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Social Cohesion and Volunteering: Correlates, Causes, and Challenges

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Recent declines in volunteering rates and reduced governmental support for volunteer infrastructure in the United States and the United Kingdom present a clear policy challenge of how and whether to bolster levels of volunteering. Despite common assumptions that volunteering is both a critical antecedent and product of social cohesion (i.e., the vertical and horizontal connections between people that bind society), particularly during times of political distrust, the validity of these assumptions has not been fully established. Drawing primarily from evidence from the United Kingdom and United States, this review critically explores what is currently known about the relationship between social cohesion and volunteering. Specifically, we consider how investment in social cohesion may enhance volunteer engagement and how investment in volunteering infrastructure may support and sustain social cohesion. Overall, we find consistent evidence of a bidirectional relationship between social cohesion and volunteering, though the strength of these relationships is dependent on the specific forms of social cohesion and volunteering that are involved. Both policy and research require greater clarity in conceptualizations of social cohesion and volunteering. Further empirical evidence is needed to establish proposed causal links. Based on the current evidence, we propose that policy should start with a strategy for building social cohesion within specific communities in ways that increase volunteer engagement and its benefits, and that the strategies must consider both the intragroup and intergroup implications of these interventions.

What is the significance of this article for the general public?

This review establishes that social cohesion (i.e., the vertical and horizontal connections between people that bind society) and volunteering are positively related, such that each can benefit from investment in the other. However, the impact of volunteering on social cohesion is weaker than that of social cohesion on volunteering, and the strength of these relationships depends on the specific aspects of social cohesion and volunteering involved. Therefore, public policy to invest in social cohesion is likely to sustain and facilitate volunteering and other positive outcomes, whereas investments solely in volunteering may not improve cohesion and may be more limited in their impacts.

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Growing financial strains and the COVID-19 pandemic have greatly increased global dependence on the public sector (WHO Council on the Economics of Health for All, 2022). A rising reliance on volunteers has emerged in the United Kingdom and United States across numerous sectors, including emergency food provision (Bryant, 2023; Joint Economic Committee, 2020), education (United Nations, 2020), and health social care (NHS England, 2023). However, recent research in the United Kingdom and United States alike shows that, despite a surge of mutual aid and volunteering during the COVID-19 pandemic, volunteering rates have reduced dramatically, with record declines in the past 3 years (Americorps, 2021; DCMS, 2023b). One point six million fewer people volunteer in the United Kingdom now than they did 5 years ago, and volunteering is now in "crisis" (A. Hill, 2023). These declines have placed significant strains on critical emergency services (Edmunds & Miskin, 2023; Flavelle, 2020; McElwee, 2019; Purdum, 2023). Therefore, just as the need for voluntary efforts is increasing, the capacity to provide volunteer support appears to be in serious decline (WHO Council on the Economics of Health for All, 2022).

Policy and academic discourse highlight the potential role of social cohesion in addressing shortages in volunteering engagement (Baylis et al., 2019), though the exact nature of that role is not known. Elucidating the association between cohesion and volunteering is therefore an essential step toward establishing whether and why it will be beneficial to pursue policies that support social cohesion and/or volunteering engagement within communities (Broadwood et al., 2021; DCMS, 2023a; DLUHC, 2022). Exploring this relationship requires the application of consistent conceptualization and definition of both constructs. Our review begins by explaining our choices of definitions in the context of those available in the literature. We then outline our central aims before describing our methodology and findings.

Definitions and Conceptualizations

In the following section, we define and conceptualize the terms social cohesion and volunteering in turn, drawing from previous academic and policy literature. We also introduce and define a related concept to social cohesion–social capital.

Social Cohesion

Various definitions of social cohesion have been offered across the fields of sociology, political science, and psychology (see Ramsey, 2012). The most commonly adopted definition (and the one we ourselves adopt for this review) comes from Chan et al. (2006), who define social cohesion as:

> A state of affairs concerning both the vertical and the horizontal interactions among members of society as characterized by a set of attitudes and norms that includes trust, a sense of belonging and the willingness to participate and help, as well as their behavioral manifestations. (p. 290)

Numerous conceptualizations of social cohesion have been developed and refined in policy and research (e.g., Bernard, 1999; Bottoni, 2018a, 2018b; Chan et al., 2006; Schiefer & van der Noll, 2017). A full discussion of these is beyond the remit of this review, but a more comprehensive account can be found in Baylis et al.'s (2019) scoping review for the British Academy's Cohesive Societies Programme. The review drew on a broad range of academic and policy sources, and derived eight key components of social cohesion, summarized in Figure 1.

Baylis and colleagues' conceptualization extends Chan et al.'s (2006) framework by including economic factors. Although the role of economic factors in social cohesion is a subject of debate (Chan et al., 2006), in the present review, we point to their significance in the relationship between social cohesion and civic engagement.

Social Capital

A further definitional complexity is that social cohesion is frequently discussed alongside or interchangeably with the term social capital. Literature on volunteering and general civic engagement is no exception to this. Although connected, it is important to note that social capital and social cohesion are not completely overlapping constructs. Social capital itself has various definitions (R. P. Putnam, 1993; see Claridge, 2018, and Cook, 2022, for reviews). Broadly, social capital

Figure 1

Components of Social Cohesion Identified by Baylis et al. (2019)

Social	Political	Equality-based
Sense of belonging	Participation or collaboration	Wealth/income equality
Homogeneity of values	Rules and institutions which rely on consensus	Equal access to resources
Attitudes and regard for diversity		
Personal and collective autonomy		

Note. "Personal and collective autonomy" is not specifically considered a social component by Baylis et al. (2019) but is strongly linked to the "Attitudes and regard for diversity" social component.

describes connections between people, categorized as bonding (within-group connections), bridging (between-group connections), and linking (connections to people of greater power or institutional authority). Thus, we consider social cohesion to be a much broader construct. Whereas social capital tends to be conceived as an asset possessed by individuals, social cohesion is perhaps better conceived as a public good. Social capital is therefore an important aspect of social cohesion, but social capital does not guarantee social cohesion at a community level (see Ramsey, 2012).

Volunteering

Omoto and Packard (2016) define volunteering as:

> An active and intentional process in which individuals and groups seek out opportunities to assist others. These actions, intended to be helpful, are undertaken by choice, on the basis of free will, and often in the service of personal values, needs and motives. (p. 272)

However, much of the literature on volunteering is dominated by the "civil society paradigm" (Paine et al., 2010), involving formal volunteering driven by altruistic intentions to improve local communities. This paradigm does not fully capture other routes to formal volunteering (Ramsey, 2012) or their relevance for social cohesion. For example, there may be structural or instrumental reasons for volunteering, such as the presence of the National Citizenship Service within the United Kingdom, or incentives such as university degree credit, and inducements such as corporate sponsorship initiatives.

It is also important to distinguish between formal volunteering (on behalf of an organization) and informal volunteering (arranged or committed without institutional management; Pearce & Kristjansson, 2019; Snyder & Omoto, 2008). Unlike Omoto and Packard's (2016) definition, the civil society paradigm is limited to considering volunteering involving activities outside of people's own household. It therefore overlooks the importance of informal volunteering (Thomson, 2002) including micro- and episodic volunteering (see Paine et al., 2010), despite its growing prevalence above and beyond that of formal volunteering (DCMS, 2021; Volunteer Development Agency, 2001). If we are to understand the connections between volunteering and social cohesion it is necessary to consider the roles of both formal and informal volunteering. Consequently, this review adopts a broader definition of volunteering as "an active deliberate pursuit" which is "designed to improve the world, a part of it, or community in it," by "your own free choice as an individual" and is done "without payment" (Vision for Volunteering, n.d.). This definition encapsulates both informal and episodic volunteering, making it more appropriate for exploring the social impacts and antecedents of volunteering.

Finally, we focus on two measures of volunteering. Much of the evidence available for this review speaks to the presence or incidence of volunteering (whether people volunteer), henceforth termed engagement. Evidence was also available on volunteering intensity (number of hours a person volunteers within a given time frame). Other aspects, including the breadth (number of ways) or frequency (number of separate events) of volunteering, might relate differently to social cohesion but are outside the scope of this review.

Having conceptualized and defined these terms and their scope, we now outline the aims of the current review in more detail.

Research Aims and Questions

In response to declining rates of civic engagement in both the United Kingdom and United States, we seek to identify whether fostering social cohesion can facilitate a resurgence in volunteering. Political and academic discourse suggest that social cohesion should be a key driver and product of volunteering (Birdwell et al., 2013; Kisby, 2010; Morrow, 2001; R. D. Putnam, 2003; see also Baylis et al., 2019).

We also explore the potential social impacts of volunteering and its recent decline. Volunteering may be fundamental for sustaining critical elements of social cohesion, such as community engagement and democracy, during periods of low political trust (Kearney, 2003). Given the pervasive decline of political trust in national governments across the Western world (Weymouth et al., 2020), and that trust is more sustained at local than at national levels (Davies et al., 2021), it seems ever more pertinent to understand how investment in social cohesion might bolster volunteer engagement, and how volunteering may foster social cohesion.

This review considers academic and gray literature to assess the current state of knowledge about the relationship between social cohesion and volunteering, particularly in the contexts of the United Kingdom and United States. We consider three questions: (a) Is there a consistent relationship between social cohesion and volunteering?; (b) How can investment in social cohesion foster volunteering engagement?; and (c) How can investment in volunteer programs promote the development and sustainment of social cohesion? Addressing these questions empirically is a key requirement for enabling us to assess where and how to invest resources to maximize the potential of social cohesion and volunteering. This in turn provides a basis for practical recommendations for policymakers and volunteer organizations, which we turn to at the conclusion of this review.

We address these questions by assessing extant empirical evidence for the relationship between social cohesion and volunteering, drawing primarily on evidence from the United Kingdom and United States. To address our research questions more fully, we also assess the linkage between social capital and volunteering in order to situate that within the broader account of the association between volunteering and social cohesion.

Disentangling the Relationship Between Volunteering and Social Cohesion

Social cohesion is often defined or operationalized in ways that confound cohesion with its causes or effects (Green et al., 2009). A challenge for this review was that conceptualizations of social cohesion have sometimes included volunteering, explicitly (e.g., Chan et al., 2006), or implicitly (e.g., Dickes & Valentova, 2013). Consequently, there is a surprisingly limited literature that addresses the relationship between social cohesion and volunteering as distinct phenomena, and much of that which does so is correlational rather than longitudinal or experimental (M. Hill & Stevens, 2010; Miller, 2010). This limits any conclusions of the direction of causality. A similar confound applies to research on social capital and volunteering (e.g., ONS, 2022), creating a "causality conundrum" (Fox, 2019, p. 70). Volunteering can provide opportunities to increase social capital and social ties, which may generate trust and reciprocity that can elicit further volunteering. Consequently, discerning causal primacy in the connection between social capital and volunteering is a significant challenge (Fox, 2019) and requires that the two constructs are measured and identified separately within the same piece of research.

Scope and Methodology

This review draws upon a total of 81 academic and gray literature sources. Our methodology is comprised of three stages: (a) an initial scoping review of academic literature, dedicated to exploring extant definitions and conceptualizations of social cohesion, social capital, and volunteering, (b) a systematic review of academic literature discussing associations of volunteering with social cohesion and social capital, and (c) a systematic review of gray literature to supplement the prior two searches. The first stage is not itself part of our main review. Instead, this search enabled us to develop clear conceptualizations of social cohesion, social capital, and volunteering, which directly informed the inclusion criteria for the main two stages of the review. It is briefly described below.

All stages of the review focused on sources from the United Kingdom and the United States published in the last 23 years. Searches related to social capital were limited to sources from the United Kingdom published no earlier

than 2010 (in line with the introduction of David Cameron' House of Commons, 2011). These restrictions are described in depth in the online supplementary materials.

The first two stages of the review were conducted through Google Scholar and Scopus, and the final stage through the U.K. Government and British Library archives. Consequently, our gray literature consists largely, though not exclusively, of U.K. sources. For all three stages, social cohesion was searched using the terms "social cohesion," "societal cohesion," "neighbo(u)rhood cohesion," and "community cohesion." Social capital was searched using the term "social capital," and volunteering with the term "volunteer*."

We further supplemented the resulting evidence base by investigating texts of interest mentioned within the most highly cited sources of our searches. We also included some additional academic and gray literature sources outside of these searches, recommended by the advisory panel of a partnering charity or previously known to the authors through a wider scoping review of social cohesion and volunteering literature, as part of a larger project.

Initial Scoping Review

The purpose of this initial scoping review was to establish conceptualizations of social cohesion, social capital, and volunteering constructs to directly inform the inclusion criteria for our systematic search. Owing to the exploratory nature of this broad search of the literature and its indirect inclusion in the review, we provide a brief outline of the process here and a detailed account in the online supplementary materials. Since our priority for this search was to establish the most widely accepted definitions and conceptualizations of these terms, we focused on the top 50 results from both Google Scholar and Scopus for each search, sorted by relevance. These were screened for inclusion based on the criteria outlined in Table 1. We also identified works of significant impact that these sources mentioned (e.g., early frameworks the current sources draw from), working backward to the earliest relevant conceptualizations of these terms.

From this, we derived a total of 17 academic sources that speak to conceptualizing and defining the constructs. A more detailed breakdown of these sources is provided in the online supplementary materials.

Systematic Review of Academic Literature

The systematic review of the academic literature was dedicated to addressing our key research questions. Our search focuses on evidence from the United Kingdom and United States published in the last 23 years. This admittedly limited cultural scope holds the advantage of ensuring a reasonably high degree of comparability of evidence and a mostly common linguistic framing of all measures. We give precedence to longitudinal and experimental evidence to infer causality of the cohesion–volunteering relationship but draw on correlational and cross-sectional literature to supplement these sources. The search processes are summarized in Figure 2a for literature relating to volunteering and social cohesion and Figure 2b for literature relating to volunteering and social capital.

Searches for citations that included both volunteering and any of the social cohesion terms yielded a total of 74 unique, accessible results, of which seven were retained based on the inclusion criteria described in Table 1. Three nonacademic sources were identified and merged into the gray literature search. Three secondary sources cited within the primary literature were also included, along with five additional sources not located within the review, giving a total of 15 academic sources relating to volunteering and social cohesion (Figure 2a).

A search of academic literature pertaining to social capital and volunteering (see Figure 2b) yielded a total of 84 unique, accessible results which did not overlap with those from the social cohesion and volunteering search. Of these 84 sources, 11 were identified as relevant based on our inclusion criteria (see Table 2). Eight secondary sources cited within the primary literature were also included, along with one additional source. In total, we draw upon 20 sources of academic literature relating to volunteering and social capital. The search and screening procedure and outcomes are summarized in Figure 2b. Overall, our systematic review of the academic literature therefore yielded a total of 34 included sources.

Gray Literature Systematic Review

The final stage of the review search focused exclusively on gray literature, primarily from the U.K. Government and British Library archives. The purpose of this review was to identify nonacademic

Table 1
Inclusion Criteria During Screening of Academic Literature Sources From Initial Scoping Review

Criteria	Overview	Examples of exclusion
Relevance	-Focus on conceptualizations and/or definitions of social cohesion, social capital, or volunteering -Applicable to U.S. or U.K. contexts for social cohesion and volunteering -Applicable to U.K. contexts for social capital	-Feasibility or evaluation studies for new volunteering programs -Focus on social cohesion, social capital, or volunteering within nongeneralizable subpopulations -Experimental studies (i.e., where "volunteer" refers to research participants)
Methodology (empirical papers only)	-Quantitative data -High statistical power for quantitative analysis -Inferential statistical analysis	-Descriptive statistics only -Qualitative data (e.g., interviews, case studies, or focus groups)
Source	-Primary reliance on data from U.K./U.S. samples (empirical papers only) -Academic literature (e.g., peer-reviewed journal articles, book chapters, and books)	-Sources published in United States or United Kingdom but using samples exclusively from outside these countries -Gray literature sources, for example, government reports (merged into gray literature search results)

sources of evidence to supplement the rather limited scope of evidence from our academic literature reviews.

Searches in the British Library archives were limited to one search of the welfare section using the "volunteer*" search term, which yielded 175 unique, accessible sources. A systematic review of these was conducted by the primary author, who read each source to determine its relevance to the current review based on the same inclusion criteria as the systematic review of the academic literature (see Table 2). During this screening process, 147 sources were excluded for lack of relevance and a further 13 for using data from outside the United Kingdom or United States. Due to length limitations, four notable sources are not discussed here but briefly discussed in the online supplementary materials. A total of 12 sources from the British Library were thus retained for our review.

Searches on the U.K. Government website using the volunteering, social cohesion, and social capital search terms were streamlined using search filters set to include only "Research and statistics" and "Policy papers and consultations" source types. Volunteering literature was further refined by including results only from the "charities, volunteering, and honours" subtopic. These searches yielded a combined total of 240 results: 140 for social cohesion, 66 for social capital, and 34 for

Figure 2
Overview of Academic Literature Searches for Volunteering and Social Cohesion (a) and Volunteering and Social Capital (b)

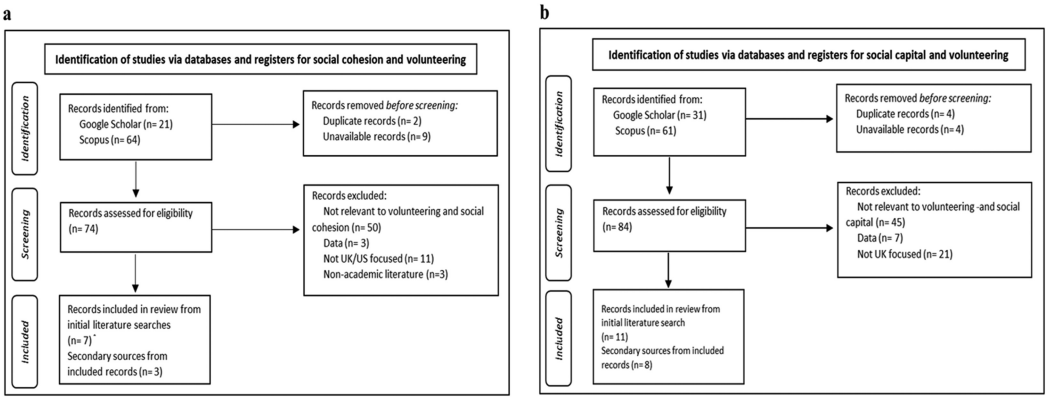


Table 2
Inclusion Criteria During Screening of Academic and Gray Literature Sources From Systematic Review

Criteria	Overview	Examples of exclusion
Relevance	-Adherence with our conceptualizations of social cohesion, social capital, and volunteering -Relevant to general U.S./U.K. populations	-Use of conceptualizations which do not align with those in the current review, for example, monetary donations as a measure of volunteering -Focus on unrelated predictors or outcomes of social cohesion, social capital, or volunteering (e.g., ethnicity, immigration, gender, age, health) -Focus on other forms of civic engagement than volunteering (e.g., voting behavior) -Focus on small subsample of population (e.g., social cohesion among university students)
Methodology (empirical papers only)	-Systematic qualitative sampling -High statistical power for quantitative analysis -Inferential statistical analysis	-Single focus group interviews -Descriptive statistics only
Source	-Primary reliance on data from U.K./U.S. samples -Peer-reviewed journal articles, book chapters, and books (academic literature searches only)	-Sources published in the United States or United Kingdom but using samples exclusively from outside these countries -Gray literature sources, for example, government reports (academic literature searches only, gray literature from these searches merged with gray literature search results)

volunteering. The primary author assessed these 240 sources for their adherence to our inclusion criteria (see Table 2), retaining seven sources for our review. Examples of sources excluded for lack of relevance included reports and prospectuses for long-term housing or counter-terrorism strategies, natural disaster management reports, and funding plans for volunteering programs. Six additional sources of interest beyond the scope of this review are briefly outlined in the online supplementary materials.

These sources, along with five additional sources provided by the advisory panel from a partnering charity, one secondary source, and four gray sources identified within the academic literature, gave a total of 29 gray literature sources used within the review. Thus, the two systematic searches together identified 63 distinct sources of evidence directly included in the review.

Results

The Relationship Between Social Cohesion and Volunteering

Correlational Evidence for a Relationship Between Social Cohesion and Volunteering

In this section, we discuss cross-sectional research-based evidence for the association between social cohesion and volunteering. We draw from five academic sources containing correlational, survey-based data for the association between the two; two primary sources (Chetty et al., 2022; Johnson et al., 2018) and one secondary source (Latham & Clarke, 2018) arising from the search, as well as two additional sources (Lalot et al., 2022; Zischka, 2019) outside of our search but previously known to the authors.

This cross-sectional evidence generally indicates that social cohesion and volunteering are positively correlated, although of course no causal inferences should be made. For example, studies of senior American individuals have identified that those engaging in moderate levels of volunteering (<100 hr in the last year) reported significantly higher levels of perceived social cohesion than nonvolunteers (Latham & Clarke, 2018), and that perceived social cohesion is positively related to both moderate and high (>100 hr in the last year) levels of volunteering (Johnson et al., 2018). Positive relationships between social cohesion and volunteering engagement via Facebook have also been identified in general population U.S. samples from social media data (Chetty et al., 2022). It is unclear whether Facebook group membership necessarily reflects current engagement. However, this statistic had a relatively strong population-weighted correlation with other research measuring true forms of volunteering ($r = .58$ with data from the 2018

Social Capital Project; Joint Economic Committee-Republicans, 2018).

In the United Kingdom, higher generalized levels of giving, including volunteering, were associated with increased interpersonal trust in their neighborhood and lower deprivation (Zischka, 2019), both factors encapsulated by social cohesion (Schiefer & van der Noll, 2017). Lalot et al. (2022) also found volunteer engagement was positively associated with both horizontal cohesion (measured as sense of neighborliness) and vertical cohesion (measured as trust in government).

Whereas social cohesion and volunteering engagement do seem to be related, research from the United States and United Kingdom suggests social cohesion and its constituent factors are not linearly or significantly related to volunteering intensity (Johnson et al., 2018; Latham & Clarke, 2018; Zischka, 2019). One potential explanation for this is that individuals who volunteer at particularly high intensities may do so as a substitute for formal employment. However, employment alone is an insufficient and inconsistent predictor of formal volunteering engagement (DCMS, 2021; Nakamura et al., 2022; Niebuur et al., 2018). Consequently, it seems that social cohesion is more clearly related to volunteering engagement than to volunteering intensity, though reasons for this remain unclear and under-researched.

Causal Evidence for the Effects of Social Cohesion on Volunteering

A systematic review of cross-sectional research by Lu et al. (2021) concluded that volunteering may be incentivized by multiple elements of social cohesion, including presence of a strong social network, sense of community, and community environment (including resource availability). Yet, the cross-sectional nature of the evidence in their review limits the confidence with which one can accept these causal propositions. We identified only three academic sources containing longitudinal data that provide evidence for possible causal effects of (components of) social cohesion on volunteering; one primary source (Nakamura et al., 2022) and two secondary sources (Ajrouch et al., 2016; Niebuur et al., 2018) and one forthcoming (Davies et al., in press). Nakamura et al. (2022) provide causal evidence for the positive effects of social contact on later volunteering. A meta-analysis of longitudinal research by Niebuur et al. (2018) exploring the impacts of social cohesion indicated that social ties predict volunteering rates. Specifically, individuals with larger social networks, regardless of whether ties were weak or strong, were more likely to volunteer (Ajrouch et al., 2016).

The Relationship Between Social Capital and Volunteering

Findings by Niebuur et al. (2018) and Ajrouch et al. (2016) indicate that social cohesion, and more specifically social capital, plays a significant role in determining volunteering engagement. Therefore, we now explore the effects of social capital on volunteering in more detail, drawing on 14 academic and one gray literature sources.

Conceptual Evidence for Effects of Social Capital on Volunteering

A number of authors have argued that social capital should affect volunteering, as proposed in three primary (Kisby, 2010; Morgan, 2013; Storr & Spaaij, 2017) and six secondary (Friedman & Laurison, 2019; Hustinx et al., 2010; Lee & Brudney, 2012; Musick et al., 2000; Simon, 1993; Wilson & Musick, 1997) academic sources.

The "dominant status model" (Hustinx et al., 2010) or "resource model" (Wilson & Musick, 1997) of volunteering holds that those with more social capital are more likely to volunteer. Social capital is thought to promote volunteering in three ways (Lee & Brudney, 2012). First, those who are more socially connected to their local communities perceive greater benefits from volunteering, making it more cost-effective for them to engage in volunteering. Second, in-group identity motivates parochial altruism (Simon, 1993), and volunteering to help in-group members is a means of expressing identity (Musick et al., 2000) and maintaining positive connections within the ingroup. Finally, those with greater social capital are more likely to be affiliated with organizations that invite them to volunteer. People who are more capable of utilizing and accumulating social capital are thus more able to access opportunities for volunteering (Friedman & Laurison, 2019; Kisby, 2010; Morgan, 2013; Storr & Spaaij, 2016).

Empirical Evidence for Effects of Social Capital on Volunteering

We found just two sources speaking to these propositions, both supportive of the conclusion that social capital has a positive impact on volunteering. A cross-sectional correlational study showed that opportunities to volunteer through direct contact with organizations (an aspect of social capital) is significantly related to volunteering engagement (Musick et al., 2000). Stronger causal evidence comes from longitudinal data revealing that those who initially have higher social capital are more likely to volunteer at a later time point (Fox, 2019). Thus, there is consistent but not plentiful evidence that social capital can play a meaningful role in determining volunteering engagement.

Challenges and Limitations

There are some important caveats regarding evidence for the relationship between social capital and volunteering, raised in three academics (Jones & Heley, 2016; Tucker & Gearhart, 2022; Zischka, 2019) and one gray (Gilbertson & Manning, 2006) source of cross-sectional evidence. These highlight contingencies, confounds, and even possible negative effects of social capital on volunteering. Consequently, we caution against the conclusion that social capital per se causes volunteering engagement. For example, factors related to social capital, such as socioeconomic status and education, have also been shown to have positive associations with volunteer engagement (DCMS, 2020; Johnson et al., 2018). Further complicating the relationship, different forms of social capital may drive volunteering to different extents. Specifically, cross-sectional evidence suggests that bonding social capital is more strongly correlated with social participation (both volunteering and other) than linking capital (Gilbertson & Manning, 2006).

Although the evidence points to there being positive effects of social capital on volunteer engagement, researchers have noted that social capital may also adversely affect volunteer engagement. Social capital may induce engagement not through choice, but through perceived obligation. This "dark side" of social capital (Jones & Heley, 2016, p. 187) leads individuals to feel pressured to behave in ways that benefit collective well-being at cost to themselves. This effect appears to be stronger in more deprived areas due to a lack of alternative community support to volunteerism (Jones & Heley, 2016). However, a lack of causal evidence for these propositions means they should be interpreted with caution.

Adding further nuance is Tucker and Gearhart's (2022) finding that it is the perception that members of a community have strong bonds with one another that increases the likelihood of volunteering (Figure 3). The role of personal perception and experience is important because it means that regardless of the objective strength of community ties, those who do not personally experience those ties are no more likely to volunteer than if they lived in a community with weak social bonds. Indeed, it seems unlikely that the social capital element of cohesion alone is sufficient to promote volunteering, and in some circumstances, it may even have a coercive impact that undermines intrinsic motivation to volunteer and perhaps cohesion itself.

Summary: Effects of Social Cohesion and Social Capital on Volunteering

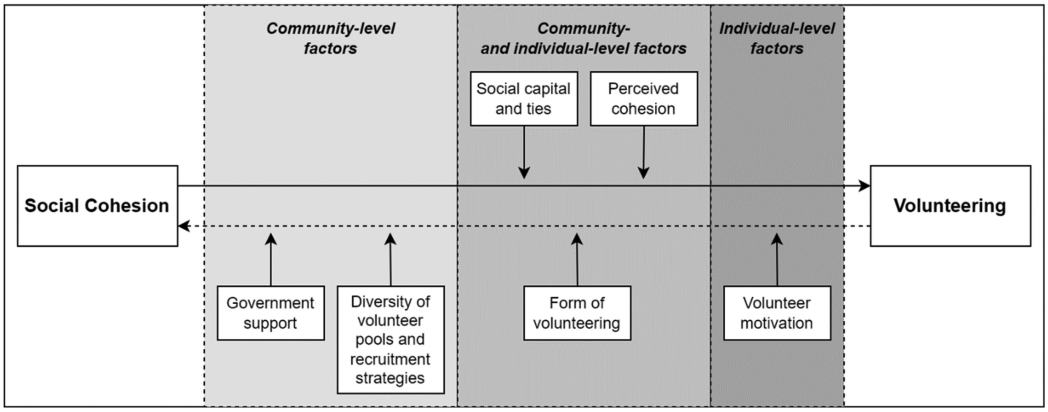
Cross-sectional and longitudinal evidence alike provide consistent support for a generally positive association between social cohesion and volunteering, and a causal effect of social cohesion on increased volunteering engagement. For the role of social capital, despite theoretical claims, it is less clear that there is a causal impact on volunteering, though some longitudinal evidence does provide initial support. Nevertheless, the potential causal relationship may be complicated by confounding factors and contingencies. Furthermore, volunteering may in some cases be driven by a lack of social capital. Consequently, we have less confidence in the conclusion that higher levels of social capital are likely to result in greater volunteering engagement.

Evidence for the Effects of Volunteering on Social Cohesion

Policymakers possess a strong belief that civic engagements such as volunteering improve social cohesion through increased intergroup contact (Kearney, 2003; Ramsey, 2012; Wiertz, 2015) and by increasing inclusivity (Dingle, 2001). Despite such expectations, evidence for the impact of volunteering on cohesion is limited (Ramsey, 2012). Our review of evidence that volunteering can impact on social cohesion identified a total

Figure 3

Graphical Summary of the Relationship Between Social Cohesion and Volunteering and Key Influencing Factors



of six published and one forthcoming sources containing case study- and survey-based evidence; four academic (Davies et al., in press; DeMarco & Bifulco, 2021; Dolan et al., 2021; Millora, 2020) and three gray (DCLG, 2009; Donahue, 2012; K. Smith & Smith, 2021) sources.

Empirical Evidence

A range of case studies from the United Kingdom (e.g., DeMarco & Bifulco, 2021; Donahue, 2012) and globally (see Millora, 2020) illustrate the positive impacts of volunteering on social cohesion. U.K. survey data also provides evidence that volunteering can, in principle, improve social cohesion. For example, the 2007–2008 Citizenship Survey revealed that both formal and informal volunteering involve similar and relatively high levels of intergroup contact (17%–19%; DCLG, 2009). A survey conducted by the Royal Voluntary Service demonstrated that volunteers showed higher levels of socialization, talked with their neighbors more frequently, and had higher levels of general well-being than their nonvolunteering counterparts (K. Smith & Smith, 2021), suggestive of increased social cohesion and social capital.

Challenges and Limitations

Once again, there is a notable dearth of longitudinal or experimental studies for the effects of volunteering on social cohesion, preventing any inferences of causality. Furthermore, virtually all evidence we identified utilized self-report measures exclusively. Consequently, any conclusions drawn for the effects of volunteering on social cohesion are largely reflective of the mere perception of these effects, rather than objective evidence.

Further complicating the matter, research suggests that perceptions of the effects of volunteering on social cohesion significantly vary according to a range of situational and individual differences. Institute for Volunteering Research data on the impacts of volunteering in a London borough revealed wide variation among volunteers' perceptions of the impacts of their volunteering on trust, friendship, contacts, and group identity (Thomas, 2006). Age was one reason for this variation: older people perceived a lower impact of their engagement than did younger people. Thomas (2006) argues that perceived impact may diminish as a function of length of time served as a volunteer.

Finally, data considering volunteering intensity (rather than engagement) yield a more nuanced picture. Specifically, Dolan et al.'s (2021) analysis of the NHS Volunteer Responders program survey data identified an inverted U-shaped distribution between the number of volunteering tasks completed and perceived neighborhood belonging (an important element of social cohesion; Baylis et al., 2019): responders who had completed an intermediate number of volunteering tasks reported the highest levels of belonging. As such, the effects of both very high and very low volunteering on social cohesion appear to be similar, both differing from moderate

volunteering, though possible reasons for this relationship have not been explored.

A broad range of research methods and contexts indicate a positive effect of volunteering on social cohesion, yet this effect may depend on how volunteering is operationalized. Our difficulty in locating causal evidence for these effects clearly limits our confidence in that conclusion. Moreover, reliance solely on self-report measures in extant data may be problematic because a number of factors may influence perceptions of the effects of volunteering on social cohesion. Finally, one mechanism for the effects of volunteering on cohesion may be indirectly through its effects on social capital, which we now explore in more depth.

Evidence for the Effects of Volunteering on Social Capital

We located a total of 13 sources of empirical evidence for effects of volunteering on social capital; seven academic (Bradford et al., 2016; Hayton, 2016; Martikke et al., 2019; McFarland & Thomas, 2006; Muirhead, 2011; C. Smith et al., 2018; Storr & Spaaij, 2016) and four gray (Boeck et al., 2009; Davis Smith et al., 2002; Fox, 2019; Locke et al., 2001) sources. An additional academic source (Hayton & Blundell, 2021) outside of the search but known to the authors is also discussed here.

Qualitative evidence (Bradford et al., 2016; Hayton, 2016; Hayton & Blundell, 2021; Martikke et al., 2019; Muirhead, 2011; Storr & Spaaij, 2016) and cross-sectional quantitative survey evidence (Boeck et al., 2009; Davis Smith et al., 2002; C. Smith et al., 2018) both support the idea that volunteering may generate both bonding and bridging social capital (cf. Locke et al., 2001).

Consistent with those findings, support for possible causal effects comes from longitudinal evidence from the United Kingdom Longitudinal Household Survey (Fox, 2019). Irrespective of people's initial level of social capital, volunteering was associated with a small but nontrivial increase in social capital (compared to nonvolunteers) at later time points. This fits with other research indicating that volunteering may improve social capital beyond initial levels even though those with higher social capital are more likely to volunteer in the first place (McFarland & Thomas, 2006). It is important to note that Fox (2019) treated neighborhood cohesion as one of several components of social capital. Consequently, their findings may also be indicative of the causal effects of volunteering on social cohesion, more broadly defined.

Distinguishing Effects of Formal and Informal Volunteering on Social Cohesion and Social Capital

Despite a rather limited volume of evidence on the impacts of volunteering on social cohesion and only a little more on volunteering and social capital, when taken together the case studies and survey data provide consistent support for the proposition that volunteering in general can be a driver of both social cohesion and social capital. Longitudinal evidence from the United Kingdom also provides causal support for these notions. However, as noted earlier, it may be important to distinguish between formal and informal volunteering, and we now consider evidence that these might have distinct effects on social cohesion and social capital.

Seventeen sources included conceptual or empirical references to the specific effects of informal and formal volunteering. Of these, seven were academic sources (Hayton, 2016; Johnson et al., 2018; Kisby, 2010; Martikke et al., 2019; McCulloch et al., 2012; Morgan, 2013; Wiertz, 2015) and three were gray sources (DCMS, 2021, 2023b; Williams, 2003). An additional four secondary academic sources (Coote, 2011; Kay & Bradbury, 2009; R. D. Putnam, 2000; Scott, 2011) and two aforementioned sources outside of the review (Hayton & Blundell, 2021; Zischka, 2019) are also discussed here, along with one source recommended by the advisory board of a partnering charity (NCVO, 2021).

Despite the lower prevalence of formal volunteering (DCMS, 2021), correlational evidence suggests that it has a greater impact on social cohesion than informal volunteering (Wiertz, 2015; Zischka, 2019). Zischka (2019) argues that formal volunteering is inherently more altruistic, whereas informal volunteering is typically driven by social pressures, is more exclusive, and occurs most typically on an individual basis, toward those with whom we have preexisting connections such as friends and family (see also Wiertz, 2015). These aspects of informal volunteering suggest that its weaker effects on social cohesion are driven specifically by a lack of

opportunity to develop social capital (Figure 3). Notably, because informal volunteering rarely involves intergroup contact, it likely impedes integration and bridging capital (R. D. Putnam, 2000). Therefore, volunteering does not guarantee either an increase in social capital (Kay & Bradbury, 2009) or in social cohesion more generally. Rather, these effects are contingent on the ways in which volunteers interact and the activities they engage in (Martikke et al., 2019).

Morgan (2013) argues that volunteering may only increase social capital when it is comprised of "far-reaching or altruistic intentions" as opposed to "short-term personal interest" (p. 384; see also Figure 3). As highlighted by correlational evidence, more advantaged individuals are more likely to engage in formal volunteering (DCMS, 2023b; Johnson et al., 2018). Consequently, its positive effects on social cohesion and social capital are most likely to arise in already advantaged communities.

Furthermore, formal volunteer groups are typically highly homogenous (Hayton, 2016) and their snowballing approach to recruitment directly or indirectly prevents those outside the network from joining (Hayton & Blundell, 2021). The high levels of ingroup trust which form within these narrow groups can lead to greater outgroup distrust (Hayton, 2016) and prevent contact with nonmembers. Thus, even if volunteering can increase social capital, it is unlikely to alleviate inequalities in social capital found in the absence of additional institutional or government support for deprived communities (Kisby, 2010; see Figure 3), and may further entrench extant inequalities in social capital through its potential negative effects on bridging capital. More encouragingly, recent survey evidence suggests that many volunteer organizations are experiencing an increase in diversity of volunteer pools since the pandemic, partly owing to more flexible opportunities for digital and micro-volunteering (NCVO, 2021). Consequently, if this trend continues, volunteer groups may become more heterogeneous, and formal volunteering may provide more opportunities for bridging capital.

The ambition of using volunteering as a vehicle for increasing social capital by involving people in their local community (Scott, 2011) may be laudable, but the conditions necessary for its success remain unclear (McCulloch et al., 2012; Morgan, 2013). It has been argued that a "bottom-up" reliance on volunteering to increase community cohesion primarily benefits individuals, communities, and organizations with the greatest resources to offer (Coote, 2011; Williams, 2003), thus exacerbating social inequalities within and between communities and eventually reducing social capital and cohesion. A lack of longitudinal evidence for the differing effects of specific forms of volunteering on these factors is apparent, and conclusions pertaining to arguments for weaker effects of either form of volunteering on social cohesion and social capital must be interpreted in light of this.

Summary: Effects of Volunteering on Social Cohesion and Social Capital

Evidence for the effects of volunteering on social cohesion and social capital is limited yet consistent, pointing to overall positive effects of volunteering on both. However, our confidence in these conclusions is limited by the noncausal nature of the majority of the evidence available. Furthermore, the impacts of volunteering on social cohesion and social capital likely differ according to the form of volunteering being considered; informal volunteering yields smaller enhancements in social cohesion, likely due to the limited opportunities to develop bridging capital and the related issue of exacerbating extant inequalities between communities (Figure 3). Nonetheless, volunteering engagement certainly seems to have the ability to facilitate the generation of social cohesion and capital when not restricted in its recruitment pools or targets of support.

Discussion

This systematic review of the relationship between volunteering and social cohesion and social capital identified a wide range of correlational evidence from the United Kingdom and the United States within the past two decades. Overall, the analysis reveals consistent support for a positive relationship between social cohesion and volunteering. Longitudinal evidence supports arguments for bidirectional causality (Davies et al., in press). Higher levels of volunteering can drive increases in community-level social cohesion and vice versa. The quite consistent conclusions drawn from an array of populations, time periods, and empirical approaches

provide some confidence in the general stability of these relationships.

Nevertheless, evidence also highlights possible qualifications that the causal pathways are always direct or inevitable. For example, the impacts of volunteering on social cohesion may depend on the form of volunteering (i.e., formal vs. informal, active vs. passive, see Figure 3). If anything, the relationship between volunteering and social capital appears more complex. Evidence certainly indicates not only beneficial effects of volunteering on social capital but also that these may be undermined by preexisting inequalities in, and negative consequences of volunteering on, social capital.

Social cohesion and social capital are likely to be linked though not fully overlapping. As such any associations between volunteering and social capital, positive or negative, are likely to influence the relationship between volunteering and social cohesion more generally. It is also important to recognize the potentially negative effects of volunteering, particularly on bridging between subgroups and across different communities, which impede the generation of societal cohesion more widely.

Conclusions and Recommendations

This review reveals a complex, multifaceted set of connections between social cohesion and volunteering. In general, evidence confirms that the relationship between the two is positive. Where researchers observe a larger proportion of people volunteering or people volunteering more intensively, they are likely to observe greater social cohesion. However, the strength of these connections is qualified by the aspects of social cohesion and forms of volunteering assessed (see Figure 3). There is consistent but less plentiful evidence for causal relationships between the two due to a lack of longitudinal or experimental evidence. Social cohesion appears to predict subsequent volunteering more strongly than volunteering predicts cohesion. Moreover, when cohesion or volunteering is restricted to particular forms there can be negative implications for the other. In this review, we highlight the critical importance of examining social capital to more fully understand the relationship between social cohesion and volunteering (see Figure 3). For example, people tend to identify and form bonding social capital with those most closely related to themselves, and they are most likely to engage in informal volunteering for those same people. These tendencies can work against the formation of strong intergroup (bridging) relationships, meaning that local or parochial cohesion may promote volunteering and vice versa, but there may be smaller, or even negative effects on wider social and societal cohesion. When considering how volunteering may influence social cohesion, it is thus necessary to consider its effects on more specific components of cohesion, such as the forms of social capital that may be facilitated or impeded by volunteering.

The review also reveals needs and challenges for future research. Most of the evidence we uncovered was based on case studies or large-scale surveys. For questions of causality, it would be helpful to have simulations and experimental evidence, as well as more longitudinal research. Experimental approaches are clearly difficult when addressing outcomes at community or societal levels, though some quasi-experimental evidence is available (Lalot et al., 2022). Whichever method is used, greater precision and clarity are required regarding the aspects of cohesion and forms of volunteering being assessed. This will allow better specification of hypotheses and a better understanding of which causal relationships exist under different circumstances.

For policy, the question is what might be the purpose of investing in either social cohesion or volunteering? There seems little doubt that supporting volunteering within communities will help sustain and strengthen those communities, and vice versa. Either strategy is likely to support a virtuous circle. However, policy strategy that starts with volunteering will have more limited and more specific impacts than that starts with building cohesion. Overall, therefore, we would advocate investing in social cohesion in ways that reflect the particular characteristics of the communities of interest, and that volunteering should be considered as one of the beneficial outcomes that can also be supported.

For practice, there are some important questions to consider. Do particular types of volunteering create disproportionate advantages for some groups or sectors within the population? Do some types of volunteering actually reinforce fractures and schisms rather than bridging divides? Is focusing on social capital a sufficient approach to building greater cohesion or

elevating volunteering? To what extent is it sufficient to nurture cohesion or volunteering from the ground up, and to what extent is top-down institutional support necessary to ensure that it grows in a sufficiently inclusive way? For example, one implication of the evidence reviewed here is that, for volunteering to have a beneficial impact on social cohesion, there needs to be a combination of grassroots and more institutionally led routes to volunteering that actively address the problems of bridging as well as the implications of intrinsic versus extrinsic or coercive reasons for volunteering. Indeed, we would recommend that, to optimize outcomes practitioners should always consider both the intragroup (bonding) and intergroup (bridging) implications of their strategies (Abrams, 2010) for increasing either cohesion, volunteering, or the linkage between the two.

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