

CONVERGE COVID-19 Working Groups for Public Health and Social Sciences Research

Research Agenda-Setting Paper

This paper was written to help advance convergence-oriented research in the hazards and disaster field. It highlights areas where additional research could contribute new knowledge to the response to and recovery from the pandemic and other disasters yet to come. Questions about the research topics and ethical and methodological issues highlighted here should be directed to the authors who contributed to this paper.

Working Group Name:

Hyper-Local and Emergent Mutual-Aid Responses to COVID-19

Working Group Description:

This Working Group focuses on hyper-local mutual aid groups that have organized to share information and provide material and emotional support to communities across the United States and around the world. Our group examines, from multiple disciplinary perspectives and using multiple methods, the works of these groups, the challenges they face, and how the particular features of this pandemic shape their activities.

Priority Research Topics and Specific Research Questions:

Priority Research Topics	Potential Research Questions
1. Emergence of Self-Organization Efforts to Provide Mutual Aid after Crisis and Disaster	<p>RQ1: How do participants define mutual aid?</p> <p>RQ2: What terms, names, or concepts do groups use to refer to their work?</p> <p>RQ3: To what extent do current manifestations of mutual aid draw on the history of mutual aid organizing in Black, Brown, disabled, LGBTQ, and other often marginalized communities?</p> <p>RQ4: How do participants determine the membership of their group, or the community to whom they feel responsible?</p> <p>RQ5: What prompted the emergence of mutual aid organizations? What are the participants' motivations?</p> <p>RQ6: What types of adaptations were exhibited by groups that existed prior to the pandemic in order to respond?</p>

	<p>RQ7: What activities were undertaken by mutual-aid groups during the pandemic? How did this change over time, including providing support to the Black Lives Matter movement?</p> <p>RQ8: How do the activities conducted by mutual-aid groups fit within or challenge established understanding of community self-help, convergence, and emergent organization during disasters?</p> <p>RQ9: How do the specific features of the pandemic shape organizational behavior in ways that are different from disasters linked to other kinds of hazard?</p> <p>RQ10: What is the range of cultures, political orientations, and organizational structures present across various mutual aid groups? What accounts for these variations?</p>
<p>2. Role of Digital Technologies in Fostering Self-Help or Mutual-Aid Organizing by People and Communities</p>	<p>RQ1: What are the primary communication practices used by mutual aid groups?</p> <p>RQ2: What digital technologies (e.g., social media, google docs) are used by mutual aid organizations? What is the role of these technologies in the groups' activities?</p> <p>RQ3: What role does the digital divide play in determining who can participate in or receive assistance from these groups?</p> <p>RQ4: What are the connections between offline and online self-help organizing efforts after crisis and disaster? What are the key differences? How are they complementary?</p>
<p>3. Connections between Mutual Aid Groups and Other Local Organizations</p>	<p>RQ1: How do mutual aid groups relate to faith-based organizations, activist networks, businesses, cultural organizations, and other groups? What factors help or hinder these relationships?</p> <p>RQ2: To what degree do mutual aid groups share or receive resources including funds, information, materials, or volunteers with other organizations?</p> <p>RQ3: What types of conflicts arise between different groups? How are these conflicts resolved?</p>
<p>4. Relationships to Government and Formal Emergency Response Entities</p>	<p>RQ1: When are mutual-aid groups seen as an obstacle or challenge to state power? When are they seen as complementary?</p> <p>RQ2: How do emergent vs. established mutual aid groups see the state—as an obstacle? Facilitator? Other?</p> <p>RQ3: How does the experience of engaging in mutual aid influence participants' perception of government?</p>

	<p>RQ4: How do laws and local regulations around COVID-19, and public health and emergency management help or hinder the efforts of mutual aid organizations?</p>
5. The Future of Mutual Aid	<p>RQ1: Will emergent mutual aid groups sustain their activities beyond the pandemic? In what forms? What explains the continuity of some and disappearance of others?</p> <p>RQ2: Will partnerships between mutual aid groups and other organizations developed during the pandemic be sustained?</p>
6. Ethical Questions Regarding Conducting Research <i>With</i> and <i>On</i> Mutual Aid Groups	<p>RQ1: What are the ethical challenges related to joining, starting, or being a part of a mutual aid group and using that position to solicit participation in research or data from the group?</p> <p>RQ2: How does the framing and practices of mutual aid extend to researchers working with mutual aid groups (e.g., participatory action research)?</p> <p>RQ3: How does the epistemic privilege of researchers who belong to or are a part of the communities they study affect their organizing efforts and their analysis?</p> <p>RQ4: How should mutual aid groups and organizers be compensated for participating in research?</p> <p>RQ5: How should people be protected from potential legal scrutiny as a result of data shared with researchers?</p> <p>RQ6: How can researchers support mutual aid groups?</p>

Ethical / Methodological Considerations:

We note that due to the informal and non-hierarchical nature of these activities, accurate accounting of the scale of mutual aid work currently being undertaken in response to the COVID-19 pandemic is impossible. Our Working Group raised a number of ethical questions related to the study of ongoing mutual aid efforts. First, there are concerns about the time that mutual aid organizers spend participating in research activities may take away from their already stretched resources to support local communities. Indeed, members of our group noted that some mutual aid organizers have explicitly requested that researchers not study their activities for this reason. Some organizers cited prior experience where participation in academic research has felt extractive. Group members discussed various means of compensating research subjects and participating organizations. For researchers actively participating in mutual aid work as well as studying, important ethical issues around disclosure, problem framing, and privacy are foregrounded. These questions are shaped, in part, by the researcher's relationship to the group (e.g., organizer or founder vs. casual volunteer) and the extent to which research goals are shared by the organization. Participatory action research (PAR) offers a useful starting point to help researchers navigate some of these decisions.

Other Frameworks, Considerations for Collaboration, and/or Resources:

In addition to ongoing discussions over research, our group is also collaborating on projects related to tracking media coverage of mutual aid organizing, [compiling a shared bibliographic library](#), and conducting a large-scale survey of mutual aid organizations operating in the United States and Canada.

Contributors:

Aaron Clark-Ginsberg, Behavioral and Policy Sciences, RAND Corporation

Adriana Garriga-Lopez, Anthropology and Sociology Department, Kalamazoo College

Jack L. Harris, Department of Communication, State University of New York at New Paltz

Jen Henderson, Cooperative Institute for Research in Environmental Sciences (CIRES), University of Colorado Boulder

Christine Kirchhoff, Department of Civil & Environmental Engineering, University of Connecticut

Embry Owen, Independent Researcher & Mutual Aid Organizer

Jean Slick, School of Humanitarian Studies, Royal Roads University

Robert Soden, Department of Computer Science, Columbia University

Randy Stoecker, Department of Community and Environmental Sociology, University of Wisconsin-Madison

Denise Milstein, Department of Sociology and INCITE, Columbia University

Serena Tagliacozzo, Institute for Research on Population and Social Policies, Italian National Research Council

Thomas Thaler, University of Natural Resources and Life Sciences, Vienna

Ben Wisner, Institute for Risk and Disaster Reduction, University College London

This COVID-19 Working Group effort was supported by the National Science Foundation-funded Social Science Extreme Events Research (SSEER) network and the CONVERGE facility at the Natural Hazards Center at the University of Colorado Boulder (NSF Award #1841338). Any opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this material are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the NSF, SSEER, or CONVERGE.