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Coronavirus aftermath: how do communities recover from trauma?

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From singing on balconies, to online choirs, communities have
come together – often through the use of social media groups –

Author

to support others around them in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic.

These are many more amazing examples of communities connecting and coping during the acute phase of this pandemic. But what we don't know is how communities will respond in the aftermath – when resources may be drained, people tired and communities have experienced a collective loss.

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My research looks at social inclusion and community engagement. As part of my work, I've looked at community resilience – the sustained ability of a community to use available resources to respond to, withstand, and recover from adverse situations.

How communities respond to trauma is an area of research that has grown considerably over recent decades, with traumatic events impacting people all over the world. These include events caused by humans, such as the 9/11 World Trade Centre attacks in 2001, after which traditional notions of community were enhanced throughout New York, and natural disasters, such as Hurricane Katrina in 2005, where feelings of belonging to a wider community were destroyed in some affected neighbourhoods, but smaller group identities were enhanced.

Research has found that people and communities respond in different ways to devastating events. This is not only influenced by the type of event, but also by the characteristics of communities. It also seems that while trauma can help some communities pull together, in other cases, it can pull them apart.

The difference with COVID-19

Most people will have never experienced anything like COVID-19 in their lifetime. And although the world has experienced viral outbreaks before – such as the Spanish flu and the plague – it is very uncertain how communities will respond to the COVID-19 pandemic long-term.

COVID-19 presents a unique challenge as it is both natural and human in character. The threat of the virus is also invisible. During manmade traumas, such as shootings, for example, people know where the threat is coming from. But people infected with COVID-19 may be asymptomatic and can potentially infect friends and loved ones. With COVID-19, everyone is a threat.

This, along with the biological nature of the crisis, may mean that it is seen as beyond the control of individuals and communities – with healthcare systems seen as being responsible for treating the virus.
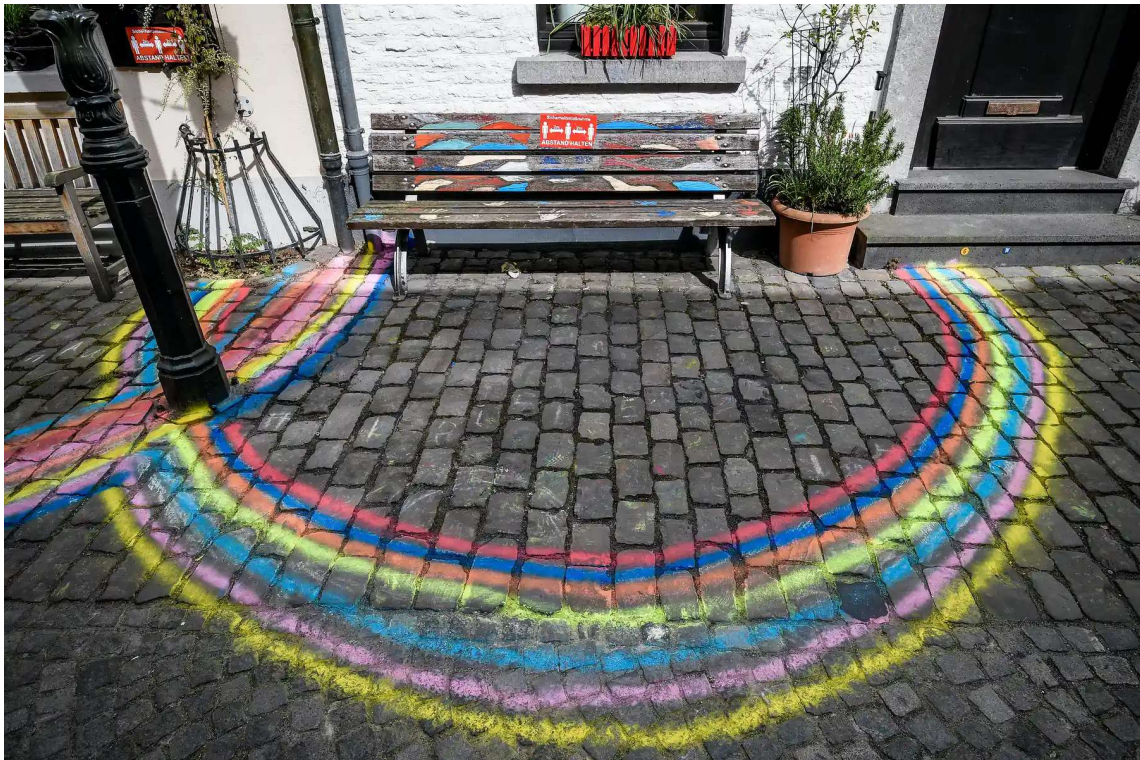
Colourful rainbows are painted on the cobbles in front of houses in the old town of Kempen, Germany. SASCHA STEINBACH/EPA

The threat of COVID-19 is also universal. Natural disasters such as floods only tend to affect a discrete number of people and unaffected communities can help with volunteering efforts. But COVID-19 is unprecedented in scale: impacting communities, health systems and economies across the globe. This makes it much harder for communities to rally together and support those in need.

Communities are also unable to meet in person. Research shows that social contact can bring a wealth of health and emotional benefits. But as meeting in groups is not possible under strict social distancing polices, this poses a number of challenges for community recovery.

The power of connection

The future is uncertain and raises a number of questions in terms of the aftermath of the pandemic. Will we identify community on a micro level – in terms of our neighbourhoods or perhaps who we

supported – or a macro level, perceiving this as a collective trauma on a global scale?

What is clear is the internet and social media will play a central role in connecting and mobilising communities to take up collective action to support those in most need – as has been the case during other collective traumas. This is backed up by evidence which shows how social media can support community development and provide support to people during and after a disaster.

While social media may be at fault for fuelling fear and influencing behaviours like panic buying, it has also given many people the ability to socialise when other methods are not possible. During this crisis, there have already has been a wealth of examples of social media saving the day, for example, through Facebook COVID-19 Mutual Aid Groups and NHS Scrub Volunteer Groups. Social media is also helping people to keep previous connections with communities, for example though online church services and youth groups.

This highlights the importance of connection. Which is why, in the wake of the pandemic, internet access must be made available to everyone and should be considered an essential resource, like water or electricity. In a precarious time, when physical connections are not possible and societal inequalities will be exacerbated, the internet is a vital tool to ensure everyone in society is connected and supported.

Pandemic   **Communities**   **Trauma**   **Flooding**   **Mass shootings**   **COVID-19**   **COVID-19 pandemic**