The dynamics of mutual aid during the COVID-19 pandemic in the UK

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Mutual aid at the onset of COVID-19 in the UK

- **March 2020**: Novel coronavirus in the UK & protective measures (staying home, shielding, furlough)

- Isolation requires practical and financial support (Patel et al., 2021)

- Lack of self-isolation mainly due to financial reasons (Smith et al., 2021)

- Access to social support increases adherence to self isolation measures (Kerkhoff et al., 2020).

- Emergence of more than 4,000 mutual aid groups in the UK (Booth, 2020)

- Created hope & were essential part of response (Tiratelli & Kaye, 2020)

- *Grocery shopping and delivery, food parcel deliveries, collection of prescriptions, dog walking, postcard and library services, emotional support by telephone/email helpline, informational support*

Mutual aid in disasters and extreme events

Solidarity is common in the aftermath of disasters

- **Pre-existing networks** (social capital) and **emergent groups** (common fate)
- **Social identity** as core factor (sense of 'we'ness, seeing others as 'us')

Tendency to decline in the recovery and rebuilding phases

- **Disruption** of networks (illness, injury, death)
- **Lack** of resources to maintain support- & increasing needs
- Long-term **stress**, **fatigue**, and **saturation** of support networks
- **Absence of threat**, decline in **common fate** & shared sense of togetherness
- Lack of **recognition** & **legitimacy**

Reduction of support can be detrimental for those in need

Core questions

1. What was the **trajectory** of social support that was mobilized through Facebook mutual aid groups at the onset of COVID-19 in the UK?

2. Did mutual aid group activity **decline**? *Why*?

3. How can mutual aid group be **sustained** over time?

Mapping the trajectory of social support in UK mutual aid groups

- 105 Facebook mutual aid groups in the UK

- Mean number of members = 794, SD = 1.019, Median = 379, Mode = 2.600, Minimum = 5, Maximum = 5.400, Total= 83.465).

- First posts in relation to social support predominantly appeared in the second and third week of March 2020.

- *Trajectories*: Explored entire timeline of groups between March – December 2020.
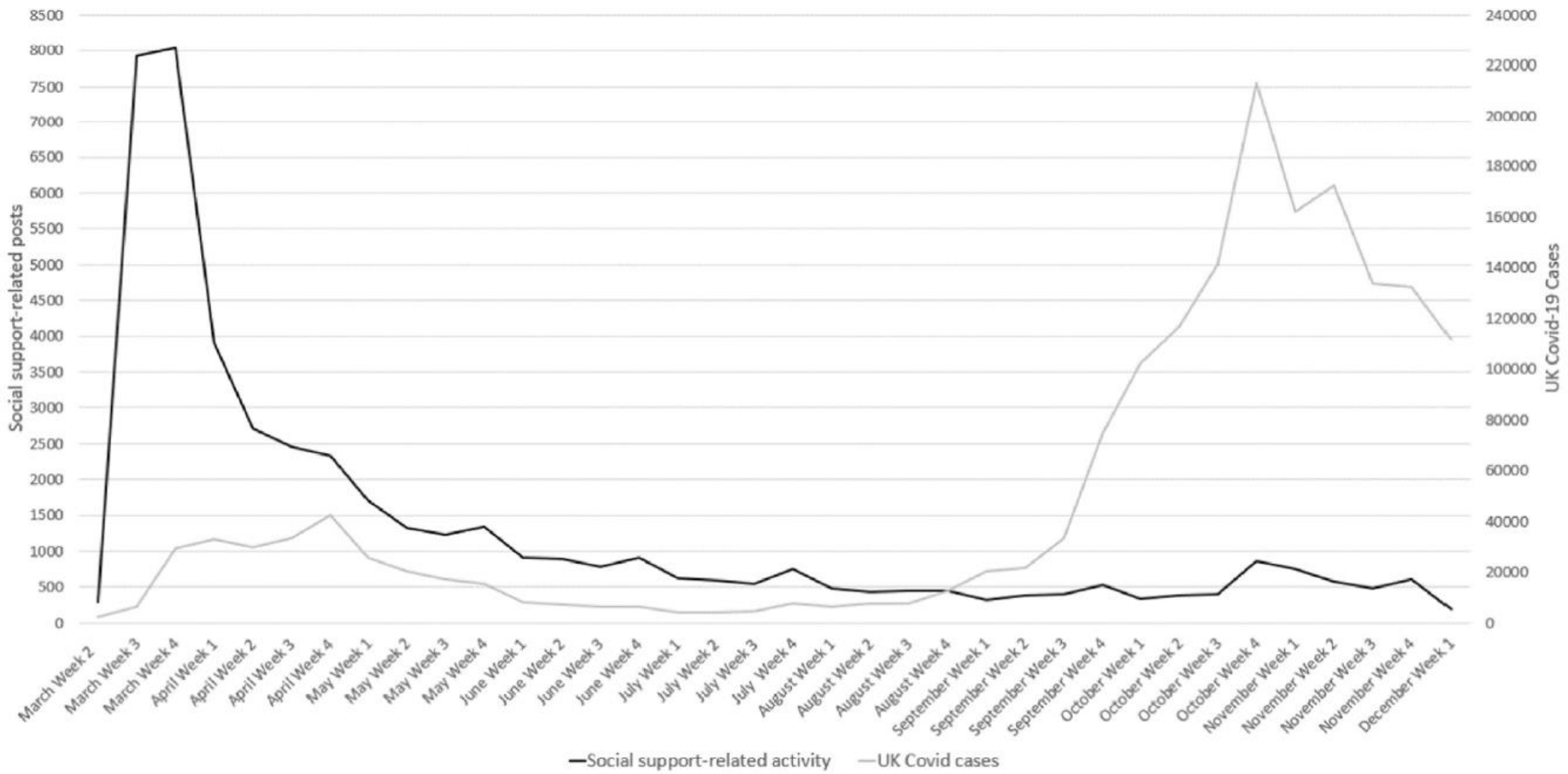
Why the decline? Possibly...

- Some people **unable to keep providing support**.

- **No re-emerging sense of unity during second wave**.
    - No novelty, camaraderie & sense of community
    - Return to perceived "normality" during summer 2020.
    - Familiarity with the pandemic and restrictions

- **Enduring** connections & **new** sources of support (family, friends, personal connections)
- **Groups as not so necessary later on**.

➢*Change in the mode of provision of support*

➢*Groups continued to operate, albeit at a reduced level*

The decline of volunteering

Structural & psychological impediments to continued engagement

- Local council and those in charge **letting people down**
- **Overwhelming numbers** of requests for support & notifications (WhatsApp)
- **Formal** groups (vs. grassroots local groups) **slow** due to bureaucracy
- **Inability to help** due to (child)care
- **Perceived return to normality**

"And the requests for help were being lost. Even within the reps group people were finding it completely overwhelming and were just leaving" (Hayden)

[Findings from interviews with 18 volunteers in Southeast UK]

How can mutual aid groups be sustained?

Findings from interviews with 32 organizers of UK mutual aid groups

Meeting community needs over time with localized action and resources

- **Localized approach** & **assistance from pre-existing networks of support with resources** (e.g., charities, kitchens, businesses, council funding)

- **Pre-existing social capital**

- **Skills of local volunteers** (IT, health sector, leadership, funding, project management, teamwork)

I think what I have learnt is that it is easier to ask or to invite people to volunteer in their own neighborhood where they live. (...). Because it's time limited, they know that it's how long it's going to take them to get there, they know how long it's going to take them to get back they know (...). Local volunteering initiatives are easier to keep going and to operate

(*Lisa, South East England*)

Increased sense of local community belonging and cohesion

- **Increased levels of perceived community cohesion and belonging**
- **Building relationships** and **relying** on other **community members**

This is no longer a COVID response, this a community response. So, if anybody at any point in next month, in a year or in 2 years, needs their shopping done, needs a prescription, needs taking to the doctors, the group will do it. Because we will now have the volunteers – this is the big thing that's come out of this, because we found all these volunteers, they all want to continue to help, a lot want to continue to help, they're able to sustain that, and continue to provide the service.

(Sophie, East of England).

Building trust and community-based alliances

Cooperation between organizations

<u>We work very closely with other groups</u>. We've actually started workshops for our coordinators with other organizations, so we have a local organization (…) so that <u>we can pass referrals to each other</u>. A lot of the people that come through to us may not have heard of the other organizations who can offer support. So that when we're building relationships with the person that we're supporting, <u>if they have additional needs, we can then refer back to other organizations.</u> *(Lucy, Central, Scotland).*

Building trust between groups

We were very clear that we were a <u>community organization</u>; we're <u>not a local government led organization</u>. [.] We don't share it [people's information] with anybody, we <u>don't act as border police</u>, we're <u>not here to judge people's needs</u>, or make assumptions about their backgrounds, or why they are or why they, they need help […] with a lot of communities, especially migrants and refugees, <u>you lose the trust as well</u>. *(Theo, London, England).*

Employing group processes strategies

- **Sustaining involvement** through **shared identity** & **sense of belonging**

- **Caring** and **supporting group members** (virus, burnout, workloads, emotional support)

- **Regular communication** & **contact** (online & in person)

For example, the helpline people who probably were the busiest of the volunteers, we [the organizers] would have a <u>weekly get together with them</u>, on Zoom, not physically. <u>And let them share experiences, so they had a really high degree of camaraderie</u>. We also had a group called the communications group which was, a cross-village group [...] I think <u>that level of communication, bringing people together and just letting them share the good and the bad, helped keep people together</u>. (Karen, South East, England).

Discussion

Emergence & rapid decline due to both **psychosocial** and **structural factors**

Leaders' awareness & strategic actions to sustain group activity

- Trust & alliances; belonging, care & support; institutional relations; localized action

Factors promoting sustained activity as provided by volunteers

- **Emerging sense of community** with neighbours and wider local community
- **Local identities** associated with support
- **Feelings of inclusivity, care, and support** towards one another
- **Sense of equality** – people both receiving and providing support

Psychological closeness as mobilizing support and facilitating response and recovery