



Solidarity in Isolation?

Social cohesion at a time of physical distance

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Executive Summary

The novel coronavirus unleashed a social crisis as much as a public-health one. In the months before the first COVID-19 vaccines began to be distributed in the United States and Europe, societies' only defences involved adjusting the mechanics of human interaction: banning group gatherings, requiring face coverings, and imposing six feet of physical distance. These new rules of engagement transformed many of the core pillars of public life—including schools, libraries, and even parks. The vital human interaction that normally occurs in these spaces was redesigned around floor stickers marking six feet of distance, or relegated to two-dimensional video apps. Even as restrictions have begun to ease, there are some signs that social distance is here to stay. Many companies are embracing remote work and less travel, and social gatherings continue to unfold on laptop screens. This experiment in remapping social interactions may disproportionately affect those who were already at arm's length from key institutions, and there is a danger that groups already marked by distrust may drift farther apart.

More than one year after COVID-19 was first declared a pandemic in March 2020, there are still no clear answers on what effects both 'hard lockdowns' and intermittent cycles of social distancing and easing restrictions have had on the connective tissue that holds societies together. Social cohesion has always been difficult to measure, and the pandemic has not made it easier to evaluate. Specific questions have arisen over whether any temporary gains in social capital or 'togetherness' are sustainable or evenly dispersed, or whether losses are more deeply affecting already marginalised communities. And while an upswell of volunteering and mutual aid initiatives created vital bridges during periods of lockdown, it is unclear the extent to which these emergency efforts can be woven into the permanent fabric of society. It remains to be seen whether societies are building new social infrastructure that will carry into the recovery (rather than temporary fixes)—and if so, whether all groups are equally equipped to effectively leverage these new virtual tools.

In the months before the first COVID-19 vaccines began to be distributed in the United States and Europe, societies' only defences involved adjusting the mechanics of human interaction.

This report analyses the pandemic's effects on social cohesion in Europe and North America by looking at two dimensions: social capital (the networks between and among groups that facilitate cooperation) and social infrastructure (the physical places and services that bring people together and thus create the conditions for social bonds). It identifies three trends:

- 1 **Bridges between groups are weakening.** The temporary closures of key pillars of public life (such as schools and libraries) dealt a blow to the spontaneous, casual encounters that once built bridges between disparate groups. Other forms of connection have taken their place. But evidence suggests that interactions have become more concentrated within existing networks, reinforced by digital platforms much better suited to maintaining relationships than to building them from scratch. This means that the important grooves already established in people's lives—relationships with close friends and family—have been etched more deeply, but more distant connections have become harder to form.

2 **Virtual immigrant integration activities are imperfect substitutes for social connection.**

Language instruction programmes and job-focused trainings have slowly made the leap to the digital world, but online courses may capture only a fraction of what in-person programming is able to achieve—and some components (such as fostering interaction among groups) simply cannot be recreated online. These shortfalls will likely be felt most acutely by vulnerable groups who already face high barriers to integration, and particularly by those that lack both access to and the skills to effectively use technology, further exacerbating intercultural distance and inequality.

3 **New forms of solidarity in isolation have emerged but may not last.**

Bursts of mutual aid and volunteering amid crisis have offered a crucial lifeline to people in need, and in some cases, it has knit together disparate communities. But while the informality of these initiatives allowed them to be nimble and bypass some standard bureaucratic hurdles, this spontaneity may also be a barrier to long-term funding and sustainability. They also face the very real challenge of volunteer burnout in a prolonged crisis. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, patchwork solutions forged in crisis may be better suited to the provision of emergency assistance than to addressing deeper structural needs.

As vaccination campaigns gain strength and countries begin to ease restrictions, the recovery must consider not only public and economic health, but the social health of communities as well. To do this, this report recommends three key principles:

- ▶ **Strengthening social capital should be built into recovery plans.** Evidence shows that communities with high levels of social capital are more resilient to crisis over the long term. Investing in social connections should therefore be considered a critical tool alongside investing in jobs and physical health, rather than an afterthought—especially for those farthest from opportunity. This requires inclusive, consultative processes to uncover different priorities and needs. And it means that policymakers need to find ways to measure the impact of social investments.
- ▶ **Policymakers should consider the ‘signalling’ power of how resources are allocated.** There may be fierce resistance to allocating more resources to certain groups (including immigrants) over others at a time when every corner of society is feeling the impact of the pandemic and lockdowns. Policies that mainstream relief to all vulnerable groups and that invest in public goods accessible to all (such as parks and libraries) can avoid seeding resentment and competition.
- ▶ **Communities should focus on economic recovery measures that also bolster social infrastructure.** As governments gradually lift restrictions, social well-being should be considered alongside economic goals. In most places, the economic recovery has taken precedence—with restaurants coming before libraries—but deconfinement plans that only look at economics may miss the broader functions of public places. Reopening a library is not just about allowing people to borrow books. It is also about creating the space for community, information-sharing, and referrals to other services. As societies consider new efficiencies that can be gained through digital platforms and remote work, more attention should be paid to assessing the social costs.

If policymakers are to avoid a potential ‘social recession’, they must act quickly to understand the ways the pandemic has challenged social cohesion and what strategies can be deployed to boost resilience as countries emerge from the crisis.

1 Introduction

The global pandemic has laid bare existing fissures and inequalities in immigrant-receiving societies. The virus has disproportionately affected certain groups, including those with constrained mobility or precarious legal status and those who by virtue of their occupation are on the frontlines of the COVID-19 response.¹ But at the same time, it has had a levelling effect on otherwise highly unequal societies in Europe and North America by uniquely demonstrating that communities are only as strong—and healthy—as their most marginalised. The collective threat posed by COVID-19 has required an unprecedented level of social solidarity in long-polarised and individualised societies. But while the pandemic has put everyone in the same storm, they are not necessarily in the same boat.

This has unveiled a paradox. At a moment that begs for solidarity, there has been fierce counter-pressure to turn inward. Since the onset of the pandemic, nearly every country in the world has imposed restrictions on mobility² and conceded that physical distance from others is a necessary ingredient for physical health. While these emergency measures have undoubtedly been necessary to mitigate domestic disease spread and delay international transmission,³ their spillover effects on societal health have yet to be fully realised. Global lockdowns have radically transformed nearly every pillar of society, including work, education, religious practice, and leisure. The centrepieces of community life that seeded meaningful interactions among different groups—schools, businesses, places of worship, libraries, and community festivals—have been forced to shutter. To compensate for in-person limitations, apps have been invented overnight to connect people across physical space. But these virtual platforms are not always accessible or desirable to those who may need social connections the most.

While the pandemic has put everyone in the same storm, they are not necessarily in the same boat.

Even as face-to-face contact was dramatically curtailed, there are some indications that social capital has increased, notably through blossoming mutual aid initiatives across the globe. Voluntary schemes to support neighbours with material needs (such as buying groceries and cooking meals) as well as to offer psycho-emotional support to elderly or confined neighbours proliferated at the start of the pandemic, though not all have lasted. The question is whether and how these efforts can be sustained: Will new forms of connection and solidarity become enshrined in institutions or social norms, rather than just in a smattering of new apps? Or will the enthusiasm fizzle out once the peak of the crisis has passed?

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- 1 The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) found that immigrants across several European countries have a higher risk of infection and mortality, despite being younger on average. For example, in the United Kingdom, the death rate for Black and Pakistani Britons is more than 2.5 times that of White Britons; and in a refugee camp in Baden-Württemberg, Germany, nearly half of its 600 residents tested positive for COVID-19. See OECD, 'What Is the Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Immigrants and Their Children?', updated 19 October 2020; Haroon Siddique, 'British BAME Covid-19 Death Rate "More Than Twice That of Whites"', *The Guardian*, 1 May 2020; Nikolaj Nielsen, 'Half of Refugees at German Camp Test Covid-19 Positive', *EU Observer*, 16 April 2020.
 - 2 In April 2020, an estimated nine-tenths of the world's population lived in a country with partially or fully closed borders. See John Gramlich, '20 Striking Findings from 2020', Pew Research Center, 11 December 2020.
 - 3 Studies have shown that travel restrictions delay (by a matter of weeks) rather than prevent the arrival of disease. See Matteo Chinazzi et al., 'The Effect of Travel Restrictions on the Spread of the 2019 Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) Outbreak', *Science* 368, no. 6489 (2020): 395–400; Michael Clemens and Thomas Ginn, 'Global Mobility and the Threat of Pandemics: Evidence from Three Centuries' (working paper 560, Center for Global Development, Washington, DC, December 2020).

But just as quickly as some have rushed to help, others have cast blame on ‘outsiders’. In contrast to natural disasters, which are ‘nobody’s fault’, the spread of communicable disease has a long history of being blamed on specific groups. Fearful publics searching for answers have fallen into well-trodden historical grooves and pointed fingers at foreigners. In the current pandemic, this began with anti-Asian rhetoric and violence across Europe and North America (a trend that has persisted⁴), and it has subsequently extended to other visibly different and vulnerable communities, such as migrants and refugees, who have been scapegoated based on perceptions of their role in bringing and spreading disease.⁵ And the ambiguous nature of a crisis with no timeline—or clear end—has caused even more panic and uncertainty, especially as new variants of the virus complicate the otherwise stunning success story of vaccine development. This has been compounded by a flood of misinformation and conspiracy theories, which have found fertile ground amid social upheaval, the increased reliance on social media during lockdown, and the lack of peer-to-peer interactions that might mitigate (or at least put into question) information from unvetted sources.

Perhaps the most striking element of this crisis—and its effect on how societies function—is that the ‘coming together’ that typically follows in the wake of a disaster has been mostly off limits. Physical connection, the most human response to collective adversity, has been out of reach during long periods of lockdown, social distancing, and remote work and learning. And the virtual stopgaps that have filled its place have not been equally accessible to all. The full consequences of societies living mostly apart for the year between when COVID-19 was declared a pandemic in March 2020 and when vaccination campaigns began to pick up speed in early 2021 are still unknown, and they may not fully manifest for months or years to come. Yet we can already discern several trends and begin to analyse their effects on immigrant-receiving societies.

Physical connection, the most human response to collective adversity, has been out of reach during long periods of lockdown, social distancing, and remote work and learning.

While many attempts to measure social cohesion focus on concrete individual outcomes, such as educational attainment and employment levels, this report looks instead at the role of intergroup dynamics. Robust social networks and mutual trust among members of a society—what is often termed social

4 A study found that hate crimes targeting Asians in 16 of the largest U.S. cities increased by 149 per cent in 2020. See Center for the Study of Hate and Extremism, ‘[Anti-Asian Prejudice March 2020](#)’ (fact sheet, Center for the Study of Hate and Extremism, San Bernardino, CA, 2 March 2021).

5 Xenophobic messaging and hate crimes have been on the rise. These include, for instance, anti-Chinese violence, stigmatising certain groups, and associating migrant agricultural labour with disease (even in countries such as Ireland with less robust anti-immigration movements). See Rory Carroll, Sam Jones, Lorenzo Tondo, Kate Connolly, and Kit Gillet, ‘[Covid-19 Crisis Stokes European Tensions over Migrant Labour](#)’, *The Guardian*, 11 May 2020. As countries begin to reopen their borders, some politicians have scapegoated migrants and asylum seekers for spreading the disease. For example, Texas Governor Greg Abbott blamed the Biden administration for releasing migrants and asylum seekers into the state, claiming they were ‘exposing Texans to Covid’. See CNBC, ‘[Texas Gov. Greg Abbott on His Decision to Lift Covid Safety Restrictions](#)’, CNBC, 4 March 2021. Scapegoating also occurred at the beginning of the pandemic. In March 2020, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán stated, ‘We are fighting a two-front war, one front is called migration, and the other one belongs to the coronavirus, there is a logical connection between the two, as both spread with movement’. See Tim Hume, ‘[Coronavirus Is Giving Europe’s Far Right the Perfect Excuse to Scapegoat Refugees](#)’, *Vice News*, 19 March 2020.

capital⁶—is instrumental in driving both individual and community well-being. Cohesion depends on the depth and breadth of social bonds and more subjective feelings of solidarity (such as loyalty and a sense of ‘togetherness’),⁷ along with the social infrastructure⁸ (such as libraries and schools) that facilitate these connections. This report explores how to assess the pandemic’s effects on social capital and infrastructure, and presents an initial analysis of how and where social cohesion is in peril and where it may actually be gaining strength.

2 How to Measure Social Cohesion and Assess Whether It Is in Danger

While there is no universally accepted definition of social cohesion,⁹ it generally refers to the glue that binds different people and groups within a society. Achieving it requires a mix of ingredients that can bolster cooperation and minimise conflict. But getting the recipe right (and tweaking it for different contexts) remains an imperfect science. For this reason, social cohesion is sometimes easiest to identify by its absence, such as through measurable disparities in income and mortality, uneven political participation, the absence of trust in institutions and community members, or ethnicity- and class-based tensions. Even before the spread of COVID-19, there were concerns that social cohesion was on the wane.¹⁰ Increasing diversity (particularly in places underprepared to manage it) has long been blamed for undermining social ties. Entrenched differences, mistrust, and concerns over immigrant communities living parallel lives have put

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- 6 The term ‘social capital’ was popularised by political scientist Robert Putnam, who in his 1995 essay defined it as ‘features of social organisation such as networks, norms, and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit’. See Robert D. Putnam, ‘Bowling Alone: America’s Declining Social Capital’, *Journal of Democracy* 6, no. 1 (1995): 65–78. It is typically understood to include three categories: (1) bonds (relationships with people who share the same identity); (2) bridges (relationships with people outside one’s circle of identity); and (3) linkages (relationships with people farther up or down the social ladder). See OECD, *The Well-Being of Nations: The Role of Human and Social Capital* (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2001).
- 7 Neli Demireva, ‘Immigration, Diversity and Social Cohesion’ (briefing, University of Oxford, The Migration Observatory, Oxford, UK, 2019); Jane Jensen, *Defining and Measuring Social Cohesion* (London: Common Wealth Secretariat and United Nations Research Institute for Social Development, 2010); Christian Albrekt Larsen, *Social Cohesion: Definition, Measurement and Developments* (Aalborg, Denmark: Aalborg University, Centre for Comparative Welfare Studies, 2014).
- 8 Eric Klinenberg, *Palaces for the People: How Social Infrastructure Can Help Fight Inequality, Polarization, and the Decline of Civic Life* (New York: Broadway Books, 2018).
- 9 The Council of Europe defines social cohesion as ‘the capacity of a society to ensure the well-being of all its members—minimising disparities and avoiding marginalisation’ with the following characteristics: (1) reciprocal loyalty and solidarity, (2) strength of social relations and shared values, (3) sense of belonging, (4) trust among individuals of society (the community), and (5) reduction of inequalities and exclusion. See Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe, *New Strategy and Council of Europe Action Plan for Social Cohesion* (Strasbourg: Council of Europe, 2010). The OECD says that a cohesive society is one which ‘works towards the well-being of all its members, fights exclusion and marginalisation, creates a sense of belonging, promotes trust, and offers its members the opportunity of upward mobility’. See OECD, *Perspectives on Global Development 2012: Social Cohesion in a Shifting World* (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2011). Xavier Fonseca, Stephan Lukosch, and Frances Brazier’s review of social cohesion literature discusses cohesion at three levels: individual, community, and institutional. See Xavier Fonseca, Stephan Lukosch, and Frances Brazier, ‘Social Cohesion Revisited: A New Definition and How to Characterize It’, *The European Journal of Social Science Research* 32, no. 2 (2019): 231–53.
- 10 A book of case studies on diverse democracies published in 2019 found that political polarisation is on the rise globally and ‘reverberates throughout the society as a whole, poisoning everyday interactions and relationships’. See Thomas Carothers and Andrew O’Donohue, ‘How to Understand the Global Spread of Political Polarization’, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1 October 2019. According to More in Common, only 37 per cent of Americans surveyed in July–August 2020 agreed that ‘most people can be trusted’, and 34 per cent said there is no community where they have a strong sense of belonging. See Dan Vallone et al., *Two Stories of Distrust in America* (New York: More in Common, 2021). By June 2021, a Pew survey found a median of 61 per cent of respondents across 17 advanced economies said they were more divided than before the outbreak. See Kat Devlin, Moira Fagan, and Aidan Connaughton, ‘People in Advanced Economies Say Their Society Is More Divided Than Before Pandemic’, Pew Research Center, 23 June 2021.

wind in the sails of nativist populist politicians over the past decade, and deep polarisation has become an accepted (if not welcomed) facet of modern life.

With many communities only recently easing out of lockdown (with schools, cafes, and tourism beginning a tentative return to normal as of Summer 2021), the full impacts of pandemic-related distancing measures on social cohesion are not yet fully apparent. Much of the existing research tends to concentrate on the first few months of ‘hard’ lockdown, rather than the ongoing cycles of easing and tightening restrictions.¹¹ Assessing their effects on this already complex landscape is even more complicated, given more and more interactions are taking place online and across borders rather than in person and within a particular geographic space.

Some empirical efforts to monitor the impact of lockdowns on society are already underway. For example, the UK All Party Parliamentary Group on Social Integration published a report in 2020 that found that while the pandemic had a unifying effect early in lockdown, it also created community tensions around perceptions that some groups were not social distancing.¹² A 2020 More in Common report on the various impacts of COVID-19, based on a survey of 14,000 people in six European countries and the United States, similarly found an immediate surge in feelings that ‘we’re all in it together’, but also that respondents held inaccurate perceptions about the degree to which others were not following public-health guidelines.¹³ Beyond surveys and attitudinal polls, another way to assess the strength of social bonds and mutual trust when much social mixing has been paused is looking at volunteering and mutual aid—some of the only forms of community engagement still accessible to many people. The willingness to expend resources to pursue collective goals, especially at a time of economic pain and uncertainty, may be a good proxy for community strength and resilience (as explored in detail in Section 2.C.).

In addition to the strength of relationships, another important ‘soft’ measure of cohesion is common identity, values, and feelings of belonging, which are often among the hardest to quantify. National identity is already hard to articulate in terms specific enough to be meaningful yet general enough to be inclusive,¹⁴ and some researchers have questioned whether a common identity is still an appropriate marker of social cohesion in multicultural societies.¹⁵ Many surveys have attempted to measure how feelings of belonging have changed as a result of COVID-19, with some finding that the pandemic has had a unifying effect (as mentioned above) but others finding evidence of increased discrimination.¹⁶ But an even more difficult

11 One exception is the Coping with COVID-19 project in France, where researchers repurposed an existing longitudinal panel survey. While respondents’ well-being increased during the Spring 2020 lockdown, albeit unequally, by the Autumn 2020 lockdown there was a drop in well-being and increase in stress. As the pandemic progressed, respondents reported lower levels of social connection, particularly in the second half of 2020. See Jen Schradie et al., ‘The Covid Year in France: A Tale of Two Lockdowns’ (policy brief, Sciences Po, Paris, 2020).

12 All Party Parliamentary Group on Social Integration, *Social Connection in the COVID-19 Crisis* (London: All Party Parliamentary Group on Social Integration, 2020).

13 The study found that 90 per cent of Americans believed that ‘we’re all in it together’ in late March 2020, compared to just 63 per cent in Autumn 2018. The shared experience of lockdown sparked a dramatic shift toward social solidarity in the early days of the pandemic, but it did not last, as seen in subsequent surveys in Autumn 2020. See More in Common, *Polarization and the Pandemic: How COVID-19 Is Changing Us* (New York: More in Common, 2020); More in Common, *The New Normal? A 7 Country Comparative Study on the Impacts of COVID-19* (New York: More in Common, 2020).

14 See Natalia Banulescu-Bogdan and Meghan Benton, *In Search of Common Values amid Large-Scale Immigrant Integration Pressures* (Brussels: Migration Policy Institute Europe, 2017).

15 Fonseca, Lukosch, and Brazier, ‘Social Cohesion Revisited’.

16 World Health Organisation (WHO), *ApartTogether Survey: Preliminary Overview of Refugees and Migrants Self-Reported Impact of COVID-19* (Geneva: WHO, 2020).

question is how to assess what impact, if any, these feelings have had on overall cohesiveness. One proxy is observance of local social norms, yet this is particularly hard to assess without face-to-face interactions. It may also prove to be a flashpoint during the pandemic as different norms come into conflict (e.g., public-health guidance clashing with cultural practices, or changing norms around mask wearing but continued prejudice around religious head coverings).¹⁷

Even in the absence of solid measurements, it is possible to predict several stresses on social cohesion—as well as some opportunities for it to flourish. Each of the subsections that follow describes a trend that has emerged since the onset of the pandemic.

A. *Bridges between Groups Are Weakening*

Not all social bonds are fraying, but links between disparate groups may have suffered disproportionately during the pandemic, with periodic lockdowns interrupting the most common vehicles of social connectedness. The rich web of interactions that result from frequenting different centres of community life (everything from cafes to libraries) came to a halt, reducing these interactions to fewer (though potentially stronger) strands, largely within pre-existing networks. This means that the important grooves already established in people's lives—relationships with close friends and family—have been etched more deeply,¹⁸ and in some cases they have become a critical lifeline for those unmoored by present circumstances.

These have been reinforced by the virtual tools that have flourished during periods of lockdown, such as birthday parties held via Zoom. But other kinds of social capital—the kinds that build bridges between groups¹⁹ and are based on spontaneous and casual encounters—have largely gone dormant or crumbled.²⁰ Organic social mixing all but ceased.

Not all social bonds are fraying, but links between disparate groups may have suffered disproportionately during the pandemic.

Bringing diverse groups of people together in meaningful ways has long depended on neutral, safe, and free community gathering places such as libraries, places of worship, and schools. Such places have also often served as touchpoints for people to access further services. When these closed for business, it became more difficult to forge meaningful contact among people not already in the same social networks,

17 Despite widespread local ordinances requiring (or at least recommending) mask-wearing for public-health purposes during the pandemic, certain jurisdictions have imposed new restrictions on religious face coverings during the same period. For example, the right-wing Swiss People's Party put forward a proposal to ban all face coverings in Switzerland, which was passed in a March 2021 referendum. See BBC News, 'Switzerland Referendum: Voters Support Ban on Face Coverings in Public', BBC News, 7 March 2021.

18 A survey of nearly 2,000 Australians asked how social distancing had affected social interactions. Many respondents said they had started to see their networks shrink, as they socialised with 'a very particular subgroup'. Those able to connect with existing friends online felt that these friendships became closer. Many respondents said that they missed casual interactions in their communities. See Celina Ribeiro, 'How Lockdowns Are Changing Our Friendship Groups', BBC, 9 October 2020.

19 Bridging social capital describes connections between individuals across divides such as race, religion, and class. Conversely, bonding social capital occurs within a group or community that is largely homogeneous in terms of demographics, resources, and attitudes. See Tristan Claridge, 'Functions of Social Capital—Bonding, Bridging, and Linking', Social Capital Research and Training, 20 January 2018.

20 Research suggests that these casual social encounters, what sociologists call 'weak ties', are very beneficial because they 'offer people a way to be seen, heard, and appreciated, as well as the chance for them to express gratitude'. They also can serve as entry points to new groups of people. See Colleen Walsh, 'The Value of Talking to Strangers—and Nodding Acquaintances', *The Harvard Gazette*, 27 August 2020.

and marginalised groups were cut off from a wider web of social supports than is visible on the surface.²¹ Most public places have not wholly flipped the switch back to ‘open’ as restrictions ease, but instead are experimenting with hybrid models—limited hours, or timed entry requiring reserving tickets in advance. This narrowing of access favours the more connected and networked, and means that casual encounters in museums or libraries may still be out of reach.

One bright spot is the new forms of bonding social capital that emerged by virtue of people being anchored to their neighbourhoods: lingering conversations with neighbours on porches that would have otherwise been hurried past on the way to work, and the now infamous neighbourhood sing-a-longs from apartment balconies or coordinated clapping for frontline workers.²² These place-based initiatives are, on the surface, inclusive (as they are open to anyone in the vicinity), but they do little to form bridges between ethnically or socioeconomically segregated areas, or may not be long-lasting enough to constitute progress on deeper social issues. For example, the United Kingdom’s ‘Clap for Carers’ lasted ten weeks during the first lockdown. Many credited the initiative for making people feel part of something bigger while also allowing residents to meet their neighbours—sometimes for the first time. But the weekly clap ended amid criticism that it was becoming politicised and that what health-care workers really wanted was not applause but more funding and personal protective equipment.²³ Efforts to revive the initiative in January 2021 fell flat.

Virtual tools have emerged to try to mimic the spontaneous encounters that have been lost. For instance, apps such as QuarantineChat connect strangers at random points of the day.²⁴ Another video chat app called twine matches users who are interested in the same discussion questions.²⁵ But while these may prove beneficial for some, they tend to target the lowest-hanging fruit (i.e., connecting international students²⁶ and getting information to already well-connected groups) rather than addressing bigger problems such as how to systematically reach those who were socially isolated before the pandemic.²⁷

Video chats are mostly a tool to sustain existing relationships, but they may be insufficient to begin new relationships from scratch.

Video chats are mostly a tool to sustain existing relationships, but they may be insufficient to begin new relationships from scratch, put a dent in a lack of trust among certain groups (or toward public authorities),

21 In the United States, for example, low-income students have been dropping out or not enrolling in college at all because of the pandemic. In addition to economic hardship, another factor contributing to this trend is a lack of access to a reliable internet connection or space to study remotely as college campuses have closed libraries and other facilities. See Heather Long and Danielle Douglas-Gabriel, ‘The Latest Crisis: Low-Income Students Are Dropping Out of College this Fall in Alarming Numbers’, *The Washington Post*, 16 September 2020.

22 Reportedly, millions of Britons clapped for frontline workers from their windows and doorsteps at 8 pm BST on 21 May 2020. See Andrew Sparrow, ‘Britain Comes Together to Clap for Carers on Covid Frontline—As It Happened’, *The Guardian*, 21 May 2020.

23 Doug Faulkner, ‘Coronavirus: Is This the Final Hurrah for Clap for Carers?’, BBC News, 28 May 2020.

24 QuarantineChat, ‘QuarantineChat’, accessed 19 May 2020.

25 Sarah Perez, ‘Twine Aims to End Social Isolation with Its Video Chat App for Deep Conversations’, Tech Crunch, 8 April 2020.

26 For example, the University of Warsaw launched a virtual meeting programme (Multicultural Volunteering Online) to match Polish and foreign students in pairs or groups so that they can communicate with and support one another via the internet. See University of Warsaw, ‘Multicultural Volunteering Online’, accessed 24 March 2021.

27 However, there have been some *ad hoc* efforts to reach traditionally isolated groups such as seniors. For example, three college students founded a nonprofit called Big & Mini that connects youths with older adults to combat loneliness and bridge generational divides during the pandemic. See Sandra West, ‘This Longhorn Startup Is Bridging the Generation Gap to Combat Loneliness’, UT News, 24 November 2020.

or offer a salve for flare-ups of community tensions, especially where these have long gone unaddressed. There is a fear that a long period of social isolation may become a breeding ground for more distrust and discrimination against visibly and religiously different migrants and their families, who have long been accused of ‘living apart’, at a time when tools to soothe these tensions are limited. In the World Health Organisation’s 2020 *ApartTogether* Survey of 30,000 migrants and refugees from around the world, a significant proportion felt that discrimination had worsened in various ways, with nearly one in three young adults (ages 20 to 29) reporting they were treated less well because of their origins.²⁸

Some targeted interventions have attempted to dislodge prejudice and stereotypes. For example, the Britain Connects project, a partnership between two widely read newspapers and the Behavioural Insights Team, used behavioural science to help make online video conversations between diverse strangers (such as young, ethnic minority voters who opposed Brexit and older, White voters who supported it²⁹) as fruitful as possible. Participants were encouraged to focus on what they have in common rather than their differences.³⁰ And unlike spontaneous conversations, which are not typically recorded and disseminated, these online interactions may even help break down social barriers for those who watch or read about them later. It remains to be seen whether this type of innovation endures even after most in-person activities resume.

B. Virtual Immigrant Integration Activities Are Imperfect Substitutes for Social Connection

While digital tools have in many ways been a blessing amid social-distancing measures, not all integration activities survived (or thrived in) the shift to the virtual sphere. Attempts to rebuild social infrastructure in a virtual way may have left out populations with the greatest need for social connection and captured only a fraction of what in-person initiatives are able to achieve. The barriers to entry may have been highest for immigrant groups, particularly those with limited receiving-country language proficiency, weaker local information networks, and limited access to electronic devices or the internet. At the EU level in 2020, while 86 per cent of individuals reported using the internet at least once per week, this average obscures sometimes large differences between urban and rural populations and between low- and high-skilled groups. For example, the share of frequent internet users drops to 68 per cent if you look at women with low levels of formal education.³¹

And while access to the internet can theoretically be solved with enough resources (for instance, schools lending free laptops to children), ensuring that people can use virtual tools well takes much more than just distributing supplies. Access on its own does not translate into proficiency. While there are numerous digital replacements for in-person language learning, for example, such courses are most accessible to the tech savvy and those requiring minimal in-person supervision and support. With many students and newcomers expected to continue learning online, less digitally literate or connected households have effectively been

28 WHO, *ApartTogether* Survey.

29 Ros Wynne Jones and Claire Donnelly, ‘Britain Connects: What Happened When Boris Johnson Fan Zoomed Labour Supporter’, *Daily Mirror*, 4 May 2020.

30 Behavioural Insights Team, ‘Britain Connects: Take Part in Our Project to Bring Britain Together’, Behavioural Insights Team, 7 May 2020.

31 Eurostat, ‘Individuals—Frequency of Internet Use [ISOC_CI_IFP_FU]’, updated 25 May 2021.

shut out of the classroom.³² Areas that made a full shift to digital communication, including to disseminate vital public-health information or pandemic-related financial benefits, may therefore have amplified intercultural distance and existing inequalities as certain groups were left further behind.

With many students and newcomers expected to continue learning online, less digitally literate or connected households have effectively been shut out of the classroom.

Much of the infrastructure that specifically supports immigrants and refugees (such as language instruction and housing assistance) was effectively put on hold in the early months of the pandemic,³³ with populations left in limbo while clunky systems attempted to translate offerings into virtual spaces. Inclusion-focused programming in particular, which is rooted in face-to-face interactions, is difficult to replicate in the virtual sphere.³⁴ Programmes that survive on the strength of volunteers have also taken a hit from

the pandemic. In the wake of the 2015–16 European migration and refugee crisis, for example, a complex web of partnerships between governments, private corporations, and civil society emerged, providing support, training, and other tools to newcomers.³⁵ But this fragile ecosystem was in some cases heavily dependent on elderly volunteers vulnerable to COVID-19, and it was not built to withstand sudden lulls in activity. Community sponsorship programmes, for instance, whereby a group of volunteers takes over some of the responsibilities typically held by state actors for resettling refugees, were suddenly left in the lurch as resettlement was halted. The programmes are often credited with speeding up integration by placing newcomers into ready-made and supportive communities, but the pause in arrivals threatened the momentum and ‘muscle memory’ of these programmes (and in more practical terms, imperilled things such as housing arrangements). However, volunteer-run programmes may have had certain advantages over state-run programmes, for instance being more able to compensate for social-distancing measures with apps such as WhatsApp and Zoom.³⁶

The past year has taught us that a certain set of experiences can be recreated online, but others cannot make the leap from in person to virtual. The most successful immigrant integration activities during the pandemic have been those that targeted newcomers who already had a foothold in a society, whether by virtue of their skills (including technological prowess), education levels, or language ability—or their youth. For example, at Startblok Riekerhaven, a co-housing initiative in Amsterdam for young refugees and Dutch students, residents were able to reinforce the social mixing at the heart of the project by moving group activities such as yoga classes online.³⁷ The Swedish nonprofit Kompis Sverige (Buddy Sweden) launched

32 Sarah R. Lambert, ‘Do MOOCs Contribute to Student Equity and Social Inclusion? A Systematic Review 2014–18’, *Computers & Education* 145 (2020): 103693; UK Government Digital Service, Cabinet Office, ‘A Checklist for Digital Inclusion—If We Do These Things, We’re Doing Digital Inclusion’, updated 13 January 2014.

33 During a closed-door meeting with integration policymakers that the Migration Policy Institute Europe (MPI Europe) convened in April 2020, senior officials from Czechia, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Norway, and Poland, among others, described a ‘state of emergency’ in the early days of the pandemic that left governments with little bandwidth as they scrambled to translate in-person offerings (such as language courses) to digital platforms, postpone language tests and other integration requirements, and disseminate fast-changing information in multiple languages and mediums. MPI Europe Integration Futures Working Group Meeting, ‘Solidarity in Sickness: Identifying Pressing Integration Implications of COVID-19’, 1 April 2020.

34 Liam Patuzzi, *Driving Migrant Inclusion through Social Innovation: Lessons for Cities in a Pandemic* (Brussels: MPI Europe and International Organization for Migration, 2020).

35 Liam Patuzzi, Meghan Benton, and Alexandra Embiricos, *Social Innovation for Refugee Inclusion: From Bright Spots to System Change* (Brussels: MPI Europe, 2019).

36 Participant discussions during the European Policy Centre roundtable, ‘Future-Proofing EU Resettlement Policies: Scaling up Commitments’, 21 June 2021.

37 Ginny de Bruin, ‘Update: Starblok in Tijden Van Corona’, Startblok Riekerhaven, 26 March 2020.

the project Language Buddy Online to help newcomers learn Swedish by connecting them via video to native Swedes.³⁸ But other community-building activities may never find a good fit in the virtual world (such as food festivals and cultural parades). Others may disappear altogether due to funding cuts. And while some people may thrive with new forms of digital connectivity, others may suffer from forced isolation (including mental and physical health strains).³⁹ At best, this period of limited contact will delay newcomers' integration in terms of exposure to language and culture, and at worst, it could permanently stunt it.

C. *New Forms of Solidarity Have Emerged but May Not Last*

Following the onset of the pandemic, thousands of aid groups formed at the local level to reimagine how to provide critical services (such as grocery or medicine delivery) to neighbours in need. In Denmark, 56 new support groups were established on Facebook the day the lockdown was announced in March 2020; within three weeks, 247 support groups had emerged.⁴⁰ This pattern was replicated around the world. For example, an estimated 800 mutual aid groups were active in the United States as of March 2021.⁴¹ And as the crisis has worn on, many of these groups have expanded their offerings beyond food and basic supplies, for instance connecting children with technology for remote schooling and, since the beginning of 2021, helping disadvantaged populations register for vaccinations. Some of these groups have also expanded beyond practical help into socioemotional assistance. In Lithuania, the mutual assistance and online volunteering platform Stream targets refugees and asylum seekers and aims to bring communities together during quarantine through online seminars, workshops, training, and counselling on a wide range of topics and content in different languages. As of March 2021, the initiative was still in operation and had reached 250 users with 92 online activities.⁴²

Early evidence suggests that highly flexible, volunteer-driven operations have had a better chance of succeeding in places where trust was already high and networks robust. Research from Denmark, for example, reveals that the vast majority of informal pandemic-related support was distributed through existing relationships, with only 9 per cent of survey respondents organising help for someone outside their networks.⁴³ A study in Germany similarly found that the vast majority of aid was between family, friends, and neighbours; only 20 per cent of helpers offered aid to people they were not previously connected to.⁴⁴ Thus, there may be limits to how scalable these initiatives are, as the ties that bind do not always stretch.

38 Kompis Sverige, 'Break Your Own and Others' Isolation: Become a Language Friend Online', accessed 21 May 2020.

39 Research has found that loneliness heightens health risks, such as excessive smoking and alcohol consumption, and can increase the risk of premature death far more than many other leading health indicators, such as obesity. Perceived social isolation is also linked to depression, poor sleep quality, and accelerated cognitive decline. See Amy Novotney, 'The Risks of Social Isolation', *American Psychological Association* 50, no. 5 (2019).

40 Hjalmar Bang Carlsen, Jonas Toubøl, and Benedikte Brincker, 'On Solidarity and Volunteering during the COVID-19 Crisis in Denmark: The Impact of Social Networks and Social Media Groups on the Distribution of Support', *European Societies* 23, sup1 (2021): S122–S140.

41 According to one database mapping mutual aid efforts in the United States, there were 293 groups with an active web presence as of March 2021. News articles estimate the number of groups to be 800 or higher. See Mutual Aid Hub, 'Database of Localized Resources during Corona Outbreak', accessed 17 March 2021; Kimiko de Freytas-Tamura, 'How Neighborhood Groups Are Stepping in Where the Government Didn't', *New York Times*, 3 March 2021.

42 European Web Site on Integration, 'STREAM', accessed 24 March 2021.

43 Carlsen, Toubøl, and Brincker, 'On Solidarity and Volunteering during the COVID-19 Crisis in Denmark'.

44 This study also found weak links among the outer rings of people's social networks, for instance, only one in six respondents (N=4,799) said they offered aid to someone within their associations or religious communities, whereas 80 per cent reported giving aid to family members, and 69 per cent to friends and neighbours. See Sebastian Koos and Ariane Bertogg, 'Lokale Solidarität während der Corona-Krise: Wer gibt und wer erhält informelle Hilfe in Deutschland?', University of Konstanz, 2020.

One of the strengths of mutual aid is its informality; these programmes bypass bureaucratic hurdles rather than reinvent infrastructure. They typically do not ask recipients for proof of circumstances—and critically, legal status—to receive aid. But the flip side of this flexibility is often a lack of sustainability. The weak infrastructure may not be able to accommodate scaling up or transitioning to more permanent and consistent ways of working. Still, it is encouraging that these new efforts have succeeded in doing more than mobilising existing cadres of volunteers; there is evidence that COVID-19 has actually unlocked additional volunteer capacity and more people than ever before became ‘helpers’. A German survey conducted in April and May 2020 found that 25 per cent of people participating in local mutual aid efforts were new to this type of volunteering.⁴⁵ Past research has similarly shown the mobilising power of seminal events. For example, research on the volunteering legacy of the 2012 London Olympics indicates a significant share of people were first-time volunteers, primarily motivated by the ‘chance of a lifetime’ opportunity to contribute rather than a general interest in volunteering or lifestyle change.⁴⁶ To harness and sustain this new influx of support, programmes must trade some flexibility for formality in order to train and continue recruiting volunteers and, crucially, have legal standing to accept the public funds or private grants that will be necessary for growth.

There is evidence that COVID-19 has actually unlocked additional volunteer capacity and more people than ever before became ‘helpers’.

Many volunteer and mutual aid efforts have run out of steam over the prolonged period of crisis. Some individuals involved have experienced major life upheavals and become more focused on their own survival, while others have experienced burnout. Many informal groups have in fact already ended their efforts. And while some established civil-society and humanitarian aid groups have seen a flurry of new engagement, others saw their ranks decline (most likely as a result of in-person limitations and volunteer fatigue),⁴⁷ or even external barriers that have taken away opportunities for engagement (such as the temporary halt in refugee resettlement). Some schemes that experienced an early flood of support also struggled to absorb the sudden increase in interested volunteers. Long delays between signing up and being mobilised into action can dampen enthusiasm, even if engagement is still needed during the recovery.⁴⁸ In Stuttgart, Germany, the municipality had to stop accepting volunteers only a week after it launched Stuttgart Neighbourhood Aid in mid-March 2020 as it had already reached its target of 500 registrations.⁴⁹ In the

45 Koos and Bertogg, ‘Lokale Solidarität während der Corona-Krise’.

46 Moreover, many volunteers who felt their skills were underused or their roles were not challenging enough were less inclined to do it again. The surge in volunteering lasted about two years before returning to normal levels. See Niki Koutrou, Athanasios Pappous, and Anna Johnson, ‘Post-Event Volunteering Legacy: Did the London 2012 Games Induce a Sustainable Volunteer Engagement?’, *Sustainability* 8, no. 12 (2016).

47 In the beginning of the pandemic, the Red Cross in France, with a normal count of 60,000 volunteers, had 30,000 new people express interest. Also in France, the platform Tous Bénévoles (All Volunteers) saw their ranks double in 2020, adding 40,000 new volunteers. The International Committee of the Red Cross experienced similar surges around the world, including 48,000 new sign-ups in the Netherlands and 60,000 in Italy. However, in the United States, a survey conducted in August 2020 found that two-thirds of respondents had decreased their volunteering activities or stopped altogether because of the pandemic. See Margot Delpierre, ‘Covid-19: anciens bénévoles et nouveaux venus, comment les associations ont fait face’, *France Culture*, 1 May 2020; United Nations Regional Information Centre, ‘COVID-19 Drives Global Surge in Volunteering’, accessed 15 June 2021; Fidelity Charitable, *The Role of Volunteering in Philanthropy* (Cincinnati: Fidelity Charitable, 2020); Paul Sullivan, ‘Demands on Nonprofit Groups Rose in the Pandemic, Even as Volunteering Fell’, *New York Times*, 13 November 2020; Amy McKeever, ‘Coronavirus Is Spreading Panic. Here’s the Science behind Why’, *National Geographic*, 18 March 2020.

48 For a full analysis of volunteer engagement following the 2015–16 migrant and refugee crisis, see Susan Fratzke and Emma Dorst, *Volunteers and Sponsors: A Catalyst for Refugee Integration?* (Washington, DC: MPI, 2019).

49 Jetzt Helfen Tausende, ‘Solidarität in Der Corona-Krise’, TAG24, 22 April 2020.

United Kingdom, more than 750,000 people signed up to be National Health Service volunteers (three times as many as were expected, with the initial target of 250,000 reached in less than 24 hours).⁵⁰ But by April 2020, some complained they did not have enough to do while others had not been given any tasks.⁵¹

Another challenge amid this flurry of civic engagement and volunteering has been that efforts are largely centred on the immediate emergency response rather than on what comes next. For example, in the United States, mental health hotlines created at the start of the pandemic may only be a band-aid solution, as they do not address the structural barriers to accessing treatment that predate the pandemic.⁵² And some of the platforms or systems developed under pressure may not be suited to long-term use; just because a service or project can make the transition from in person to digital does not mean the result will be simple to use or effective. Care must be taken to understand the various online and offline ways to best reach target groups, and how to make virtual platforms accessible, useful, and attractive. Another dimension of cultivating sustainable community action is creating conditions for long-term trust. This should also extend to the apps and platforms being used and how transparent they are in terms of how personal data are being collected, stored, and shared. If platforms are not fortified to prevent privacy breaches now, this might not bode well for continued use down the line.

Another challenge amid this flurry of civic engagement and volunteering has been that efforts are largely centred on the immediate emergency response rather than on what comes next.

In some ways, society (or at least normal social life) has felt like it has been ‘on ice’ for the past year as a result of successive pandemic-imposed lockdowns. The arrival of effective vaccines has begun a gradual thawing, but it also threatens to create new schisms between those who are able and willing to receive a vaccine and those who are not. As policymakers navigate when and how to reopen societies without leaving anyone behind, it will be important to try to harness and channel the renewed sense of being ‘all in this together’ into something with longer-term impact on the barriers to social cohesion. Lessons from the 2015–16 migration and refugee crisis show that a robust support infrastructure needs to be in place to take advantage of and sustain volunteer engagement; this infrastructure is both cost and resource intensive, and typically flourishes best with government support.⁵³

3 Conclusions and Policy Considerations for the Recovery

Social isolation is not an automatic result of physical distance; you can feel lonely in a crowd and feel fulfilled at home alone. Its remedy depends on whether people can access new lifelines and services as well as meaningful human connections. For many, this human connection was already lacking before the pandemic. For instance, an October 2019 YouGov survey in the United Kingdom found that among 18- to

50 UK National Health Service (NHS), ‘NHS Volunteer Responders: 250,000 Target Smashed with Three Quarters of a Million Committing to Volunteer’ (news release, 29 March 2020).

51 Patrick Butler, ‘A Million Volunteer to Help NHS and Others during Covid-19 Outbreak’, *The Guardian*, 13 April 2020.

52 These issues are particularly concerning as mental health experts and studies indicate that a ‘second pandemic’ of widespread mental health needs is looming. See Allison Abrams, ‘Is a Mental Health Crisis the Next Pandemic?’ *Psychology Today*, 17 March 2021.

53 See Fratzke and Dorst, *Volunteers and Sponsors*.

24-year-olds—so-called digital natives—31 per cent felt lonely often or all the time.⁵⁴ New platforms that have emerged to address the mechanics of connecting people via video (when it is too dangerous to meet face to face) may therefore only be scratching the surface of the problem. More work is needed to figure out new ways to address old problems, such as loneliness, inequality, and discrimination—a far more difficult task.

If we are lucky, the pandemic may help kick-start a needed conversation on who we are, how we live as a community, who is and is not served by our social infrastructure, and how to make more inclusive decisions about the way forward. While even the immediate future is a vast unknown, we can anticipate the following:

- ▶ **There will be ebbs and flows of solidarity.** In the early waves of the pandemic, societies across Europe and North America experienced surges of solidarity to help the most vulnerable, but the momentum has ebbed and flowed, and in some cases slowed as attention turned away from acute crisis toward economic recovery. In many places, there has been pressure to get native-born residents back into work over immigrants (for example, low-wage workers in physically demanding sectors such as manufacturing or food processing already being transformed by automation). A sense of relative precarity may be felt across the board as many people will be less well off than before. But societies that are able to capitalise on the increased sense of solidarity and neighbourliness—channelling this goodwill into formal commitments and actions—may become more resilient in the face of (post-)crisis anxiety.
- ▶ **Fear and uncertainty will amplify both the prevalence and persuasiveness of false information.** People are receiving many different messages and competing interpretations about the scope and degree of danger from the pandemic—and more recently, the efficacy and safety of vaccines. This barrage of mixed messages can breed distrust. In some cases, messages from governments themselves have been bungled, with misunderstandings between public-health experts, leaders, ministers, and different spokespersons.⁵⁵ If governments fail to address the glut of conflicting information, it opens up an information vacuum at a moment when people are hungry and desperate for knowledge that can help them. This is a recipe for exploitation, which populist and far-right actors in Europe and North America have already seized upon, including to stoke anti-Muslim sentiment.⁵⁶ As vaccine hesitancy becomes a bigger barrier to immunity than vaccine supply, governments need to ensure that high-quality, vetted content penetrates informal networks—and is trusted and used—which often requires culturally sensitive, person-to-person contact.
- ▶ **Not all immigrant integration efforts have translated well to the virtual sphere.** The business of integration relies heavily on in-person interactions. While technical offerings (such as language or even

54 Connor Ibbetson, 'Who Are the Most Lonely People in the UK?', YouGov, 3 October 2019.

55 Even the most basic public-health messages have been subject to wildly different interpretations. Early in the pandemic, for example, camps formed between those who adhered to strict social-distancing or mask-wearing measures and those who did not. An over-representation of people with a migrant background in the latter category may reinforce stigmas and animosity toward this group, especially where it becomes associated with higher infection rates or is blamed for spreading the disease.

56 Unfounded rumours circulated around the internet that Muslims were receiving 'special treatment' to allow them to congregate during Ramadan, when Christian churches had been forced shut for Easter. This was widely disseminated to stoke anti-Muslim sentiment. See Saranac Hale Spencer, 'Stay-at-Home Policies Treat Mosques Same as Churches', FactCheck.Org, 30 April 2020.

work training) can be reimagined in virtual formats, such as one-on-one conversations with mentors or language tutors, the work of building community does not have an obvious digital replacement. As some organisations find efficiency in remote operations, inter-group contact may never reach pre-pandemic levels. Yet as programmes are reimagined in the virtual sphere, attention must be paid to recreating the benefits of face-to-face interactions—which, when done well, may still be the best way to forge friendships and reduce stereotypes.⁵⁷

Governing during a national emergency is a delicate balancing act involving competing policy priorities and interests. Prioritising physical and public health, while necessary, requires a mix of ingredients that may prove harmful to the health and resilience of communities over the long term. For example, the economic downturn generated by global lockdowns may have flattened the curve, but the widespread unemployment and poor job prospects could scar a generation of workers.⁵⁸ As we move towards recovery, there are still more trade-offs in terms of how much and in what order to reopen which sectors of society. In many parts of the United States, gyms and indoor restaurants have opened before schools or community centres, prioritising economic recovery over social recovery. These trade-offs will need to be constantly recalibrated. To ensure an inclusive and effective recovery—one that minimises harm of all kinds and accounts for the needs of the most vulnerable members of society, including those with migrant and refugee backgrounds—policymakers should consider the following:

- ▶ **Social capital is crucial to pandemic recovery.** Governments should look to strengthen the links between newcomers and long-standing residents through the recovery planning process, ensuring a diverse range of views—and needs—are incorporated.⁵⁹ This is not a purely altruistic effort: evidence shows that communities with high levels of social capital and trust weathered the pandemic better than areas lacking robust support networks.⁶⁰ And while all social capital is helpful in the immediate aftermath of a crisis, bridges between groups may be particularly important for long-term recovery. For example, a study of post-tsunami Indian communities found that even where bonding social capital was high, disparities and lack of trust between groups undercut long-term resilience, as it discouraged the sharing of scarce resources and vital information between groups affected by the same disaster.⁶¹ Governments can lay the groundwork now by developing consultative decision-making processes that can help rebuild links between different segments of society.

57 For more on contact theory, see for example: Thomas F. Pettigrew, Linda R. Tropp, Ulrich Wagner, and Oliver Christ, 'Recent Advances in Intergroup Contact Theory', *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 35, no. 3 (2011): 271–80.

58 Susan Lund, Kweilin Ellingrud, Bryan Hancock, and James Manyika, 'COVID-19 and Jobs: Monitoring the US Impact on People and Places', McKinsey Global Institute, 29 April 2020.

59 The provincial government in Saskatchewan, Canada, for example, came under sharp criticism from their political rivals for failing to consult with ethnic minority groups before announcing the COVID-19 recovery plans, despite the high infection rate in these communities. See Jayda Taylor, 'Meili Says Re-Open Sask. Plan Shows Lack of Consultation and Supports to Recover from COVID-19', *Prince Albert Daily Herald*, 24 April 2020; Nicole Bohrer-Kaplan, Amenee Siahpush, and Samantha Nemana, *Social Cohesion: A Practitioner's Guide to Measurement Challenges and Opportunities* (New York: Facebook and 100 Resilient Cities, 2019).

60 One study looking at more than 2,700 U.S. counties found that 'moving a county from the 25th to the 75th percentile of the distribution of social capital would lead to a 18 per cent and 5.7 per cent decline in the cumulative number of infections and deaths'. See Christos A. Makridis and Cary Wu, 'How Social Capital Helps Communities Weather the COVID-19 Pandemic', *PLoS ONE* 16, no. 1 (2021). Previous research by Eric Klinenberg on the Chicago heatwave of 1995 found a strong correlation between social isolation and high fatality rates. See Eric Klinenberg, *Heat Wave: A Social Autopsy of Disaster in Chicago* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

61 Nicholas Pitas and Colin Ehmer, 'Social Capital in the Response to COVID-19', *American Journal of Health Promotion* 34, no. 8 (2020): 942–44.

- ▶ **Consider the ‘signalling’ power of how resources are allocated.** The pandemic is thrusting questions of equity to the fore. While some communities will need more help than others, there may be fierce resistance to allocating more resources to those deemed most in need at a time when every corner of society is feeling the impacts of the pandemic and related lockdowns—and when most are feeling relative insecurity. Policies that mainstream relief to all vulnerable groups, such as sector-wide assistance programmes or ones based on material conditions, could help keep anxious publics on side. It may also be important to demonstrate investment in community ‘commons’, such as parks and libraries, which may have broader appeal.
- ▶ **Focus on economic recovery measures that also bolster social infrastructure.** Putting social cohesion at the centre of recovery plans may not always be possible, and where it is feasible, it may involve a set of complex trade-offs and considerations. But as governments gradually lift restrictions, social well-being should be considered alongside economic goals. In drafting plans for which types of businesses will reopen and when, this could take the form of parallel discussions on which parts of the social infrastructure should be prioritised and why. For example, clear guidance is needed on what kinds of community engagement and volunteering activities are allowed and how to perform them safely. Debates over when to reopen schools have largely been based on the issue of children falling behind in their studies, or on granting parents a reprieve from juggling work and child-care responsibilities. But deconfinement plans that prohibit children from playing together may miss the broader function of schools as places of social encounter and emotional development. Likewise, reopening a library is not just about allowing people to borrow books. It is also about creating the space for community, information-sharing, and referrals to other services. In some places, economic concerns have driven reopening decisions—which has led to crowded bars and restaurants while children still attend virtual school. Governments need to assess the social costs of these decisions alongside the economic ones, and invest more in understanding the full returns on investment of social infrastructure.⁶²

The COVID-19 pandemic did not invent most of the social cohesion and migrant inclusion challenges European and North American societies are experiencing. But it has exacerbated underlying issues and intensified the divide between the digital ‘haves’ and ‘have nots’. To minimise the potential social damage from this prolonged period of lockdown, it is vital that social cohesion be prioritised during the recovery, both in terms of when and how parts of the social infrastructure are reopened and in how decisions are made and who is consulted. Missing this opportunity could turn this health crisis into a much longer and more profound social one.

To minimise the potential social damage from this prolonged period of lockdown, it is vital that social cohesion be prioritised during the recovery.

⁶² For a discussion of how policymakers can use cost-benefit analysis to calculate the broader social value of integration investments, see Meghan Benton and Paul Diegert, *A Needed Evidence Revolution: Using Cost-Benefit Analysis to Improve Refugee Integration Programming* (Brussels: MPI Europe, 2018).

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