NEW SOLIDARITY

How Mutual Aid might change Britain

Tom Wein

June 2020
Before Black Lives Matter, another, quieter social movement swept the country. They prefer not to think of themselves in those terms - but campaigners, organisers, and politicians can. A patchwork of new groups has the potential to reshape our society.

4,224 groups have made a huge national donation - equivalent to 3.6m hours of volunteering, or £31m.

Mutual aid is more than just neighborliness. It is politically potent. In this report, we examine how it might change British politics.

New groups have sprung up across the country, doing whatever is needed and improvising as they go. Contrary to some fears, they seem to be helping a wide range of people, and not reinforcing existing inequalities.

These mutual aiders are finding it tough. They feel lower life satisfaction and more anxiety than the general public. But they are getting on with things, and feel equipped to handle the problems the pandemic throws at them. More than half wish they could do this sort of work all the time, even after the crisis abates. They would welcome help on mastering technology and communication - using online documents and videos.

77% say that this is a time when great change is possible. Though they’d rather not think of mutual aid groups as political vehicles, 83% say they are likely to take political actions in the coming months. Almost half will take at least 3 different actions.

Which political tendencies might that benefit? Mutual aiders are right in the middle of the political spectrum, though there are more Remainers than Brexiters among them. They don’t trust the government much (though still more than the general public), and are evenly split on whether the course of the pandemic is more down to individual choices or to the natural course of the virus. They are more focused on their community, who they trust, than on challenging national leaders to do better.

Two thirds of our respondents are female. That might be a form of empowerment - but it is also a whole pile of extra caring tasks. Mutual aid respondents reflect the country when it comes to ethnicity and disability. The groups brought together people from different generations and class backgrounds - in a way that directly addresses some of the country’s most intractable social cleavages.

These results reflect the responses of 182 members of mutual aid groups in the UK, answering an online survey from 11-30 May through an online questionnaire. This research has been conducted by Tom Wein of the Dignity Project, a campaign for more respectful development. For more, see dignityproject.net.
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HOW MUTUAL AID MIGHT CHANGE BRITAIN

INTRODUCTION

DIGNITY PROJECT

Photo by Kelly Lacy
Introduction

In between all the debate about government lockdowns and individual mask-wearing, we’re missing something big: the astonishing power of communities responding with mutual aid. In the UK, there are at least 4,224 groups.

Why are these groups important? More civically engaged people are more likely to follow public health measures. ‘And in tough times, it’s just how people get by, as OluTimehin Adegbeye writes of her native Lagos, “people survive difficulty by coming together as communities of care, not pulling apart in a retreat into individualism.”

But mutual aid isn’t just neighbourliness, and its effects are not confined to public health. Mutual aid is politically potent.

There is a long history of mutual aid societies aiding oppressed peoples; the Free African Society, formed 1787, is an early example. Their power has been lauded by thinkers like the anarchist Peter Kropotkin. These groups are independent from the usual power structures. Suhayl Omar, co-founder of Mutual Aid Kenya, says “Mutual aid is a form of political participation, where people take responsibility for caring for one another. We don’t have to wait on anyone.”

Right now, that political power is sorely needed. The UK government has performed uniquely poorly among rich democracies. Huge state spending is underway, and regulations are changing fast - whose needs are being met, and who is missing out? We are at last examining race and empire, spurred on by dedicated protestors. Social contracts are being reshaped, and Brexit is still happening. There will be a new normal, but what will it be?

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6. This research began before the Black Lives Matter protests that followed the killing of George Floyd. Though we address race and inequality, I now wish there was more on these topics.
That new normal will be shaped in part by the decisions of mutual aid groups. Their potential power is huge, but it is in the balance. This is a critical juncture where great change is possible. Political change can be shaped, but to do that you need an infrastructure of activists with relationships in their communities. The course of the HIV pandemic was crucially altered by the public’s democratic voice. Mutual aid groups represent a unique flowering of civic engagement — but most civic engagement is only loosely political. Social and moral self-help does not automatically mean that groups are directing activity and attention towards power. Will they decide to do so?

How mutual aid groups react will be shaped by their practices and narratives today. It will be shaped by how they see Covid-19, and how they see the government’s responses. Today’s framing will matter a great deal. They will also be shaped by the reactions of the government, charities and foundations - which find such groups tricky to work with.

When politics matters more than ever, these groups could matter in politics. So, who is giving help? Who is receiving it, and who is missing out? How will today’s experience change people’s beliefs about society? What’s next? That’s what we’ve been researching.

When Ebola hit West Africa, it took too many months, before the international response noticed that volunteers and traditional leaders were determining which communities quelled the disease. Let’s learn from that mistake. Something important is going on; let’s not miss it.

Caveats

This report should not be the final word. I am new to the topic of mutual aid in the UK; others have gone before me. I have tried to cite them, but there is surely more to learn - and I look forward to any feedback. Second, these results are based on what we call a ‘convenience sample’. We don’t know exactly what the full mutual aid movement looks like, and how it compares to the wider population. Our results will not be representative. But they are the first data on this new movement, and so I think they’re still important.

Thanks

We offer thanks to all the participants who completed this survey, and salute the hard-working mutual aiders who are helping all across the country - especially the members of Kew Green Support Network, who have given unstinting assistance to the lead author’s mother. We are grateful to Keena Roberts for her support to this project, and to all those who generously commented on the framing of the project and the survey. Lea Oneko led the graphic design; our thanks to her:

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The National Donation

Mutual aid respondents told us they have helped someone an average of 17 times. Each time they helped, that took them an average of 1.8 hours.

Scaling these numbers up across the country’s 4,224 groups, that equates to 2m tasks completed by 115,000 people. This amounts to a donation of 3.6m hours of volunteering. If all those hours were paid at the National Living Wage, mutual aid groups have made a donation of time to our society worth £31m.

“These new forms of generosity we are seeing – organising, networks, projects, donations, support and outreach – are numerous beyond counting, a superbloom of altruistic engagement.” - Rebecca Solnit

How Mutual Aid Might Change Britain

Introduction

Dignity Project

4,224 UK groups registered on covidmutualaid.org. 9 June 2020.¹

82% think people are doing more to help others since the outbreak

25% shopped for a neighbour in the past week

71% agree 'If I need help, other local community members would support me during the Coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak.'

51% checked on a neighbour in the past week

Office for National Statistics

3.6 million hours of helping

2 million tasks completed

4224 mutual aid groups in the UK

115,000 people estimated number in mutual aid groups

£31 million of volunteering time


HOW MUTUAL AID MIGHT CHANGE BRITAIN

INTRODUCTION

DIGNITY PROJECT

Photo by Markus Spiske

save our Planet
How They Help: whatever is needed

Mutual aid groups have been helping in all sorts of ways.

Doing shopping, keeping people’s spirits up, running errands and collecting medicine have been the most common, but they have also been referring people to charities and state services, passing on messages, swapping items, and paying bills - with the work evolving over the course of the pandemic.

Mutual aid respondents also described a wide range of ordinary social kindnesses - 89% said they often, very often or always smile and greet cashiers when they shop. 75% said that if they see someone in the street who might need help, they often, very often or always stop to help.

What are the main ways your group has helped people?
Please tick all that apply.

- Doing shopping: 66.85%
- Getting medicine: 52.72%
- Communicating with friends & family: 30.98%
- Paying bills: 9.24%
- Running other errands on their behalf: 55.98%
- Swapping items: 15.76%
- Referring people to charity-run services: 35.33%
- Referring people to state services: 31.52%
- Keeping people’s spirits up: 57.07%
- Other (please specify): 19.57%
When meeting people I know at work or school I try to act nicely e.g. smile and ask how they are.

When paying in the store I address the cashier with a warm voice and a smile.

In the street, when I see someone that might need assistance I offer help.
Who They Help: more equal than feared?

This pandemic has harmed poorer, older, disabled and black people disproportionately.¹ There were fears that mutual aid might reinforce existing injustices, by offering help mostly to the better off.² As Britain and the world examine their racist past and present, that becomes even more pressing. In our data, we did not see those inequalities emerge strongly.

Many groups had only helped a small number of people - 31% of respondents said their group had helped fewer than 40 individuals. Yet some groups have helped many more people - 18% of respondents said their group had helped more than 200 individuals.

Approximately how many different people have received help from your group?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1-40</td>
<td>30.98%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41-80</td>
<td>7.07%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>81-120</td>
<td>7.61%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>121-160</td>
<td>3.80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>161-200</td>
<td>5.98%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More than 200</td>
<td>18.48%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t know</td>
<td>26.09%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

There have been fears of a major inequality in who receives help - that could reinforce existing injustices. As Britain and the world examine their racist past and present, that becomes even more pressing. In our data, we did not see those inequalities emerge strongly.

Asked to think back to the last person they helped, 5.4% said they were Asian - compared to a national population share of 7.5% Asian. 3.8% said they were Black, compared to a national population share of 3.3%. 64% said the last person they helped was white - compared to a national population share of 86%.

25% of respondents said the last person they helped was poorer than average, and 39% said they were somewhere in the middle - compared to only 10% receiving help who were richer than average.

Unsurprisingly, 55% of respondents said the last person they helped was older, but other age groups are receiving help too. 12% reckoned the last person was middle aged and 14% that the last person was younger.

Coronavirus has caused and exposed many injustices. People from ethnic minorities are disproportionately dying of the disease. Poorer people are both likelier to have to go to work in person, and are more likely to have lost their jobs. Women have faced unfair childcare burdens, and increased domestic violence. We should remain alert to the possibility of those inequalities also showing up in who gets helped by mutual aid - but at least in this data, that isn’t the picture we see.

### Think back to the last person you helped. Would you say that they were:

- **Younger** 14.13%
- **Middle aged** 11.96%
- **Older** 54.89%
- **Not sure** 12.50%
- **Prefer not to say** 6.52%
Would you say the last person you helped was:

- **Richer than the average person**: 9.73%
- **Poorer than the average person**: 25.41%
- **Somewhere in the middle**: 38.92%
- **Not sure**: 20%
- **Prefer not to say**: 5.95%

Would you say the last person you helped was:

- **White**: 63.78%
- **Asian or Asian British**: 5.41%
- **Black/African/Caribbean/Black**: 3.78%
- **Other ethnic group**: 1.62%
- **Not sure**: 11.89%
- **Prefer not to say**: 8.65%
How They Work: new groups, improvising

Many groups are quite large - 39% of respondents said their group has more than 50 members - but the number of active members is often smaller. In 24% of groups, fewer than 10 people are very active.

These are mostly completely new groups. 52% of respondents said that ‘we mostly didn’t know each other before the pandemic, and we were not an organised, registered group.’ They communicate through a range of informal channels - WhatsApp is the most common means, with 51% of respondents saying it is used by their group, but Facebook, phone calls and email are all very common.

Those groups are acting fast. 34% strongly agree and 30% somewhat agree that when they see an opportunity to help, they just get on with it, without waiting for permission. In most cases, a small group of people make the decisions (53% of respondents said their group was like this), though a significant minority said that their group has more consensual decision-making, with many people contributing (33%). (This contrasts a little with the horizontal, leaderless mode for which Covid-19 Mutual Aid UK advocates). Most feel decisions are made fast and fairly; 41% strongly agreed and 21% somewhat agreed that their group makes decisions quickly, while 42% strongly agreed and 22% somewhat agreed that if a disagreement arises in the group, it is addressed in a fair way. Panthea Lee, speaking of her own mutual aid group, sums up the phenomenon as: small, ad hoc, hyperlocal, egalitarian, and biased towards immediate action.

Though around 30% are acting without liaising at all with other local actors, most are linking up with others. Many (35%) said they speak at least monthly with local councillors, 31% with medical staff, and 30% with local charities. MPs were the least liaised-with local actor; with just 11% having worked with their MP in the past month. Asked whether councils had been easy to work with, 19% strongly agreed, and 21% somewhat agreed, but 23% said they didn’t know.

“People, neighbours, friends and organisers responded before the state did. We set up groups, began coordinating, printed leaflets, spoke to people and began getting people what they needed. This was before the local council stepped in.” - Member of Bristol BS5 Mutual Aid group

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Which of the following best describes the leadership structure of your group?

- **14.67%** One person makes most of the decisions
- **52.72%** A small group of people make most of the decisions
- **32.61%** Lots of people contribute to decisions

How does your group mainly communicate?
Please select all that apply.

- **47.5%** Facebook
- **51.35%** Whatsapp
- **12.43%** SMS

- **34.05%** Phone calls
- **37.30%** Email
- **9.73%** Other (please specify)
Which of the following best describes the origins of your group?

- **26.34%**
  - We were an organised, registered group even before the pandemic

- **21.51%**
  - We mostly knew each other before the pandemic, but we were not an organised, registered group

- **52.15%**
  - We mostly didn’t know each other before the pandemic, and we were not an organised, registered group

With which of the following people does your group liaise at least once a month? Please select all that apply:

- MP and their staff: 11.41%
- Local councillors: 34.78%
- Council staff: 26.63%
- Staff of a local charity: 29.89%
- Staff of a national charity: 10.87%
- Hospital, GPs/other medical support: 30.98%
- School staff: 19.02%
- None of the above: 30.43%
- Other (please specify): 11.96%
Experiences Of The Pandemic: some reason to grumble

This unhappy time has affected us all - but our mutual aid respondents reported feeling lower life satisfaction, less worthwhile, and more anxious than the rest of the country. Whereas the national average life satisfaction in May 2020 was 7.2 (out of 10), mutual aid respondents gave an average score of 6.5. The national average for the extent to which people feel that the things they do in their life are worthwhile was 7.6, compared to 7.1 for our respondents.

It may be that extra caring responsibilities are taking their toll - or it could be that these results reflect the later data collection (after almost a month more of lockdown), or something about the life situations of those who choose to volunteer:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>ONS August 2019</th>
<th>ONS May 2020</th>
<th>Mutual Aid respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Life Satisfaction</td>
<td>7.7 (7.2)</td>
<td>7.2 (7.6)</td>
<td>6.5 (7.1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Worthwhile</td>
<td>7.89 (7.6)</td>
<td>7.6 (7.1)</td>
<td>7.1 (7.1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anxiety</td>
<td>2.88 (3.7)</td>
<td>3.7 (4.4)</td>
<td>4.4 (4.4)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Respondents nonetheless felt equipped to handle the problems they face in life, with an average self-efficacy score of 7.5 out of 10.

7.5/10
I am confident in my ability to solve problems that I might face in life (For example: I can usually handle whatever comes my way, If I try hard enough I can overcome difficult problems, I can stick to my aims and accomplish my goals)

They also reported positive experiences of their work with the group. 55% said they wished they could do this sort of work all the time, even after the pandemic. 41% strongly agreed and 23% somewhat agreed that their group makes good use of its members’ skills. 61% strongly agreed and 14% somewhat agreed that they have usually been treated with respect in their interactions with other members.

Which of the following comes closest to your view of the work you do with the group, even if you don’t quite agree with completely?

52.15%

I wish I could do this sort of work all the time, even after the pandemic.

44.69%

This is an emergency and I’m glad to do this work while the crisis lasts, but I wouldn’t want to continue doing it forever.

“My mom’s always told me that if I feel anxious and depressed I should think of how I can be of service to somebody….Hopefully, when we control the virus a little bit more and get back to regular life, this will have been a wake-up call. I think people aren’t used to being able to ask for help, and people aren’t used to offering.” - Maggie Connolly

Helping Back: the support mutual aid groups need

As asked what support they would welcome, our respondents asked for resources on mastering technology and communication. They also felt that advice on fundraising and health behaviours would be useful. Of less interest is support in formalising and managing groups, data protection and GDPR, and influencing tactics.

In providing this help, online documents and videos would be the most popular channels, with WhatsApp and Facebook groups also useful. Podcasts, posted documents, phone calls and apps are valued less.

If someone were to produce resources to help mutual aid groups, which of the following would be helpful to your group? Please select all that apply. Information or support on:

- Influencing governments: 3.89%
- Formalising and managing groups: 8.89%
- Data protection and GDPR: 9.44%
- Fundraising: 18.33%
- Covid-19 and health behaviours: 18.33%
- Technology and communication: 31.67%
- Other (please specify): 9.44%

If someone were to produce new resources, what would be the most helpful way to provide them? Please select only your favourite item.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Method</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Online videos</td>
<td>20.77%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Podcasts</td>
<td>6.56%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Documents online</td>
<td>25.14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Documents in the post</td>
<td>5.46%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phone calls</td>
<td>9.84%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WhatsApp group</td>
<td>12.57%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facebook group</td>
<td>14.21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>App</td>
<td>5.46%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
S U V I R T I O N

INTRODUCTION

DIGNITY PROJECT

Photo by Soph Photography
Campaigning: attention and action

Mutual aid respondents agreed that this is a critical juncture. 77% somewhat or strongly agreed that this is a time when great change is possible. 38% strongly agreed and 18% somewhat agreed that the pandemic had changed how they think about society. Most said they will continue paying about the same high amount of attention to politics after the pandemic as they did before, but this has changed how they think about politics for 35%.

Mutual aid’s history is a political one. Yet respondents preferred not to think of it that way - 29% somewhat agreed and a further 29% strongly agreed that ‘mutual aid groups like mine have nothing to do with politics’.

“Mutual aid is a form of political participation, where people take responsibility for caring for one another. We don’t have to wait on anyone.” - Suhayl Omar, co-founder of Mutual Aid Kenya

Even though they didn’t think of mutual aid as political, respondents intend to take a very wide range of political actions in the coming year: 83% will do something, and 49% will take at least three different actions. 64% said they were likely to sign petitions, 49% to buy or boycott products, and 47% expected to contact a politician. Some are likely to engage with political parties, including 27% working with a political party or action group, and 30% giving money to a political party, organisation or cause. A handful committed to more radical actions, including 12% saying they were likely to strike in the next year.

Though these respondents want to influence government, they didn’t feel they have the chance. Most feel capable and motivated to scrutinise government policy, but fewer feel they have the opportunity to do so. Mutual aiders may be more empowered than the general public though - in 2018-19, an ONS survey found that just 25% agree that they are able to influence decisions about their local area.

“These things that are treated as ridiculous ideas...we’ll be able to say, ‘It’s not a ridiculous idea—it’s what we did during that time.’” - Jeff Sorenson, Washtenaw County Mutual Aid group.

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### Proportion answering strongly or somewhat agree

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mutual aid groups like mine have nothing to do with politics</td>
<td>57.46%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The pandemic has really changed how I think about our society</td>
<td>55.25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The pandemic has really changed how I think about politics</td>
<td>34.81%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This is a time when great change is possible in our society</td>
<td>77.35%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### In general terms, how interested in politics are you?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interest Level</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Extremely interested</td>
<td>19.89%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very interested</td>
<td>22.58%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moderately interested</td>
<td>24.19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slightly interested</td>
<td>19.35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not interested at all</td>
<td>9.68%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t know</td>
<td>2.69%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prefer not to say</td>
<td>1.61%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
After the pandemic, how much attention will you pay to politics?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Option</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>More than before</td>
<td>19.67%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>About the same as before</td>
<td>69.40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less than before</td>
<td>6.01%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not sure</td>
<td>4.92%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Photo by Tim Dennell
This question is about how active you are in politics and community affairs. Thinking about the next 12 months, can you see yourself doing any of the following? Please tick all that apply.

- Refusing to pay rent: 1.64%
- Doing any work on behalf of a political party or action group: 27.32%
- Contacting a politician, government or local government official: 46.99%
- Going on strike or taking industrial action: 12.02%
- Buying – or refusing to buy – any products for political or ethical reasons: 49.18%
- Taking part in a public demonstration: 31.69%
- Signing a petition not on the internet: 37.16%
- Giving any money to a political party, organization or cause: 29.51%
- Signing a petition on the internet: 63.93%
- Other political action (please specify): 4.37%
- Don’t know: 7.65%
- None of these: 12.02%
Scrutinizing government policy

65% Capable
34% Opportunity
54% Motivated

Thank You Key Workers & NHS Staff
Party politics: who benefits?

Will this wave of social and political engagement benefit one party or another? It’s not clear that mutual aid respondents have a clear partisan leaning. Asked to place themselves on a left-right political scale, the average score was exactly 5/10 - right in the center. That group contains more individuals who lean a little to the left of the scale - but a number of conservatives with strong views about their partisan leaning. 32% of respondents gave ‘right leaning’ scores, 37% gave ‘left leaning’ scores, and 31% picked the central option.

We know the coronavirus crisis has prompted greater public support for incumbent leaders across Europe, as well as increases in support for democracy in general, so this might the pattern that mutual aid follows too. Populists could benefit from all this pain - or they might not; the academic literature finds it hard to say.

Our respondents (and this isn’t a representative sample) contained more Remainers than Brexiters - 40% thought leaving the EU was mostly bad for the country, against 27% who thought it mostly good for the country. Asked about one policy issue, international development spending, mutual aid respondents offered fairly robust support - just 31% thought the government should stop spending on overseas aid.

In politics, people sometimes talk about left and right. Where would you place yourself on the following scale?
Do you think Brexit is...

- Mostly good for the country: 27.41%
- Mostly bad for the country: 40.49%
- Don’t know: 19.75%
- Prefer not to say: 12.35%
Blame in the Balance: man-made disaster?

When disaster strikes, we might put it down to natural causes, or down to the failings of those responding. Who receives the blame makes a big difference. When the consensus is that this was an unpreventable natural disaster, it brings people together; while man-made crises fracture communities. Mutual aid respondents were exactly in the middle. Whether this is recorded as a natural disaster, or one that was down to the government, remains in the balance. This was true even as the Dominic Cummings story emerged on 22 May - participants who completed the survey from 23-30 May were actually slightly more likely to say that the crisis was natural, compared to respondents answering from 11-22 May. Earlier respondents assigned a score of 4.2/10 (i.e. more towards man-made), against an average among later respondents of 5.7/10.

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Blame: man-made or natural

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Do you think the Covid-19 outbreak in the UK and the associated problems we face today are more down to the decisions of the governments and individuals, or more down to the natural occurrence and path of the virus?

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Trust: in neighbours, but not in government

Mutual aid respondents don’t trust the government much - but they are still more trusting than the general public. Data collection took place mostly before Dominic Cummings’ breaches of lockdown were reported, yet trust in government was still strikingly low. 23% said they trusted the government ‘not at all’ and 24% ‘just a little’. That’s low - but perhaps still a little better than the results of the general public; the International Survey on Coronavirus found that 77% of UK respondents felt the government’s response had been insufficient, and 44% felt the government had been untruthful.¹ YouGov have found that the UK government response has the lowest approval of any of the 22 countries it surveys.² The ONS reckons public trust in government had already fallen before all this, from 32% saying they tend to trust the government in Autumn 2018 to 21% in Autumn 2019.³

Right now, how much do you trust the government?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Trust Level</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Not at all</td>
<td>22.58%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Just a little</td>
<td>23.66%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat</td>
<td>30.11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A lot</td>
<td>18.28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t know</td>
<td>4.30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prefer not to say</td>
<td>0.08%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Mutual aid respondents preferred to focus on their community, ignoring government. In a choice between ‘political engagement’ - coming together to challenge power - and ‘prepolitical engagement’ - coming together for self-help - 70% picked the prepolitical option, against 30% saying that the priority is challenging leaders.\(^1\) Low levels of trust in government contrasted sharply with very high levels of social trust. Whereas among the general public (measured in 2016), 36% said most people can be trusted,\(^2\) among our mutual aid respondents 65% said most can be trusted (with 35% saying instead that you can’t be too careful). That’s important, because we have good evidence that trust in government is important in quashing disease outbreaks,\(^3\) and because it affects the politics that is to come.

Hopefully mutual aid groups will build up some form of community that has disintegrated over the last few decades. People will feel comfortable to talk to their neighbours again, and we can start to think about resilience and autonomy. - Member of Bristol BS5 Mutual Aid group\(^4\)

Which of the following statements come closer to your view?

- **In a crisis like this, our community needs to come together to help ourselves**
  - 69.61%

- **In a crisis like this, our community needs to come together to challenge our leaders to help us**
  - 30.39%

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Generally speaking, would you say most people can be trusted or you can’t be too careful?

- Most people can be trusted: 65.41%
- You can’t be too careful: 34.59%
Gender: women carry the load

Mutual aid respondents were 65% female. Women have been vital leaders throughout the history of mutual aid,¹ and if that reflects the wider mutual aid movement, we might reflect that these are new avenues for women to take action in their communities - in that sense, they are a sort of empowerment. However, they are also a new source of caring responsibilities, at a time when many women are already facing still-sharper inequalities in the division of labour at home;² in an ONS survey 13% of the public said their caring responsibilities had been affected as a result of the virus.³

What is your gender?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>64.65%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>32.83%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-binary</td>
<td>1.52%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prefer not to say</td>
<td>1.01%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Ethnicity: a picture of the country

Many respondents are white - 83%. Much smaller percentages of respondents were from other ethnic groups - though this was not necessarily sharply different from those groups’ representation in the national population.¹ 53% of respondents said they were Christian, 30% said they were of no religion, and 7% described themselves as Muslim. (Asked about religiosity, just 13% said they were very religious, 20% called themselves moderately religious, 19% slightly religious, and 40% not religious).

We found the same when we came to ask about disability: 23% of mutual aid respondents are disabled, which is in line with the proportion of people in the general population with disabilities.

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Do you have any long-term illness, health problem or disability which limits your daily activities or the work you can do? This could include problems which are due to old age.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Option</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>23.34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>69.53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t know</td>
<td>3.44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prefer not to say</td>
<td>3.69%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Class And Generation: mixing together

When it comes to income, age, and education, these mutual aid groups brought together many of the groups that have been divided in Britain’s recent political convulsions. The average of the respondents was 48 - half were younger, half older.

These respondents were not necessarily wealthy. Though mutual aid groups are often located in better-off areas, 48% said their household had an income of less than £30,000 in 2019, whereas 30% had an income above £30,000. Median household income for the whole country was £29,600. A majority, but by no means all, had at least experienced stability of income - 61% said their income hadn’t changed as a result of the pandemic, compared to 13% who had lost all of their income and 22% whose income had reduced. (This makes them quite a lot worse off than the rest of the country; one estimate is that 14% of the general public have seen a reduction in their income).

We saw a similar mix of people when it came to education. The better-educated were overrepresented - 20% had a postgraduate degree. However, 13% of mutual aid respondents told us that they had no formal qualifications, and 22% had GCSEs or equivalent as their highest education.

Perhaps this is part of the reason why 55% of mutual aid respondents either strongly or somewhat agreed that the pandemic had changed their view of society. In mutual aid groups, people are mixing who often wouldn’t in other times.

Gross household income, 2019

- Under 30,000: 48.28%
- 30,000 or more: 29.56%
- Don't know or prefer not to say: 22.16%

Has your income changed since the outbreak of Covid-19? Please select the option that best describes your situation.

- No, it hasn't changed: 61.48%
- Yes, I have lost all my income: 12.84%
- Yes, my income has reduced: 21.98%
- Yes, my income has gone up: 3.70%
What is your highest level of education?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Education Level</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No formal educational qualification</td>
<td>12.62%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GCSE or equivalent</td>
<td>21.53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A-Level or equivalent</td>
<td>14.11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undergraduate degree</td>
<td>19.06%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Postgraduate degree</td>
<td>20.05%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prefer not to say</td>
<td>12.62%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Where From: English cities, towns and villages

Our respondents were mostly (89%) based in England. That bias is a little stronger than the national picture of mutual aid groups registered on covidmutualaid.org, though that website’s groups are 82% in England as well. The mutual aid movement, at least in these datasets, seems to be stronger in England than in Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland. They are spread across all kinds of places: 41% of respondents were based in cities, 35% in towns, and 21% in villages.
During the lockdown, who else are you living with?
Please tick all that apply.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Option</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>My spouse or partner</td>
<td>55.45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children under the age of 18</td>
<td>19.31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children over the age of 18</td>
<td>14.11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friends or housemates</td>
<td>4.95%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Someone else</td>
<td>8.91%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None of the above - I am living alone</td>
<td>16.34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prefer not to say</td>
<td>7.67%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Methods
**Methods**

Data was collected from 11-30 May through an online questionnaire, created in SurveyMonkey. Informed consent was sought through an information page at the start of the survey. To incentivise participation, respondents were informed that £1 would be donated to the Trussell Trust, a UK food bank charity, for each completed response. (A donation of £200 was made on 8 June. We are not affiliated with the Trussell Trust).

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**The survey was distributed in four ways:**

1) An email was sent to mutual aid groups who had listed their email address on the covidmutualaid.org database.

2) A Google advert promoted the survey to people searching for relevant keywords.

3) The survey was shared on the author’s social media profiles.

4) Where groups in the covidmutualaid.org database listed a WhatsApp group, the author joined several of those groups and shared the survey. However, two members of those groups replied to say that they felt this was intrusive, at which point this process was stopped.

919 respondents accessed the survey. Of those, 512 qualified to answer the survey by confirming that they were both based in the UK and a member of a mutual aid group. On the first main page of questions, between 344 and 409 respondents completed the questions (all questions were optional). After this point, there was a significant drop-off, and for the remaining questions an average of 182 respondents completed each one.

During the course of the data collection, the coronavirus crisis continued to evolve. Lockdown began on 23 March, so it had been underway for 7 weeks when data collection began. On 28 May, the government announced an impending loosening of the lockdown. On 22 May, reports emerged that the Prime Minister’s advisor, Dominic Cummings, had broken lockdown rules; this received widespread coverage, and trust in government dropped sharply.
The Author

Tom Wein is the founder of The Dignity Project (dignityproject.net), a campaign for more respectful development. He researches citizen engagement and dignity in development. He was most recently Program Coordinator at Raising Voices in Uganda, and before that served as Senior Research Associate at the Busara Center for Behavioral Economics. He tweets @tom_wein.