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All in it, but not necessarily together: Divergent experiences of keyworker and volunteer responders to the Covid-19 pandemic

Beyond Us and Them: Perception of
Covid-19 and Social Cohesion

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Context

Thousands of people across the UK are working to deal with the direct impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. But their experiences are very different, depending on whether they are front-line key workers or community volunteers.

This report presents findings from a survey of people from six local authorities in England and from a sample of community organisations and volunteers to examine social cohesion in the UK. The project, “Beyond Us and Them” is led by the University of Kent, and Belong, the Cohesion and Integration Network, with funding from the Nuffield Foundation.¹

¹ *The project has been funded by the Nuffield Foundation, but the views expressed are those of the authors and not necessarily the Foundation. Visit www.nuffieldfoundation.org.*

The Survey

An online survey was sent to 2,027 respondents between 9 and 24 June 2020. The survey was distributed through local councils and charities, which allowed us to reach both keyworkers and volunteers.

In this report we compare evidence about 3 categories of respondents:

- 345 **keyworkers** who were not volunteering (20%) - mostly schools and nurseries staff (22%), key government staff (18%), social care workers (15%), and NHS staff (14%)
- 573 **volunteers** who were not also keyworkers (34%) – these are respondents who said they were currently volunteering to help people in their community respond to Covid-19, either as part of an organised support group (47%) or another structure (53%)
- 787 **other-activity** (i.e. not related to Covid-19) respondents (46%) who were neither keyworkers nor volunteers and served as a basis for comparison between groups (hereafter, '**other**')²

A higher proportion of keyworkers than volunteers or others were female. Both keyworkers and volunteers had higher incomes than others. Keyworkers tended to be younger (average 43), than volunteers (average 46), or others (average 49).

The analysis has adjusted for these demographic differences (age, gender, and income) and observed effects cannot be attributed to those. All the differences are highly statistically significant (p-value = .001 or even less).

²An additional 322 respondents were both keyworkers and volunteers. These are not discussed here for clarity of interpretation. Their answers, on average, were more similar to those of volunteers than those of keyworkers.

The experience of being a keyworker and a volunteer

Our focus group research shows that keyworkers and volunteers might be having very different experiences, connected with the pressure on them and their opportunities to relate to others.

For example, talking about local key workers one group member said: "They've been out there from day one, with food parcels and guidance, and I don't think they've stopped. I think they were going at 100 miles an hour."

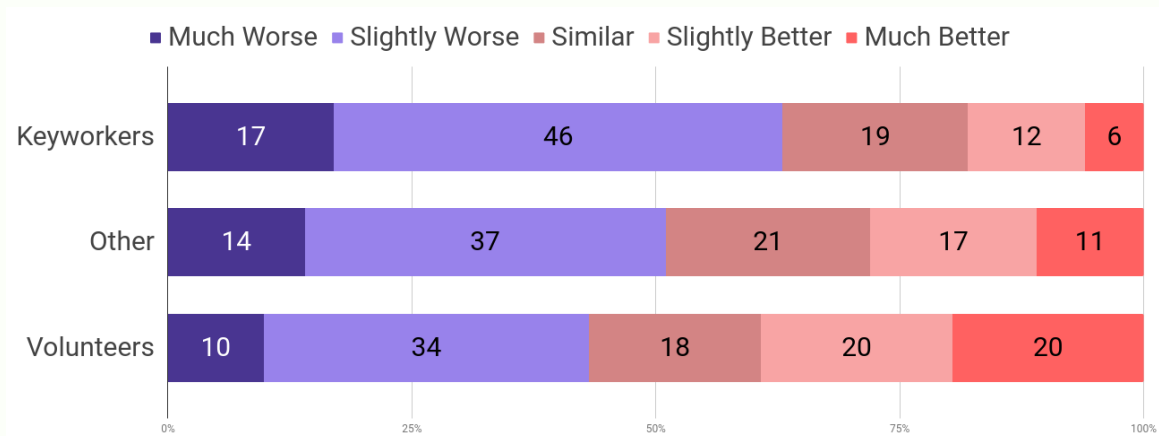
But a volunteer described how new relationships formed during lockdown: "I, you know, my volunteers know, I just know that they will be friends for life, you know, [...] and I'll have a permanent, ongoing relationship with these people and I just know it from 12 weeks, you know, it's gonna, it'll change and inform our lives and our decisions for the rest of our days."

Our survey findings back up these perceptions. Notably, our results show that survey respondents overwhelmingly expressed admiration for keyworkers (93%), and keyworkers were mostly aware of this support (81%). However, despite this public support, keyworkers seem to be feeling more detached and more pessimistic than other people.

Perception of local area deprivation

When asked about the standard of living, job opportunities, and the quality of public services, a majority of respondents said their local area was worse off than other places. This perception of disadvantage was especially true among keyworkers who reported the most (and predominantly) negative perception of the disadvantage faced by their local area, and much less marked among volunteers, of whom only a minority thought their area was disadvantaged, as illustrated below. These perceptions were independent of the actual economic situation of the area, and so reflect differences in day to day experiences across the sample.

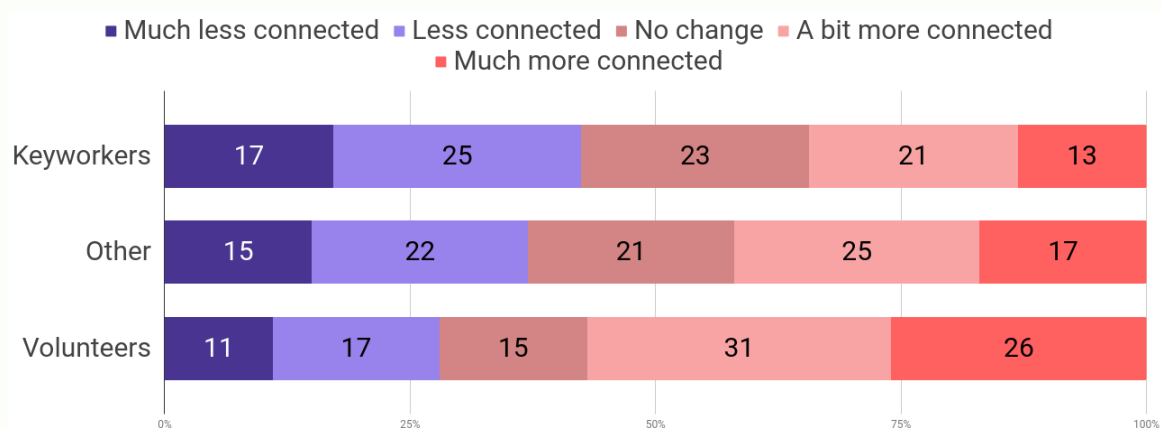
Perception of local area deprivation relative to other areas



Connection with one's family

When asked how "connection with your family has changed during lockdown", respondents generally reported an increase in connection (likely due to families spending much more time together in the household during lockdown). However, this was more true of volunteers than of keyworkers, who were much more likely to report a loss of connection, as illustrated below.

Connection with one's family



The importance of local deprivation and family connection for social cohesion

Why are family connection and perception of deprivation important?

Further analyses revealed that these two factors were significantly related to other psychological dimensions which contribute to societal cohesion.

We looked at two of these, political trust and personal optimism.

Regardless of their demographic background, respondents who reported stronger family connection and perceived lower deprivation of their local area also expressed higher trust in politicians, and felt greater optimism about the future.³

³ Optimism: standardised β of perceived deprivation = .15, $p < .001$, standardised β of family connection = .12, $p < .001$. Statistical model including perceived deprivation, family connection, as well as gender, age, and income, accounted for up to 11% of variance in optimism. Trust in politicians: standardised β of perceived deprivation = .18, $p < .001$, standardised β of family connection = .07, $p = .007$. Statistical model including perceived deprivation, family connection, as well as gender, age, and income, accounted for up to 9% of variance in trust in politicians.

Implications and Conclusions

Both keyworkers and volunteers have been actively engaging with other people during lockdown but their experiences mean that they are being affected in very different ways.

Keyworkers seem to be paying a price for having been on the frontline for months, reducing their connections with family and highlighting perceptions of disadvantage in their area. Their trust in politicians is diminished and they feel more pessimistic about prospects.

Volunteers, in contrast, are experiencing more positive engagement with their families, feel that their local area is less deprived, and are more trusting of politicians and more optimistic about the future.

Trust and a degree of optimism are important elements for social cohesion. The findings here suggest that keyworkers would benefit from support to equip them better, socially and psychologically, to continue working to support their communities.

Keyworkers	Lesser family connection	Greater perception of local area deprivation	Lower political trust	Lower optimism for the future
Volunteers	Greater family connection	Lesser perception of local area deprivation	Higher political trust	Higher optimism for the future

But for both key workers and volunteers there is a sense that much work still lies ahead. As a local government keyworker said: “our [local] people will require our support for probably another 12 months even more than that. So we've got to continue understanding that it's not all over and that we continue to make sure that people do work together”.

The research team will be pursuing the investigation of the impact of Covid-19 on keyworkers, volunteers, and other people across the UK in future rounds of the survey. Meanwhile we are involving keyworkers and volunteers in our focus groups and 1-to-1 interviews in order to gain a deeper understanding of their situation as the effects of the pandemic continue to unfold.