were likely compounded by the loss of health insurance, which could increase vulnerability and potentially motivate protest participation [1]. However, they did not test this mechanism directly or provide quantitative evidence for its role.

Salience and Signaling Value

Avetian et al. (2021) found evidence that the pandemic increased the salience of racial inequalities in the United States, which helped mobilize new allies who joined the movement for the first time during the pandemic [4, 4]. They also found support for increased signaling value of protest as a mechanism [4]. Gifford and Oliver (2021) discussed how ideological narratives and emotional states made social issues more salient and emotionally resonant during the pandemic, though they did not test this mechanism directly [2].

Biographical Availability

Biographical availability—the idea that unemployment frees up time and reduces constraints on protest participation—was implied in several studies but rarely tested explicitly. Avetian et al. (2021) tested opportunity costs of protesting, which is closely related to biographical availability, and found support for this mechanism [4]. However, Habr and Pullen-Blasnik's (2025) finding that long-term unemployment in 2019 was negatively related to protest attendance suggests that biographical availability alone cannot explain protest participation [1].

Moderating Factors

The relationship between unemployment and protest participation was conditioned by multiple demographic, geographic, economic, and social factors.

Geographic and Inequality Moderators

Iacoella et al. (2021) found that the impact of government responses to the COVID-19 pandemic on protests was observed only in counties with high levels of inequality before the pandemic, where grievances may have been initially stronger [3]. Counties with lower trust in political institutions but higher levels of social trust and civic engagement at the pandemic's start were also more likely to experience protests in response to stringent policies [3]. This suggests that the unemployment-protest relationship was amplified in contexts of existing inequality and particular configurations of social and political trust.

Avetian et al. (2021) identified urban counties with large Black population shares as less responsive to increased COVID-19 exposure due to being most severely affected by the pandemic, caught in what they termed the "protest poverty trap" [4]. This indicates that geographic context and existing demographic composition shaped how economic shocks translated into protest participation.

Demographic Moderators

Habr and Pullen-Blasnik (2025) found that the percentage of Black population in the labor force had a positive effect on protest likelihood, while the number of Black people killed by police showed a large but non-significant effect [1]. The presence of previous BLM protests in an area significantly increased protest attendance, suggesting that protest history and community characteristics moderated the unemployment effect [1]. Political leaning of an area, as indicated by Trump vote percentages, negatively affected protest attendance [1].

Education levels also played a role, with higher percentages of the population enrolled in higher education positively affecting protest attendance [1]. Gifford and Oliver (2021) noted that Black groups experienced higher unemployment rates and economic deprivation, indicating that race was a key demographic moderator [2].

Economic Moderators

The Miller studies (2024, 2022) provided evidence that different types of wealth had distinct relationships with protest participation. Liquid assets were negatively associated with protesting, homeownership was positively associated, and investment assets exhibited a non-linear association [5, 6]. These relationships held when controlling for income, demographics, and ideology, but disappeared when controlling for economic vulnerability, suggesting that economic vulnerability itself was the key moderating factor [5, 6].

COVID-19 Pandemic Context

The COVID-19 pandemic created a unique context that shaped the relationship between unemployment and protest participation in several ways.

Pandemic-Related vs. General Unemployment

Multiple studies distinguished between pandemic-related sudden employment loss and general unemployment trends. Habr and Pullen-Blasnik (2025) highlighted that the sudden employment loss due to COVID-19 was distinct from long-term unemployment trends, with the rapid nature of the economic shock creating unique mobilizing conditions [1]. Gifford and Oliver (2021) found that the COVID-19 pandemic led to significant short-run economic effects, including labor market disequilibrium and misallocation of resources, disproportionately affecting Black communities [2].

Health Restrictions and Protest Participation

The pandemic's health restrictions had complex effects on protest participation. Habr and Pullen-Blasnik (2025) noted that lockdowns and health restrictions provided opportunities for people to engage in online activities and

protests [1]. However, Iacoella et al. (2021) found that health restrictions affected protest participation by increasing the costs of participating due to fear of infection and policing of gatherings [3].

Timing and Historical Context

The protests occurred during the early months of the pandemic, creating a unique historical context where multiple crises converged [1]. Gifford and Oliver (2021) found that the pandemic coincided with the George Floyd murder, amplifying the protests through a combination of economic impact and racial justice concerns [2]. The 2020 context was unique due to the combination of the pandemic's economic impact and the political polarization and social movements of the time [3].

Mobilization of New Participants

Avetian et al. (2021) provided evidence that the pandemic mobilized new allies who joined the movement for the first time during the pandemic, attributing this to a rise in the salience of racial inequalities [4]. This suggests that the pandemic created conditions that expanded participation beyond traditional activist communities.

Synthesis

The studies converge on a positive relationship between unemployment and BLM protest participation during 2020, but they reveal important heterogeneity in when, where, and how this relationship manifests.

Temporal Dynamics: Sudden vs. Chronic Unemployment

A key finding across studies is that the type and timing of unemployment matters. Habr and Pullen-Blasnik (2025) found that sudden employment loss in early 2020 increased protest participation while long-term unemployment from 2019 showed a negative relationship [1, 1]. This suggests that economic shocks mobilize differently than chronic economic hardship. The temporal precedence established by Gifford and Oliver (2021), where unemployment searches preceded BLM engagement by five days [2], further supports the idea that sudden economic disruption creates an acute sense of grievance that can mobilize participation.

This distinction has methodological implications. Studies measuring unemployment as a stock variable (the percentage unemployed at a given time) may miss the mobilizing effect of unemployment as a flow variable (the rate of job loss). The convergence of the COVID-19 economic shock with the George Floyd murder created conditions where millions experienced simultaneous economic disruption [2], potentially explaining why 2020 saw unprecedented protest participation despite—or rather, because of—the pandemic.

Geographic Heterogeneity: The Role of Inequality and Existing Mobilization

The unemployment-protest relationship was strongly conditioned by geographic context. Iacoella et al. (2021) found that unemployment increased protests only in counties with pre-existing high inequality [3], suggesting that economic shocks activate latent grievances rather than creating them de novo. Similarly, Avetian et al. (2021) identified a "protest poverty trap" where counties with large Black populations and high COVID exposure were simultaneously most aggrieved and most constrained from protesting [4, 4].

These findings reconcile an apparent paradox: if unemployment mobilizes protest, why weren't the most economically devastated areas necessarily the most active? The answer appears to be that multiple factors must align. Areas with high inequality, previous protest history [1], and sufficient (but not crushing) economic resources showed the strongest unemployment-protest relationships. Areas with extreme economic devastation or very low inequality showed weaker relationships, though for different reasons.

Mechanism Pathways: Multiple Routes to Mobilization

The studies support multiple non-exclusive mechanisms. Economic shock effects appear robust across studies [1–3], but resource mobilization effects are more complex. The Miller studies' findings that liquid assets were negatively associated with protesting while homeownership was positively associated [5, 6] can be reconciled with the resource mobilization framework if we recognize that different types of economic resources have different effects. Liquid assets may indicate economic stability and thus lower grievances, while homeownership may provide rootedness in communities and neighborhoods most affected by both policing and economic disruption.

The salience mechanism identified by Avetian et al. (2021) [4, 4] helps explain why unemployment mobilized specifically for BLM protests rather than protests generally. The pandemic made racial inequalities in unemployment, healthcare access, and mortality highly visible [2], creating conditions where economic distress was interpreted through a racial justice frame.

COVID-19 as Catalyst and Context

The pandemic served multiple roles beyond simply causing unemployment. It increased the salience of existing racial inequalities [4], provided biographical availability through lockdowns [1], threatened health insurance access for those losing jobs [1], and created conditions where protest could signal commitment despite health risks [4]. The concentration of these factors in spring-summer 2020 created a unique mobilization context that explains both the magnitude and the specificity of the unemployment-protest relationship.

Importantly, Habr and Pullen-Blasnik (2025) found that the relationship between employment loss and protest attendance was specific to BLM protests and not observed for other protests during the pandemic [1]. This suggests that unemployment didn't simply create generalized discontent but rather activated specifically racialized economic grievances, consistent with longstanding racial disparities in unemployment that were exacerbated by COVID-19 [2, 2].

Implications for Understanding Protest Mobilization

These findings suggest that unemployment mobilizes protest participation not as a simple linear effect but through multiple conditional pathways. The strongest effects occurred where sudden economic shocks (rather than chronic hardship) intersected with pre-existing inequality, visible racial disparities, reduced opportunity costs from lockdowns, and communities with protest capacity not entirely depleted by economic devastation. This helps explain why the 2020 BLM protests reached unprecedented scale: they occurred at a rare convergence point where economic, health, and racial justice crises aligned in ways that amplified each pathway to mobilization.

References

1. Habr K, Pullen-Blasnik H (2025) A Convergence of Crises: Sudden Employment Loss and Black Lives Matter Protest Attendance during the COVID-19 Pandemic. Socius: Sociological Research for a Dynamic World. https://doi.org/10.1177/23780231251328799

2. Gifford J, Oliver JO (2021) Black Lives Matter and Granger Causal Testing: A Signal of Economic Deprivation. Modern Economy. https://doi.org/10.4236/me.2021.1211084

3. Iacoella F, Justino P, Martorano B (2021) Do pandemics lead to rebellion? Policy responses to COVID-19, inequality, and protests in the USA. https://doi.org/10.35188/UNU-WIDER/2021/995-2

4. Avetian, Casanueva A, Sardoschau S, Saxena K (2021) Social Protest in Times of Social Distancing: Black Lives Matter and COVID-19. Social Science Research Network. https://doi.org/10.2139/SSRN.3831819

5. Miller S, Roll S, Brown CT, et al (2024) Which Side (of the Balance Sheet) Are You On? Household Financial Resources and Participation in the 2020 Protests. The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare. https://doi.org/10.15453/0191-5096.4671

6. Miller S, Roll S, Brown C, et al (2022) Which Side (Of the Balance Sheet) Are You On? Examining the Relationship between Assets, Income, and Participation in the 2020 Protests. Social Science Research Network. https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4077179