

## **Karlsruhe's 'giving fences': mobilisation for the needy in times of COVID-19**

**Michael C. Zeller, 20 April 2020**

### **Abstract**

*Protective measures against the spread of COVID-19 have placed strains on many segments of society, but perhaps homeless and impoverished people most of all. In Karlsruhe (Germany), a form of collective action has emerged to help provide for needy individuals while their normal support structures are unavailable: 'giving fences.' This article reviews this practice and considers its qualities and defects. The giving fences are a promising example of solidary collective action, providing considerable advantages to participants and beneficiaries. Its shortcomings, however, emphasise the importance of resuming institutionalised social service provision as soon as emergency conditions are relaxed.*

**Keywords:** COVID-19; homelessness; collective action; expectancy-value theory; digital mobilisation; solidarity

The outbreak of COVID-19 and activation of protective measures in Germany has introduced unique restrictions on public life. For many, these restrictions are fairly minor inconveniences or annoyances; for others, for those living at mere subsistence levels in normal circumstances, the consequences of COVID-19 are a serious threat to survival. In many instances, essential service providers to homeless and needy individuals have been forced to suspend operations.

In the German city of Karlsruhe, these unprecedented circumstances have indeed caused many charitable organisations to close temporarily or to reduce operations. Yet several residents in Karlsruhe have responded to this emergency by organising food and supply drop-offs. These 'giving fences'—a term derived from the location (fences) and legal context (which makes an important distinction between 'gifts' and 'donations') surrounding the practices—are a form of solidary collective action that provide sustenance to Karlsruhe's homeless and needy.

This article reviews this practice. The following section presents the context in which the 'giving fences' emerged, including the typical support available to needy individuals and the challenges presented by COVID-19. Then, it presents the practice and its qualities and defects. The article concludes by discussing the prospects of the practice and outlook for service provision to the needy after the COVID-19 emergency conditions abate.

## **Social welfare in Karlsruhe and the onset of COVID-19**

Karlsruhe is a medium-sized city located on the western edge of Baden-Württemberg in southwest Germany. Baden-Württemberg is economically prosperous and, vis-à-vis other German states, has low levels of poverty, welfare scheme enrolment, and homelessness. Nevertheless, these issues do manifest, particularly in the region's largest cities, Stuttgart and Karlsruhe.

Germany's welfare system has ample provisions for people who are homeless or struggling economically. Unemployment benefit (*Arbeitslosengeld*), basic security benefit (*Grundsicherung*), social benefit (*Sozialgeld*), and housing benefit (*Wohngeld*) are the most common sources of financial support from the state. There are, moreover, dense and stable networks of philanthropic institutions in Karlsruhe that support people in need: the 'Worker's Welfare' (*Arbeiterwohlfahrt*, AWO) charity, Catholic Caritas missions, and Evangelical diaconal ('*Diakonie Deutschland*') missions operate or supply short- and long-term housing facilities throughout the city. Donations from restaurants, grocery stores, and private individuals sustain numerous food distribution centres. Clothing depots at a handful of central locations give individuals a place to get garments suitable to the weather, especially during winter months. Taken together, the support and services provided to the needy in Karlsruhe<sup>1</sup> are considerable and do much to alleviate the extremities of homelessness and poverty.

Crucially, however, there are not many redundancies within these support networks. They often work to capacity, and without them people in need may have no alternative source of help. The onset of COVID-19 in Karlsruhe has compelled some parts of this network to shutdown.

## **COVID-19 in Karlsruhe**

The southern states of Baden-Württemberg and Bavaria—as well as North-Rhine Westphalia—have been hardest hit by the COVID-19 outbreak in Germany.<sup>2</sup> Proximity to particularly stricken regions like northern Italy, Tirol in Austria, and Alsace in France presumably influenced the high number of infections. By the middle of March the total number of confirmed cases in Germany numbered several thousands, which prompted the German government to move from 'containment' to the 'protection' stage of its strategy (Robert Koch Institut 2020a, 13). This entailed, first, the closure of schools and daycare centres (13 March), and subsequently several restrictions on public spaces, including prohibitions against gatherings of more than two people, the closure of restaurants and businesses, and general guidance to avoid leaving one's residence (21 March) (Deutsche Presse-Agentur 2020b). In a nationally televised address on 18 March, Chancellor Angela Merkel declared that 'since

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<sup>1</sup> Catalogued online in several online resources (e.g., Ruf (2020)).

<sup>2</sup> The first case recorded in Germany was in Munich in late January (Deutsche Presse-Agentur 2020a).

the Second World War, no challenge in our country has demanded more of our collective solidary action' (Merkel 2020).

The first recorded cases of COVID-19 infections in Karlsruhe appeared on 6 March. Insofar as testing reveals it, the spread of COVID-19 has not taken on the sort of geometric growth witnessed in more severely affected places; as of mid-April there were just over 300 cases and only four confirmed fatalities.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, the containment and protection measures enacted nationally and regionally apply in Karlsruhe like everywhere else: restaurants and businesses are closed or operating at reduced capacity, social services are restricted to operations deemed 'essential,' and individuals are encouraged to remain at home as much as possible.

These restrictions to public life have diminished the resources upon which many homeless and impoverished people rely. A food bank in West Karlsruhe, for example, closed their ordinary distribution service on 16 March. Though the service later made arrangements for a fixed number of pre-prepared meals that could be collected, this provision (72 meals) is smaller than usual and available for shorter periods on fewer days of the week. Yet the fact that this service has continued in any form is exceptional. Other providers, often reliant on supply chains that have gone into abeyance or volunteers that feel compelled to stay home,<sup>4</sup> have had to suspend operations. Perhaps most disturbing of all: the short- and medium-term economic impact of COVID-19 may result in a contraction in funding for welfare and social services, whether through reduced state expenditure or fewer private donations. Apart from the direct health risks, COVID-19's secondary and tertiary effects pose a serious threat to economically struggling people in Karlsruhe and around the world.

### **'Giving fences': digital mobilisation for Karlsruhe's needy**

On 24 March, a group page called '100% Karlsruhe helps the homeless and needy' (*100% Karlsruhe hilft den Obdachlosen und Armen*) appeared on Facebook. The creator, a 36-year old Karlsruhe resident using 'Loco Dias' ('crazy days') as a nom de guerre, announced his intention to improvise a food and supply station for the needy near a local railway station. Crates of food and hygiene supplies were arrayed along a low fence beneath an overpass—free to any who came to collect and superintended by 'Loco Dias' himself. Within the space of a couple of days the group page had upwards of 100 members and had attracted a handful of participants to act as administrators (i.e., taking on core organising duties). In less than three weeks, the group had well over 1000 members and the practice had developed from a *random* collection of spare food, hygiene products, and clothes for a dozen needy persons to more regular

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<sup>3</sup> For up-to-date figures, see the Robert Koch Institute's COVID-19-Dashboard (Robert Koch Institut 2020b).

<sup>4</sup> Many soup kitchens are staffed by elderly volunteers, who are particularly at-risk from COVID-19. Soup kitchens, moreover, have not been allowed to take on new volunteers during the crisis.

provision of meals, distribution of vouchers for use at local groceries, and even delivery of supplies to more than 80 people per day.

This emergent practice unfolded in a thick legal structure. In German law, the term 'donations' (*Spende*) has specific legal usages, which generally imply liability. Since the '100% Karlsruhe' group page scarcely constitutes a legally-recognised entity—let alone one capable of assuming liability—the activists clarified on signs posted on the fence that only 'gifts' (*Gaben*, a less legally restricting term) are accepted, and referred to their project as the 'giving fence' (*Gabenzaun*).<sup>5</sup> This terminological choice, however, is not the end of legal issues for this practice: '100% Karlsruhe' did not have a permit for their activity.<sup>6</sup> German law has longstanding and all-encompassing permitting requirements for activity in public spaces; yet the protection measures against COVID-19 caused municipal registrar offices to close, leaving no possibility for legally permitted public activity. Police inquired with Loco Dias, but were content to allow the giving fence to continue as long as social distancing measures were observed (Rastätter 2020). This signaled an open opportunity for this and other giving practices—but it is a legally tenuous opportunity which leaves much to police discretion (Betsch 2020).

Members of the group page came from various areas of Karlsruhe; that fact and recognition of the limited mobility of homeless and needy persons led the '100% Karlsruhe' group to establish other giving fences: in less than a week the group had initiated three other sites, and four more in the week after that. The group also spurred on others: in West Karlsruhe a group ('Karlsruhe West helps the needy', *Karlsruhe West Hilft Bedürftigen*) set up a 'giving wall' (*Gabenwand*) in an underpass; in the nearby city of Pforzheim, too, a group started a giving fence (Scharfe 2020). These practices and the not inconsiderable mobilisation of activists and resources that they require have continued and grown for several weeks.

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<sup>5</sup> Admittedly, this distinction is not observed in several comments and exchanges on the '100% Karlsruhe' group page, where commenters often refer to 'donations'—but it is present in all the practice site's signage.

<sup>6</sup> Indeed, when interviewed 'Loco Dias' declined to give his real name to ensure that the action, the giving fence, remains the focal point, but also because the activity was, strictly speaking, not legal (Rastätter 2020).



*'Giving wall' in West Karlsruhe. The text reads, 'Giving-wall for homeless and needy. Together instead of alone.'*

### **Practice benefits**

The mobilisation of participants in this practice seems commonly motivated by both a sense of potential efficacy—that this practice can achieve a desired effect (i.e., it can provide food and supplies for the needy)—and a value-based sympathy for a disadvantaged, marginalised group (Saab et al. 2014). It is, in other words, a case of solidary collective action. This motivational pairing supports the expectancy-value theory of collective action articulated by Klandermans (1997), Stekelenburg and Klandermans (2013), and others—though not necessarily to the exclusion of other socio-psychological theories of collective action participation.

On the 'expectancy' side, wherein participants engage because of an expectation of efficacy, giving fences achieve a visible and emotively powerful effect. On many of the group pages there are pictures and videos of organisers distributing or delivering food and supplies to beneficiaries. While it is difficult to determine the proportion of local needy persons who have benefitted from the giving fences—both because statistics on homelessness and the socio-economically disadvantaged are scarce and because the COVID-19 crisis has likely enlarged

this group—recurrently witnessing several dozens of individuals collecting from a single giving fence over days and weeks bears out the practice's effect.

On the 'value' side, wherein participants derive benefits (moral self-esteem, a heartening sense of community, or even just useful preoccupation in circumstances where typical activities of work and leisure are not available) from their engagement, there are numerous daily posts on the organising group pages that express joy at the solidarity evinced in the giving fences and gratitude for the various contributors.

'[I] just hung something [on the fence]. People are super grateful and happy. I'm supposed to send along greetings and a big thank you' ('gabENZaun Pforzheim' page, 31 March 2020).<sup>7</sup>

'[I] was at the fence around 7 this morning to bring some things by - there were already several bags. Really great, I'm totally happy!' ('gabENZaun Pforzheim' page, 3 April 2020).<sup>8</sup>

'... Thanks to the many donors who provide us with supplies every day. Thanks go not only to the many companies, but especially to the many members of this group, who provide us with urgently needed food, fruits and vegetables, as well as hygiene products and other supplies. ... Even with the smallest donations, you are all guarantors that we can help many homeless and needy people through this difficult time' ('KA West hilft Bedürftigen, Lebensmittel Ausgabe Haltestelle Kühler Krug' page, 8 April 2020).<sup>9</sup>

'Good morning everyone! Just thank you to everyone who brings something, who has a kind word for us and who helps make life a little easier for those in need' ('100% Karlsruhe hilft den Obdachlosen und Armen' page, 19 April 2020).<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> In original: "Habe gerade was angehängt. Die Leute sind super dankbar und freuen sich. Ich soll liebe Grüße und ein herzliches Danke ausrichten"

<sup>8</sup> In original: "war heute morgen gegen 7 am zaun um ein paar sachen vorbeizubringen - da hingen schon mehrere beutel. echt super, freut mich total!"

<sup>9</sup> In original: "... Danke an die vielen Spender, die uns Tag für Tag mit Nachschub versorgen. Der Dank geht nicht nur an die vielen Firmen, sondern ganz speziell an die vielen Mitglieder dieser Gruppe, die uns täglich mit dringend benötigten Lebensmitteln, Obst und Gemüse, sowie Hygieneartikeln u.s.w. versorgen. ... Ihr alle seid auch mit noch so kleinen Spenden Garanten dafür, daß wir vielen Obdachlosen und Hilfebedürftigen über diese schwere Zeit hinweghelfen konnten."

<sup>10</sup> In original: "Guten Morgen an alle! Einfach mal lieben Dank an alle, die etwas vorbeibringen, die ein liebes Wort für uns haben und die helfen, den Bedürftigen das Leben ein wenig zu erleichtern."

An unmistakable impression emerges from such comments and informal conversations with participants of a clear constellation of psychological benefits from engagement with the giving fences. First, during crisis circumstances that are likely to impart feelings of helplessness and paralysis, there is a sense of purpose and of contribution expressed; to be sure, some of this benefit is attributable just to empowering participants to get out of the house (no mean feat given the pressures to remain at home). Then, witnessing the engagement of others and the response of beneficiaries can engender faith in community, which also mitigates the deleterious impact of social isolation.

In sum, the giving fences are a practice that, so to say, keep on giving. Beneficiaries and participants alike derive clearly recognisable rewards. However, it should be noted that the advantages of this practice are not unalloyed. In fact, the struggles and shortcomings of the giving fences are largely by-products of the stopgap motivations that gave rise to them, thereby underscoring the importance of resuming institutionalised social service provision as soon as emergency conditions are relaxed.

### **Practice problems**

Though no problems have arisen from their legal status, giving fences in and around Karlsruhe have nevertheless encountered several challenges. The most serious of these stem from the use, or rather 'misuse,' of the service. In every group page there are reports or speculation of people who are not really needy taking from the giving fences. With remarkable regularity, participants on group pages use the metaphor of 'black sheep' (*schwarze Schaf*) to refer to such individuals. The black sheep problem is essentially an issue of verification: the normally operating institutions for homeless and needy persons in Karlsruhe have established procedures to ensure that services go to those truly in need. For example, Karlsruher Tafel e.V. (that is, 'Karlsruhe Table registered Association')—which has reduced operations due to COVID-19 prevention measures—provides free and low-cost groceries, but to access the service individuals must obtain an 'authorisation card' (*Berechtigungsausweis*) by showing a personal ID and confirmation that they receive some form of state welfare (Karlsruhe Tafel e.V. 2020); Karlsruhe's Caritas branches employ a similar verification procedure (Caritasverband Karlsruhe e.V. 2020). But the giving fences do not have sufficient resources to institute these procedures. Besides, many group members flatly dismiss the idea of using such a procedure, at least partially because the notion of eyeballing someone's state benefit confirmation at the side of a road or in an underpass is a grim prospect. Yet posts about people with new smartphones or nice bikes and backpacks taking from the fences evince a suspicion about the efficacy, or at least efficiency, of the practice.

In several instances, the black sheep problem has a pointedly ethnic facet: at the giving wall in West Karlsruhe a participant posted that he had asked a beneficiary who was taking a large amount of food and supplies whether that

was necessary and found that the beneficiary could hardly speak German. The participant's emphasis on this detail triggered a tense exchange about 'latent racism,' which eventually prompted one of the group administrators to disable comments on that post. A participant in Pforzheim, conferring with beneficiaries, was informed that Russian individuals were collecting all the food and supplies, and even threatening others—though the participant noted that this did not necessarily mean they were not in need. It could be that some people who do not need help are misusing the giving fences; it could be that some needy persons are over-using it, which evidently disappoints participants who feel that some beneficiaries' behaviour does not reflect the solidarity (and other values) they are acting upon. This, in turn, can trigger demobilising pressures of 'lost commitment' and 'membership loss' (Davenport 2015, 35–36), depriving the collective action of essential resources.

Core participants initiated conversations about how to deal with the black sheep problem. At the giving wall in West Karlsruhe, for instance, one of the group administrators wrote,

'It had already bothered me and annoyed me. Skin colour doesn't matter for me. I don't want to read that here anymore! How can we control the whole thing better? Post guards? Also stupid, camera? Stupid ... or just hope that some who badly need [help] get enough. Or should we abandon [the giving wall] entirely so that nobody gets anything anymore since there will always be people who take advantage of things? Think about it please' ('KA West hilft Bedürftigen, Lebensmittel Ausgabe Haltestelle Kühler Krug' page, 3 April 2020).<sup>11</sup>

With such interventions, participants combat the internal demobilising pressures caused by doubts about the efficacy of their action. They engage in what Davenport (2015, 43–47) terms 'reappraisal' and 'trust-building.'<sup>12</sup> In the cases of the giving fences, reappraisal denotes reconsideration and alterations arising from efficacy concerns, while trust-building refers not only to exchanges and interactions between activists—strengthening intra-group bonds—but also repeated endorsement of the notion that the practice is worthwhile so long as some of the food and supplies are getting to people who genuinely need it.

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<sup>11</sup> In original: "Es war mir auch schon aufgestoßen und hat mich geärgert. Die Hautfarbe spielt da für mich keine Rolle. Das möchte ich hier nicht mehr lesen! Wie können wir aber nun das ganze vielleicht besser kontrollieren? Wachen abstellen? Auch doof, kamera? Doof...oder hoffen das einige die es dringend brauchen genug bekommen. Oder sollen wir es ganz lassen damit niemand mehr was bekommt, da es nun Mal immer Menschen geben wird, die Dinge ausnutzen? Denkt Mal drüber nach bitte."

<sup>12</sup> Davenport theorises about the demobilisation of social movement organisations (SMOs) based on induction from a case study of antagonistic dyadic interaction between a SMO and the state. However, his theorisation of demobilisation is generalisable to many other forms of SMOs and collective action.



In all cases, some of the most active participants put forward optimistic perspectives on the black sheep problem, attempting to dispel efficacy concerns. One ruminated on the 'gift' terminology that the legal opportunity structure imposed on the practice:

'I think if you give a gift it is given away. I hope and then trust that it provides a benefit, but there are always black sheep, no matter where. That is annoying, of course, but as soon as I have given something away, passed it out of my hands, it is beyond my authority. Strange if someone then comes and takes it away, but that's the way it is. And I think—that is where I start from—it is not easy to take something from a fence if there is no good reason. So maybe respond [to someone behaving suspiciously]. But don't let it annoy me or mess up my day when I cannot change it' ('KA West hilft Bedürftigen, Lebensmittel Ausgabe Haltestelle Kühler Krug' page, 3 April 2020).<sup>13</sup>

Others downplayed the black sheep problem:

'We don't want to judge [who is *really* needy] and hope that those who really need it will take it. Black sheep are everywhere - but if, of the 100%, 25% are black sheep, then we are happy about the other 75%' ('gabENZAun Pforzheim' page, 4 April 2020).<sup>14</sup>

Some are even more forceful about imposing this sort of perspective as the basis for participation:

'Hello to all helpers. This group is all about love and humanity. Something like [the misuse] described above can happen. If someone is convinced that he or she needs blankets and food, please help yourself. You don't have to be homeless and have signs of decomposition to be in need. We want to reach everyone. And in the event that it was unjust, their karma should take care of it. However, please continue with your good deeds. Don't scold anyone. You are great people, so we

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<sup>13</sup> In original: "ich finde wenn man eine Gabe abgibt ist es verschenkt. Ich hoffe und vertraue dann darauf das es beim richtigen ankommt, aber schwarze Schaf gibt es immer, egal wo. Das ist natürlich ärgerlich, aber sobald ich etwas verschenkt habe, in dem Fall abgelegt, entzieht es sich meinem befragen darüber. Doof wenn man dann sowas mit bekommt, aber ist halt so. Und ich denke- da gehe ich von mir aus- es fällt nicht leicht an einem Gabenzaun was mit zu nehmen wenn es keinen triftigen Grund hat. Ansprechen ja eventuell. Mich ärgern nein, versaut mir den Tag und ändern kann man es nicht."

<sup>14</sup> In original: "Wir wollen das nicht beurteilen und hoffen darauf, dass es sich diejenigen nehmen, welche es auch wirklich brauchen. Schwarze Schafe gibt es überall - aber wenn von den 100%, 25% schwarze Schafe sind, dann freuen wir uns doch über die anderen 75%."

will continue with that. The comment function is hereby switched off ('100% Karlsruhe hilft den Obdachlosen und Armen' page, 29 March 2020).<sup>15</sup>

In their conversations, participants (particularly core organisers) in the giving fences ultimately affirm the view that the food and supplies will at least reach some who need it; they adopt an approach of trust—but the desire to 'verify' is plainly there.

One other challenge deserves mention: the giving fences can be absorbing, demanding considerable commitment and active involvement—especially from core organisers and especially after black sheep problems prompt participants to adopt more demanding procedures (Witke 2020). As ever, when collective action demands such intense engagement there is a danger of 'burnout' or 'exhaustion' (Davenport 2015, 32–33; Gorski, Lopresti-Goodman, and Rising 2018). Demands on participants have been dealt with by a habitual readiness to ask for help and to share around administrative responsibilities, but the longer the collective action continues, the more likely are the exertions of participation to induce burnout.

## **Outlook**

The giving fences are a promising practice and well suited to the exigencies of the COVID-19 emergency measures in Germany. Its benefits are modest in scope, but certainly meaningful among direct beneficiaries and participants: cumulatively over the whole municipal area, probably a few hundred homeless and needy individuals take succour from the giving fences; and participants clearly derive distinct psycho-social benefits from engagement, which can alleviate strains arising from the public health response to COVID-19.

All the giving fence group pages reveal struggles with inefficiency and efficacy concerns, and difficulties in establishing optimal arrangements for supply and distribution. This underscores a distinctive feature of collective action focused on service provision. Unlike other areas of collective action, in which institutionalisation (Tarrow 2011, 207–13) is sometimes viewed as the death knell of a movement, mobilisation that centres around service provision overwhelmingly benefits from the establishment of fixed institutions and regularised procedures. Institutionalisation facilitates more efficient provision of services and more constancy for beneficiaries. Some participants expressed a desire to continue the giving fences after the COVID-19 crisis abates—but this

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<sup>15</sup> In original: "Hallo an alle Helferinnen und Helfer. In dieser Gruppe geht es ausschließlich um Liebe und Menschlichkeit. Sowas wie oben beschrieben, kann passieren. Wenn jemand davon überzeugt ist, dass er oder sie decken und Lebensmittel notwendig hat, dann bitte bedient euch. Man muss nicht obdachlos und Verwesungs Anzeichen haben um bedürftig zu sein. Wir wollen alle erreichen. Und für den Fall das es doch ungerecht war soll sich deren karma darum kümmern. Ihr allerdings macht bitte mit euren guten taten weiter. Schimpft niemanden. Ihr seid tolle Menschen, also machen wir genau damit weiter. Kommentarfunktion wird hiermit abgeschaltet."

can almost certainly be attributed to the 'initial euphoria' (*Anfangseuphorie*) of engagement. The daily demands on participants, especially those most involved, are intense, which more than anything else suggests that the practice cannot be maintained in the long-term.

The giving fences are an encouraging manifestation of solidary collective action. Their inherent shortcomings underscore the importance of re-starting social work and service provision institutions as soon as COVID-19 protective measures are relaxed. The resumption of these normal operations may draw some individuals mobilised in the giving fence practices into established institutions. Understandably, the merged senses of ownership and accomplishment that some participants have for the giving fences are not lightly relinquished, but the extensive network of welfare institutions in Karlsruhe and other German cities offer channels for participants to continue acting upon their values—and with greater efficacy.

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