

Kayla Williams

POLISCI 151 Final

Have We Been Mobilized?: An Investigation of Changes in Communal Participation Since 2020

Research Question:

To what extent has the unique combination of events that met us in 2020 mobilized US citizens to take more proactive measures in supporting community members in the face of governmental shortcomings?

Abstract:

March of the year 2020 marked a time of great uncertainty for Americans as the arrival of COVID-19 to the US and its initial spread suggested that there was looming tragedy ahead. Yet in the face of drastic shifts from normalcy due to quarantine, economic insecurity for many, and widespread death, the force that many would believe we could depend on most, the government, was either unresponsive or guilty of actively using this time to further subjugate certain groups. At such a dire time, could the hyper visualization of governmental failures spark a fire in citizens to take matters into their hands?

Through time series analyses of Google searches for “mutual aid” over time, coupled with similar investigations of aid related tweets on Twitter, one finds that 2020 could indeed be considered a catalyst for changes in how people respond to disaster or uncertainty as a collective. More concretely there have been clear increases in interest around communal participation for the greater good, or mutual aid -- the voluntary and reciprocal exchanges of goods and services

amongst community members for the collective good, highlighting that people may indeed have been mobilized in the face of 2020.

Background:

While the most marginalized members of society have long grown accustomed to unresponsive governments and stagnancy in policies, 2020 was arguably a crucial point because it 1) brought a large new wave of citizens into positions of economic insecurity and 2) exacerbated already existing economic and social inequities in ways that could not be ignored.

With an increase in the number of those experiencing financial hardship in the US, it became harder to ignore the manner in which the government inadequately responds to such circumstances. Data collected from the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities highlights dramatic shifts in food, housing and employment hardships since the Covid- 19 outbreak. For instance, while only 3.4 percent of adults had reported not having enough to eat in 2019 according to a Census Bureau survey, this percentage hit nine percent in survey data collected between April 28 - May 10 this year.¹ Beyond this, the Census survey changed wording of questions around rent and lengthened the survey, making the results incomparable before and after covid; however, we know that millions reported having difficulty paying rent between April 28 and May 10, or 15 percent of adult renters with an estimated 6.4 million adults unable to make their mortgage payments.² In the face of this rising uncertainty for Americans, however, the initial responses of the government were found to be “uninspired and counterproductive.”³

This is because weeks into the pandemic, millions were unsure when they’d receive their

¹

<https://www.cbpp.org/research/poverty-and-inequality/tracking-the-covid-19-recessions-effects-on-food-housing-and-inequality/tracking-the-covid-19-recessions-effects-on-food-housing-and-inequality/tracking-the-covid-19-recessions-effects-on-food-housing-and-inequality>

² Ibid

³

<https://www.brookings.edu/blog/the-avenue/2020/03/13/coronavirus-makes-it-impossible-to-ignore-the-economic-insecurity-built-into-our-labor-market/>

benefits, small businesses were losing loans to larger businesses that qualified for what mom and pop businesses needed far more, and state and city governments were moving in, sometimes, conflicting directions about the opening and closing of businesses due to health crisis.⁴ All in all, the government's response in the face of great uncertainty was more anxiety inducing than calming. While many could claim ignorance before this time, especially with the segregated state of our nation, too many were dragged into the sorts of situations that they may have been totally blind to previously making this point in time a unique one in our life times.

In addition to people experiencing new financial hardships, they were also met with the fact that their Black, poor and otherwise marginalized counterparts had not only been subjected to such experiences for a while but that this was only exacerbated in the pandemic. Regarding the same statistics discussed before, the 9 percent of adults that reported insufficient access to food grew to 16 percent each for Black and Latino adults, compared to 6 percent for white adults.⁵ Furthermore, the 15 percent of all adults behind on rent sits side by side with 29 percent of Black adults, 21 percent of Asian adults and 18 percent for Latinx folk.⁶ Thus, in addition to experiencing their own hardships firsthand, many more privileged people were given a new understanding of the circumstances of their more disenfranchised counterparts while watching their subjugation be compounded by the pandemic.

Beyond economic hardships, there were also clear disparities in health outcomes across races that many struggled to reckon with. Data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention revealed that minorities faced covid hospitalization rates approximately five times

4

<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-usa-bailout-analys/u-s-response-to-virus-splinters-into-acrimony-and-uncertainty-idUSKCN2280EK>

⁵ Ibid

⁶

that of white people.⁷ While non white groups haven't been found to have any genetic predispositions to being more affected by the virus, they are more likely to deal with the underlying health conditions that make it more deadly, like diabetes for instance.⁸

And if the increased number of those experiencing hardships and the sight of these hardships exacerbated in minority communities weren't enough to mobilize citizens, the hyper visualization of racial authoritarianism bolstered by police violence was another powerful motivator. In 2020 alone, 1,021 people were killed in police shootings.⁹ While this number isn't outstanding compared to other years (there were 999 fatal shootings in 2019), it was a unique time to digest it all as we had limited access to distractions -- the news and media were our biggest connections to the outside world for nearly year and having to constantly see Black lives lost at the hands of those allegedly charged with protecting them in sensationalized ways, the world found itself in a state of mourning and unrest. Furthermore, this added fire to conversations around the disproportionate rates at which Black people have these experiences, making up less than 13 percent of the population but dying at the hands of police at rates more than twice that of white Americans.¹⁰ In yet another realm it was made alarmingly clear to Americans that those in power often behave in ways counter to the roles as protectors of liberty and security, sometimes in negligence and other times in blatant disregard for these responsibilities in the face of political and capital gains.

In the face of all of this, I wanted to know what the people have done with all of this information.

In the face of clear governmental shortcomings are people radicalized to take matters into their own hands or do they carry on as is.

⁷

<https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/coronavirus/expert-answers/coronavirus-infection-by-race/faq-20488802>

⁸ Ibid

⁹ <https://www.statista.com/statistics/585152/people-shot-to-death-by-us-police-by-race/>

¹⁰ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/investigations/police-shootings-database/>

Existing research highlights that this really could have gone two ways for people. For those who already held more liberal beliefs, the circumstances surrounding the pandemic could have been a reaffirming force for them -- highlighting the need for more left leaning policies and systems.¹¹ However, research done by Daniel Rosenfeld and Janet Tomiyama using conformity to gender roles as a proxy for measuring conservatism earlier this year highlights that for others, the uncertainty of pandemic conditions could have the opposite effect - pushing people to revert to what is most comfortable and safe for them, that being more rightist ideology.¹²

Learning this, I came into this research project interested in finding out how much the former had occurred, but more so whether that could have any tangible impacts on society. As previously discussed, the issues brought to the surface by the pandemic weren't extraordinary for many groups of people. People have long been living with poverty, insufficient health care, racism, and death while others moved about in ignorance or willful complacency -- a behavior that only allows such conditions to persist. Thus, I wanted to know if this culmination of events could present us with a point of no return, one where the people, too agitated by what has been plastered in front of our faces for a year now, would take necessary action to prevent more people from experiencing the same. Optimistically, I present my research findings which suggest that this may just be the case.

Methods:

My research took the form of two major investigations: one on Google search trends and one on twitter data.

¹¹

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2020/04/08/gen-z-was-fed-up-with-status-quo-coronavirus-could-reinforce-their-liberal-politics/>

¹²

For the first prong, I looked at trends in Google searches of the words “mutual aid” and “donate” in order to do an initial interrupted time series analysis. By looking at people’s engagement with these words over the past years I was able to see clearly how dramatically search behaviors changed in 2020.

I chose “mutual aid”, defined as the voluntary, reciprocal offering of services and funds in support of community members, as a proxy for measuring radicalization and mobilization for three main reasons.

For starters, mutual aid is a feasible way for community members to respond to issues around them. It allows people to show up as they are, regardless of socioeconomic status, and offer what they have, thereby allowing me to measure participation and minimize the impacts of privilege as a confounding variable. Those from the lowest economic standing can donate as little as a dollar or they can get others to donate or they can contribute their time and skills.

Secondly, mutual aid is efficient because it responds directly to needs. Unlike the criticisms that philanthropists and larger non profit organizations often face around unseen impacts on communities, inefficiency within the org and disconnect between what is preached and what is actually changed within communities, mutual aid responds directly to the circumstances of those that need it. Money, services and resources go directly into the hands of those who need it most to secure housing, food and safety, thereby making it a sound measure of society’s ability to enact change.

Finally, redistribution has consistently been sensationalized by conservatives and governmental agencies, as is seen clearly by the criminalization of the Black Panther Party’s Free Breakfast Program by the FBI and US government in the 1970s. Finding that poor children were often going to school hungry and staying hungry, the BPP coordinated with local churches and

businesses to start a Free Breakfast Program in Oakland in 1969, to which the FBI responded by “ending forged letters to stores to discourage them from donating food, spreading rumors that the food was poisoned, and even raiding sites while children ate” in order to discourage participation in and reduce support for it.¹³ Thus, to suggest that mutual aid and the like have moved closer to the center of discussions when just 50 years ago redistribution was placed on the margins is a big deal.

The Google Trends data offers two variables, the week and the interest level for the term at that time, meaning that it doesn’t return an absolute search number but instead a relative measure on a scale of 0 to 100 with 100 being the peak in interest for the term at the time. It also offers region specific data as well, allowing you to look at interest for a term by city or nation for example. After my initial findings around searches for “mutual aid” and “donate” in general, I did a few more specific investigations to see more isolated effects of more region specific potential catalysts.

The second prong of my research focused on data collected through the rtweet package in R, which allows us to get data on tweets, users and their timelines. As the basic package only allows us to search terms in tweets for as far back as 9 days, I looked at the most popular aid related tweets in this time to then look at how the timelines of those tweeters may have changed over time. I also looked at key words in these tweets to give us an idea of the types of requests made.

13

Findings:

From the Google Trends data I found that there has been a clear overall increase in interest in “mutual aid” since the onset of the pandemic in the US (the first week of March 2020). This increase is paralleled by an increase in the search term “donate” at the same point in time, though by much smaller margins. As the following graphs highlight, there is a clear spike in searches for mutual aid around that time, and a more subtle but still visible increase in searches for “donate”. This is further supported by linear regressions onto the search variable from an “intervent” variable that classifies whether or not the date was before or after 2020. These regressions highlight that relative interest went up by approximately 23 index points for “mutual aid” after this point and time and 7 for donations.

```
summary(lm(mutualaid$Searches ~ mutualaid$intervent))
```

Call:
lm(formula = mutualaid\$Searches ~ mutualaid\$intervent)

Residuals:

Min	1Q	Median	3Q	Max
-16.873	-3.227	-0.227	1.773	68.127

Coefficients:

	Estimate	Std. Error	t value	Pr(> t)
(Intercept)	9.2273	0.5492	16.80	<2e-16 ***
mutualaid\$intervent	22.6457	1.1178	20.26	<2e-16 ***

Signif. codes: 0 '***' 0.001 '**' 0.01 '*' 0.05 '.' 0.1 ' ' 1

Residual standard error: 7.727 on 259 degrees of freedom
Multiple R-squared: 0.6131, Adjusted R-squared: 0.6116
F-statistic: 410.5 on 1 and 259 DF, p-value: < 2.2e-16

```
summary(lm(donate$Searches ~ donate$intervent))
```

Call:
lm(formula = donate\$Searches ~ donate\$intervent)

Residuals:

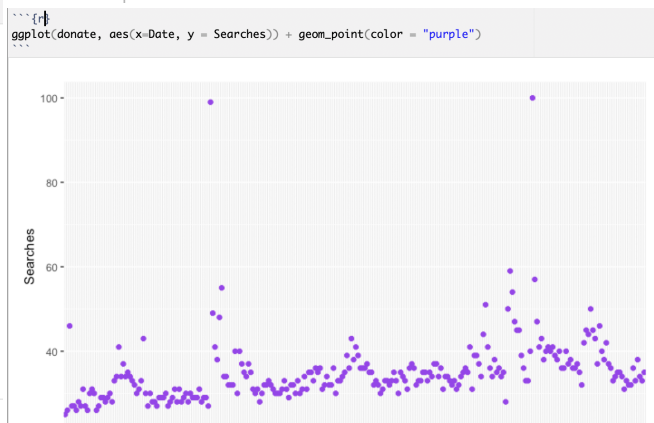
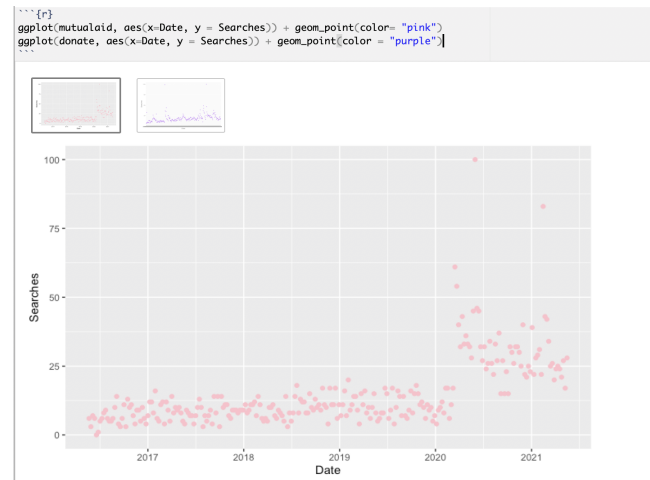
Min	1Q	Median	3Q	Max
-12.159	-3.421	-1.290	1.579	65.579

Coefficients:

	Estimate	Std. Error	t value	Pr(> t)
(Intercept)	33.4213	0.5331	62.697	< 2e-16 ***
donate\$intervent	6.7374	1.0829	6.222	1.98e-09 ***

Signif. codes: 0 '***' 0.001 '**' 0.01 '*' 0.05 '.' 0.1 ' ' 1

Residual standard error: 7.482 on 258 degrees of freedom
Multiple R-squared: 0.1305, Adjusted R-squared: 0.1271
F-statistic: 38.71 on 1 and 258 DF, p-value: 1.977e-09



After this I was interested in seeing more local engagements with the search, specifically for mutual aid, and found that regional disasters have served as clear catalysts for growth in interest. More concretely, when looking at Texas and Minnesota, who both had tumultuous times between a winter storm in February that resulted in power outages for days in Texas and with Minnesota being the place where George Floyd was murdered, I found that their local events had far more impact on surges in searches than the intervention date, suggesting that mutual aid is most responsive to local needs.

The following linear regression models highlight that the more regional interventions had impacts nearly quadruple and double the pandemic intervention in Minnesota and Texas respectively. This goes back to the previous discussion of the responsiveness of mutual to immediate needs. These findings highlight the manner in which people are being mobilized by the sights right before their eyes or empowered by mutual aid in their own experiencing of these disasters to turn their communities when the governments can't and/or won't service them.

```
Call:
lm(formula = minn$Searches ~ minn$interven + minn$george)
```

Residuals:

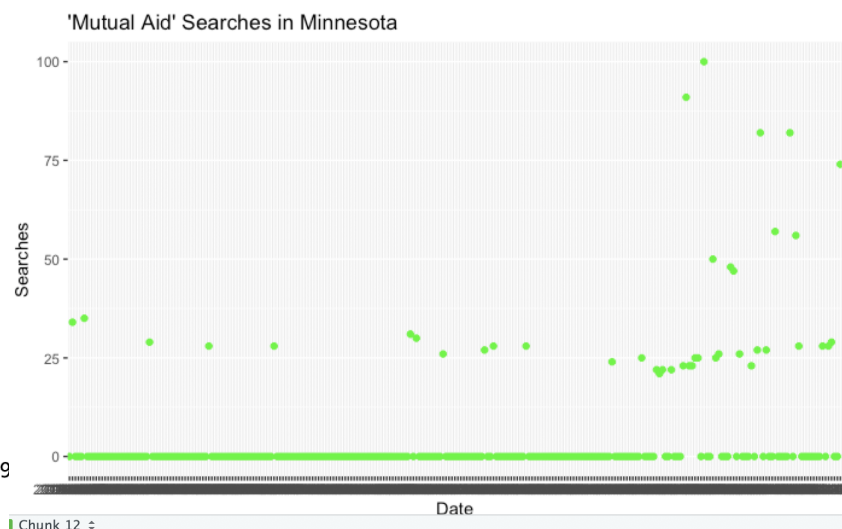
Min	1Q	Median	3Q	Max
-16.969	-1.903	-1.903	-1.903	83.031

Coefficients:

	Estimate	Std. Error	t value	Pr(> t)
(Intercept)	1.9031	0.9814	1.939	0.0536 .
minn\$interven	15.0657	1.9780	7.617	4.94e-13 ***
minn\$george	57.0313	13.8461	4.119	5.13e-05 ***

Signif. codes: 0 '***' 0.001 '**' 0.01 '*' 0.05 '.' 0.1 ' ' 1

Residual standard error: 13.74 on 258 degrees of freedom
Multiple R-squared: 0.2427, Adjusted R-squared: 0.2369
F-statistic: 41.35 on 2 and 258 DF, p-value: 2.654e-16

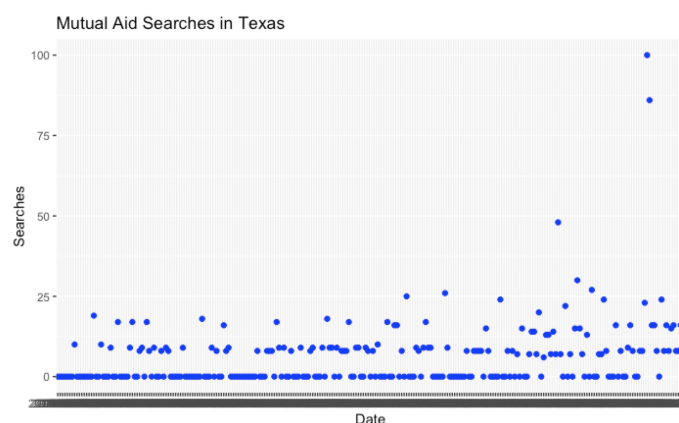


```
Call:
lm(formula = texas$Searches ~ texas$interven + texas$storm)

Residuals:
    Min       1Q   Median       3Q      Max
-21.563  -4.061  -4.061   3.939  78.438

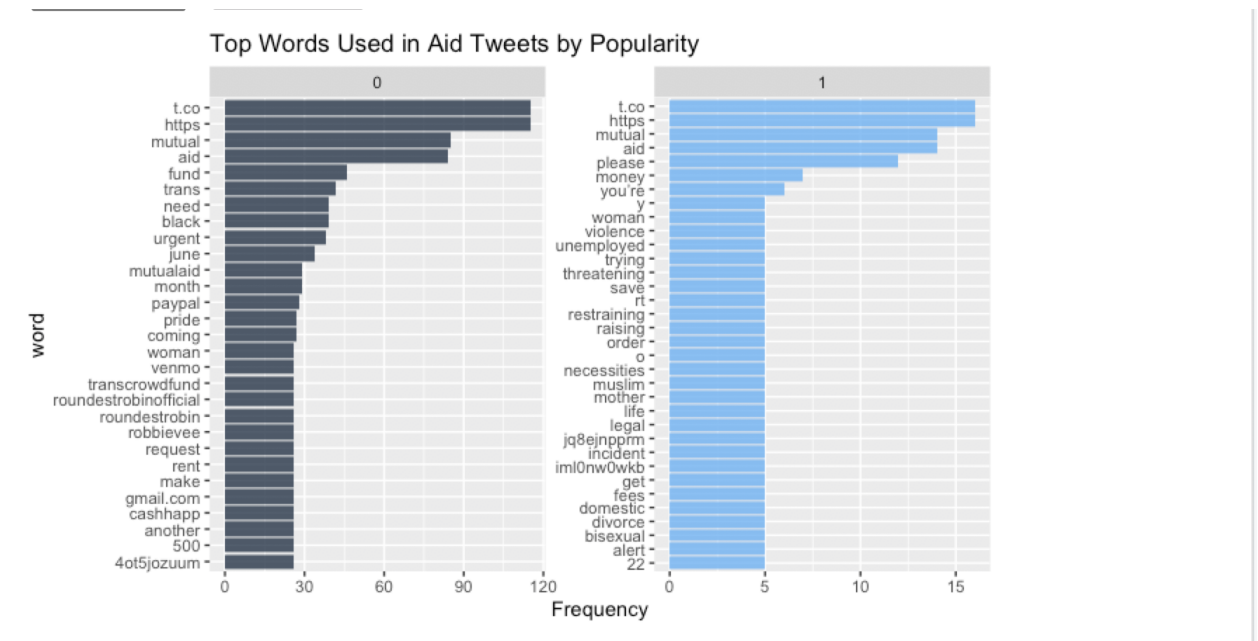
Coefficients:
            Estimate Std. Error t value Pr(>|t|)
(Intercept)    4.0612     0.6876   5.907 1.1e-08 ***
texas$interven    5.2245     1.5374   3.398 0.000786 ***
texas$storm     12.2768     2.7716   4.429 1.4e-05 ***
---
Signif. codes:  0 '***' 0.001 '**' 0.01 '*' 0.05 '.' 0.1 ' ' 1

Residual standard error: 9.626 on 258 degrees of freedom
Multiple R-squared:  0.1769,    Adjusted R-squared:  0.1705
F-statistic: 27.72 on 2 and 258 DF,  p-value: 1.242e-11
```



The second prong of my research started by searching for tweets in the past week or so that included any of a list of mutual aid related words. This list included “ mutual aid OR donate OR gofundme.com OR fund OR gofund.me OR donation OR collective OR food bank,” words that I chose because, aside from gofundme, they showed up as related topics on Google Trends, meaning that those who searched for mutual aid also searched for these words. Gofundme was added as it has been a popular tool for crowdfunding both before and after the onset of pandemic conditions.

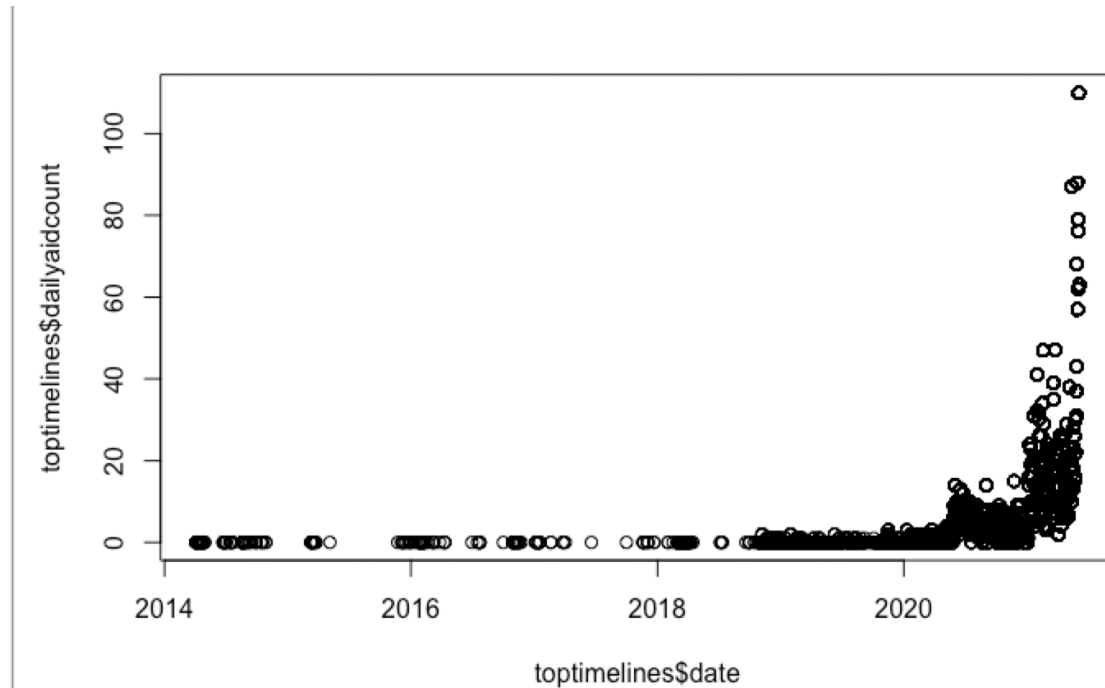
After gathering these tweets, I examined the top words used to find that the top keywords included the following: unemployed, rent, trans, woman, necessities, restraining order and violence.



This highlights the manner in which mutual aid 1) addresses urgent needs directly, further emphasizing its efficiency in the face of uncertainty and calamity and 2) how it allows the most marginalized to finally be included in the conversation. For instance, the inclusion of “trans” folk, who are typically excluded from conversation and disproportionately left to deal with uncertainty and financial insecurity, shows a clear push to make up for governmental shortcomings with marginalized groups especially. Furthermore, the needs being met are essential: violence and rent for instance highlight the impact that mutual aid has as these aren’t frivolous desires but essential needs that community members are ensuring for others.

Finally this data was supported by another interrupted time series analysis. With the creation of a daily aid word count variable I was able to calculate the number of tweets from these top timelines each day that includes one of the signal aid words. Similarly to the google trends data we find that these sorts of tweets have seen a drastic uptick since the start of 2020, an added sign that the year posed a catalyst for increased communal participation as measured by

mutual aid engagement.



Conclusion:

As we begin to return to some sense of normalcy with increased vaccination numbers and reduced restrictions around gatherings, it is hope inducing to find that in the face so much trauma community members were able to rally together to play their part in making sure basic needs were met. While previously discussed research shows that people very well could've resorted to higher levels of conservatism in the midst of such circumstances, my research highlights that many did the opposite, and used the time to learn how to best support community members in ways that have historically been criminalized like with the Black Panther Party.

