

# Civic mobilisation around immigration detention: Exploring motivations and experiences

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## ABSTRACT

While there is a burgeoning literature critically mapping the spatial logics of immigration detention around the world, there is relatively little systematic research on geographies of resistance, particularly the role of ‘outsiders’ – members of the public with relatively secure status. This article considers how people mobilise around immigration detention in the UK to challenge the status quo. Drawing on qualitative interviews and survey research, it offers a fine-grained analysis of what nourishes civic mobilization, considering the concerns and positionalities of volunteers. It examines their experiences of taking action, visiting detention centres or campaigning for change, highlighting rewards and challenges. Probing divergences as well as convergences in people’s approaches to the issue, a picture is built up of a vibrant detention movement working across multiple spaces and scales against government efforts to isolate, contain and exclude ‘unwanted’ migrants. How this civic mobilization challenges moral distance and political closure offers a fresh insight to the geography of detention and study of pro-migrant mobilisation.

## 1. Introduction

Governments across Europe and North America have engaged in increasingly restrictive immigration policy in recent years. A series of measures aiming at containing and disciplining mobility previously used primarily in times of war and crisis – detention, deportation and dispersal – have become increasingly normalized as ‘commonsense’ aspects of immigration control (Bloch and Schuster, 2005; Gill, 2016). At the same time, we have seen a surge in pro-migrant civic mobilization by citizens (García Agustín and Jørgensen, 2016).<sup>1</sup>

Focusing particularly on detention, a burgeoning geographical literature calls our attention the spatial and temporal logics and the play of power within these systems (for overviews see Mountz et al., 2013; Gill et al., 2018). Yet, while often acknowledging the existence of complex forms of resistance within and outside detention centres, it has been slower to engage in detailed analysis of what nourishes this resistance, particularly by ‘outsiders’ to the system, and how it plays out.

This article contributes a fine-grained analysis of the motivations and experiences of detention volunteers in the UK context. Section 2 contextualizes the analysis within the study of the geography of detention and volunteering and social movements, and outlines the research methods. Section 3 explores how detention is articulated as a cause for concern by volunteers and the socio-spatial positionalities

involved. Section 4 explores how people attempt to ‘make a difference’ through organized action, by visiting detention centres and campaigning for change, illuminating the rewards and challenges involved. Convergences and divergences, tensions and complementarities are identified throughout. A picture is built up of a vibrant detention movement working across multiple spaces and scales against government efforts to isolate, contain and exclude ‘unwanted’ migrants. The concluding remarks explore how this mobilization challenges moral distance and political closure.

## 2. Geographies of detention and civic mobilization

The media furore over child detention in the US has occurred against a global backdrop where detaining migrants is increasingly seen as ‘an essential, everyday facet of immigration control’ (Silverman, 2012, p. 1132). Against the ‘sometimes awkward intellectual boxing-up of carceral systems’ (Gill et al., 2018, p. 197), geographers have probed connections between detention and wider societal dynamics and scales.

Detention is part of a series of developments in which spaces of immigration control are diversifying away from the territorial border, through extra-territorial processing mechanisms and internal hostile environment policies that deepen the marginalization of ‘unwanted’ migrants (Martin, 2015). A growing global phenomenon, the practice of

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<sup>1</sup> Of course, categories of migrant and citizen are not as clear-cut as often depicted. Experiences of (non)citizenship are relational, multidimensional, and intersect with other axes of difference/similarity which are also important in people’s experiences, such as socio-economic status, gender, and ethnicity (Anderson, 2013).

detaining migrants is ‘intensified by the growth of related global industries and policies that become enmeshed in distinct geopolitical landscapes’ (Mountz et al., 2013, p. 523). Detention has been conceptualized as a set of spatial strategies through which governments discipline migrant mobility, which ‘anchors and reproduces geopolitical, raced, classed, and gendered borders, while simultaneously distinguishing between citizens and groups with fewer or no rights.’ (Mountz et al., 2013, p. 531). While the walls and fences of the detention facility are the most obvious manifestation of containment and disciplinary power, these also extend inwards and outwards in important ways (Martin, 2015).

Internally, detention centres regiment the routines and control the activities of those they confine (Conlon and Hiemstra, 2017). While there are differences in the UK between detention centres and prisons (where immigration detainees may also in fact be held for extended periods) there are also important similarities. People are subject to persistent surveillance; confined to their cells for periods of the day; access to internet is restricted; visits are restricted; ‘privileges’ such as access to social and library spaces may be withheld; segregation is controversially deployed to ‘manage’ those identified as vulnerable, mentally unwell or troublesome; transfers to other detention centres are used officially to manage local demands or provide more secure accommodation, and may break up supportive relationships and activism (e.g. Bosworth, 2014; Medical Justice, 2015). These mechanisms exert internal control, with many wary of communication with others in detention and carefully regulating their behavior to avoid trouble.

Externally, detention centres are often located on islands or in remote areas, physical distance reinforcing the isolation of the people within from communities and support networks (Mountz et al., 2013). The UK’s detention facilities are in fact not as obviously physically remote as many in other countries – most of the ten immigration removal centres at the time of writing are located by air or sea ports or on the edges of industrial parks.<sup>2</sup> But they are often inconspicuous in design, ‘hiding’ in wider nondescript landscapes, and away from urban concentrations of migrants, often hard to reach for friends and relatives of those held inside. This can be reinforced by criminalizing dimension of incarceration: the shock and shame that some people experience at finding themselves on ‘the wrong side of the system’ can mean that they do not share news of their detention or discourage friends and family from visiting (Griffiths, 2017). If subsequently released, people must often move a long distance away to access public ‘dispersal’ accommodation (they are generally forbidden to work). Meanwhile, the detention estate also casts a long shadow into society – in tune with the notion of a carceral continuum: fear of confinement and deportation pushes migrants into deeper precarity; and the legal concept of ‘immigration bail’ now extends to all people whose right to live in the UK is being questioned by the government, whether or not they may be lawfully detained, restricting liberty through reporting, residence, activity or electronic monitoring restrictions (McGregor, 2011; Yeo, 2018; cf. Martin, 2015).

At the same time as containing and disciplining migrants, detention centres are not total institutions; like other loci of migration governmentality, they are also the scene of interaction and resistance (Bosworth, 2014). Within detention centres, research has illuminated the complex nature of day-to-day relationships between detainees and security staff (Bosworth, 2014; Hall, 2012; Gill, 2016). It has also explored how detainees experience daily life and how they engage in collective organization and protest, including occupations and hunger strikes (Bosworth, 2014; McGregor, 2011). People detained also interact in various ways with ‘people from outside’ (friends and family members, ministers of religion, medical practitioners, lawyers, NGO workers, and volunteers and activists). In a context where detention functions not only to contain but also to *exclude* migrants from wider

society, based on arguments about the ‘riskiness’ of migrant populations (Bloch and Schuster, 2005), efforts to cross these boundaries are of particular interest. However, the involvements of outsiders, while often acknowledged in research on the geographies of detention (e.g. Mountz et al., 2013; Gill et al., 2018), but rarely analyzed in significant detail.

There is little systematic research on these questions in the UK context. Pertinent exceptions include analysis touching on organizational strategies challenging detention (e.g. Gill, 2016) and a collection of volunteer testimonies by the Association of Visitors to Immigration Detainees’ (AVID) (McGinley, 2014, see also Mann, 2015). Several factors militate against close analysis of volunteers’ motivations. The heavy problematization of migration politically tends to focus researchers’ attention on what migrants and policy-makers do, rather than what the rest of society does, overlooking the role of local people as actors in processes of migrant inclusion/exclusion. At a more practical level, migrant support organizations – particularly those dealing with people in detention – often operate with a sense of urgency and severe resource restriction that can make reflection on recruits’ motivations appear indulgent navel-gazing. Moreover, although the government sponsors research on volunteering in a quest to encourage active citizenship and the ‘Big Society’, it has no interest in celebrating or promoting activism around detention and deportation.

But this is precisely why this kind of analysis matters. The government claims to enact immigration controls in the public interest. Yet there is clearly a diversity of views (Silverman, 2012). Acquiring a more systematic understanding of what nourishes civic mobilization around migration and detention opens up alternative sets of values, positionalities, actions and experiences. Analysis of these not only contributes to a fuller understanding of the geographies of detention, but may also usefully inform efforts to challenge hostile immigration environments.

Thus, this article focuses on civic mobilization around immigration detention by ‘outsiders’ who have relatively secure status. This mobilization overlaps with other themes of social action, as we shall see, but it is possible to identify a reasonably well-defined detention ‘sector’. Organizational mapping revealed some 40 groups across the UK focusing on the issue of detention as a priority.<sup>3</sup> Levels of institutionalization vary: some are entirely volunteer-run, out of living rooms, community centres and student unions, but many are established charities with offices and paid staff. In terms of goals, some focus on supporting individual welfare by visiting detention centres (offering emotional and practical support), others on trying to change the detention system; many do a bit of both. Some would describe themselves as NGOs, others as networks, groups or a movement/campaign (cf. Eliasoph, 2013). Some of the people involved would describe themselves as volunteers, others as advocates or activists – for the sake of simplicity, in this article, all those giving unpaid time and energy to the various forms of organized action around detention are referred to as volunteers.

The research, carried out in 2015–16, with some follow-up in 2018, was deliberately micro-level, seeking people’s accounts of what motivates them, i.e. ‘the way people make sense of their own involvement’ (Rochester et al., 2010, p. 124), and how this connects with the wider organizational and political picture.<sup>4</sup> Twenty semi-structured interviews were carried out in the southeast of England, where the majority of detention centres were located, focusing on volunteers and co-ordinators with more than a couple of years of experience, from a variety of individual backgrounds and organisation types, and including some

<sup>3</sup> AVID estimated that its 20 organizations mobilize around 670 volunteer visitors (McGinley, 2014) but many other people are involved in campaigning: single demonstrations calling for particular detention centres to be shut down have attracted up to two thousand people (Townsend, 2016).

<sup>4</sup> Before and during the research, the researcher was sporadically involved in visiting a centre and civil society events. While not an ethnographic project, this first-hand experience helped frame survey and interview questions.

<sup>2</sup> Dungavel and Morton Hall are more isolated in rural areas.

who had stopped their involvement for various reasons. These conversations sought to tease out people's motivations and experiences. Interviews were recorded and transcribed, and NVivo was used to code according to themes generated from the literature and research questions, as well as additional themes arising in the course of analysis.

This was complimented by an online survey of people who had given time to support people detained during the previous 12 months. The link was circulated via a popular sector blog and directly via the mapped organizations. Analysis here focuses on the 132 respondents volunteering time with a group or organisation. The sample is thus not representative but can be taken as broadly indicative; respondents had a profile very similar to coordinators' accounts and AVID's survey (McGinley, 2014). Survey data were analyzed using SPSS, and findings were compared where possible with the Community Life Survey 2014–15, a nationally representative survey which includes questions on volunteering (Cabinet Office, 2015).

### 3. Concern

While the strategies and the impact of pro-migrant civic mobilizations are generating considerable interest, as are broader patterns of public opinion around migration, there is still relatively little systematic analysis of how people with relatively secure status come to mobilize around immigration issues (García Agustín and Jørgensen, 2016). Conceptual literature on volunteering and social movements suggests that to understand what nourishes civic mobilization we need to unpack how people identify a *cause for concern* and *opportunities for meaningful action* (Rochester et al., 2010; Goodwin and Jasper, 2015).

In terms of cause for concern, the vast majority of survey respondents (98%) were motivated by the 'desire to help people in a difficult situation'. This is hardly surprising. What is more interesting to explore is what participants find concerning about the situation of people in detention, and why they were drawn to take action. Civic mobilization is based on some sort of *cause for concern*: the identification of a need to defend or promote worthwhile values which people care about and judge important; for example, alleviation of human suffering, rights and justice, participation and cooperation, and so on (Rochester et al., 2010). There are a range of arguments articulated for and against detention (Silverman, 2012). So the analysis below first engages with the landscape of values invoked in volunteers' accounts of why they got (and continued to be) involved: what, in their minds, is the problem with detention?

But analysis of what mobilizes people needs to extend beyond abstract values and arguments. Volunteering corresponds to fundamental human psychological needs (to acquire an understanding of the world; to act on and express values; and to protect the self) (Rochester et al., 2010), which are situated in specific social realities. It is important to explore the nature of volunteers' 'ethical encounter' (i.e. how people's sense of 'moral distance' collapses, pushing them to take action) with detention (Levinas, 1979 in Gill, 2016). Their backgrounds, beliefs, dispositions and connections may play an important role. As Malkii found in her investigation of 'the need to help' among Finnish humanitarian workers:

[It] is not as generic "global citizens"... but as specific social persons with homegrown needs, vulnerabilities, desires, and multiple professional responsibilities that people sought to be part of something greater than themselves, to help, to be actors in the lively world. And they found their own, sometimes quite idiosyncratic, ways of doing so at different stages and circumstances in their lives.' (2015, p. 4).

Thus, the second part of this section looks at how personal factors bear on patterns of civic mobilization. At a practical level, there is the question of biographical availability, which describes the absence of constraints and responsibilities in daily life (work, family, et cetera) that may deter or prevent involvement in social action (Goodwin and

Jasper, 2015). But the analysis also explores how a range of other personal characteristics inform volunteers' engagement.

#### 3.1. An anatomy of injustice and suffering

Many research participants experienced first learning about detention – through a public meeting, media, or social contacts – as a very striking 'ethical encounter', creating a strong sense of duty and search for opportunities to act (cf. Gill, 2016). The most prominent emotions in people's accounts of early involvement were a potent combination of disbelief, outrage and curiosity spurring them to action. For example:

I just remember having to get my head round – these people had not committed a crime, they were kept in a prison... they could be kept for years! ... at the time it didn't have massive media coverage... it was so... kind of secret...

The quote above flags key spatio-temporal features of detention, which were prominent among the concerns of research participants. One focus was on the injustice of *administrative* detention. If someone does not have permission to reside in the UK, the official response is supposed to be removal or regularisation. But people may be detained by immigration officers on administrative grounds in order to control unauthorised entry, or with a view to removal (which can be after years living in the UK). Although incarceration creates a strong association with criminality, in fact detainees have, as many interviewees put it, 'not done anything wrong'.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, in sharp contrast with the more substantial safeguards around deprivation of liberty for other purposes (in criminal justice, mental health and terrorism), there is limited judicial oversight of immigration detention and no requirement for legal representation. Bloch and Schuster (2005: 497) point out that although administrative internment of migrants has a 'history almost as long as that of the state', and is permitted under certain circumstances in international law, it was historically associated with times of war and its aftermath, or domestic crisis. However, the UK government has insisted over the last couple of decades that it is a 'regrettable but necessary' measure to control migration (Silverman, 2012, p. 1132). Many volunteers pushed back against this normalization, arguing - that spatial confinement should be reserved for criminal justice and is not an appropriate response to mobility.

Concern about the use of detention for administrative reasons was compounded by more *temporal* issues. In terms of frequency, policy guidance states that detention should be used 'sparingly', yet some 30,000 people are detained annually; volunteers often come across instances of re-detention, although official data is not available. In terms of duration of detention, policy guidance states that 'for the shortest period necessary', yet volunteers meet people who have been detained many months or even years. This is allowed because there is still no statutory time limit, which means that people live in 'temporal anguish', fearing simultaneously 'that detention will continue forever and also that it will end in unexpected deportation the next morning' (Griffiths, 2014, p. 2005). Most participants viewed the indefinite nature of detention as a major injustice. The salience of the issue is partly a reflection of organisational framings, with strong NGO advocacy for a time limit (see Section 4.2).

A third concern was that detention, on the terms outlined above, creates significant human suffering. In 2017 alone, there were 11 deaths in immigration detention, almost all self-inflicted (Taylor, 2018). Participants had heard of or met people in detention who would generally be expected to merit more consideration and for whom detention is often particularly traumatizing (for instance, survivors of

<sup>5</sup> If they did commit a crime in the past, they have served their sentence prior to transfer to immigration detention. Note that the proliferation of immigration crimes since 2014 also means that a growing number non-citizens fall foul of the criminal justice system at some point.

torture, rape and trafficking; people with serious mental health problems) and people whose detention had wreaked havoc on their mental or physical health or broke up their family (cf. Shaw, 2016). Some participants also talked about the long-term psycho-social legacy of detention (cf. McGregor, 2011). They relayed numerous accounts of severe suffering and what is striking is that these not only relate to the difficulties people may have had *before* reaching the UK, but also clearly identified the way that detention can instigate fresh trauma, and have consequences that may persist even *after* release and grants of leave to remain.

A fourth concern focused on the functional formalities of detention – how policy is implemented. Visitors emphasized inconsistencies between official guidance and what they observed occurring in detention centres, in terms of medical checks and care, access to legal redress, and so on. While officially detention centres are connected to removal (hence their re-designation in 2001 as ‘removal centres’ in official parlance, Bosworth, 2014), people often pointed to the well-circulated fact that over half of those leaving detention centres are actually released, not removed, which clearly raises questions about the quality of detention decision-making. Participants also commented on the irony that those detained longest are often ‘unreturnable’ (e.g. because they are stateless; refused travel documentation by the country of return; or their human rights would be breached significantly by return). Ellerman (2006) has highlighted how, faced with these kinds of facts about how immigration bureaucracy actually works and its human costs, even members of the public who tend to support restrictive policy often shift towards a more sympathetic stance. It can be hard to determine to what extent it is the rules themselves or the government’s interpretation of them that is the problem: the legal framework governing detention is notoriously vague on key points and strategic litigation abounds, intimating a lack of fair play.

Finally, for many participants, this perceived lack of fair play was also occurring within wider frames, reflecting a process of ‘connecting the dots’ between a specific field of concern and broader features of politics and society (Eliasoph, 2013). The immigration regime more generally came in for considerable criticism. As one experienced visitor, discussing people detained for working without state authorization, put it:

[A]ny of us can get into that situation... what on paper in the Daily Mail might look a huge list of terrible sins... you speak to someone about how they ended up working illegally, and you think I would have done all of those things.

Many participants commented on a generalised culture of bureaucratic incredulity in the immigration and asylum system, and often went further to frame this as national hypocrisy:

Britain emphasises to the rest of the world that it’s all about human rights and criticises everywhere else. People... don’t expect detention. They don’t imagine that someone would reject their case on the most flippant basis.

Another observed, in an implicit critical commentary on ‘British values’: ‘I went into this [visiting detention centres] with the most naive imaginable view that – that – oh that Britannia was a true Lady, or something..... and have found otherwise... I am an idiot!’. Going further, several interviewees connected critique of the immigration regime with critique of the global system as a whole, emphasizing the structural inequalities and geopolitics that underlie international migration, raising questions about the international responsibilities of richer and former colonial countries like the UK.

Thus, participants invoked the themes of injustice and suffering across various scales and temporal frames. They varied in their emphases. Some were particularly preoccupied with the suffering the system engenders; others divergence between procedure and practice; others the liberties/rights dimensions; others contextualising the system within global structural inequality. More broadly, research has

highlighted diverse approaches and alliances within the landscape of pro-migrant mobilization, with humanitarian/charitable, rule of law/human rights, anti-racism, anti-austerity, feminist, trade unionist, and ‘no border’ perspectives being particularly strong influences (García Agustín and Jørgensen, 2016). These themes and nuances in volunteers’ concerns feed into and are informed by organisational framings of the problems to be addressed and action to be taken, as we shall see (cf. Goodwin and Jasper, 2015). As one commentary put it, ‘[W]ith so many different stakeholders involved for different reasons, it is inevitable that immigration detention [has] competing narratives’ (Ohtani and Allsopp, 2014).

Against this background, what conclusions did volunteers reach about the detention system as a whole? It is also important not to overlook the degree of ‘perplexity’ that people often experience, i.e. the questioning of basic assumptions that results from exposure to unsettling experiences (cf. Eliasoph, 2013, citing Jane Addams) – in the words of one detention visitor:

I don’t know whether it’s changed my political thinking... because I think immigration is such a hugely complex area... I just think the whole thing is very, very complicated and it sort of opened my eyes. (Quoted in McGinley, 2014: 54)

However, typically, this seems to consolidate over time, with people moving from a sense that the whole situation is complicated, towards a clearer analysis of what is the problem and what change is desirable. 86% of survey respondents agreed with the statement ‘Fewer people should be taken into immigration detention’. 67% agreed with the statement ‘The immigration detention system should be abolished’. Moreover, those disturbed by detention clearly link it to wider issues with the immigration regime: the vast majority of survey respondents favored more open approaches to immigration. This contrasts with opinion poll evidence suggesting that the majority of the UK public believe that immigration should be reduced (Blinder, 2011) but is consistent with evidence suggesting that encounters with the real human costs of immigration controls tend to unsettle restrictive preferences (Ellerman, 2006, p. 294). People’s personal positionality also filters views about migration and detention in important ways.

### 3.2. Exploring personal factors bearing on mobilization

As a starting point for exploring who gets involved and where their sense of purpose comes from, Table 1 compares the profile of survey respondents with national volunteer and general UK population data and Fig. 1 sets out broad data on survey respondents’ motivations.

At a practical level, the research bears out the relevance of biographical availability (Goodwin and Jasper, 2015). Detention volunteers are somewhat polarised in age: the majority of survey respondents were under 35 (38%) or over 65 (27%), which is consistent with coordinators’ observations. They were generally somewhat younger than the national volunteer sample, which may reflect the role of universities. A smaller proportion of detention volunteers were aged 35–64 than in the national volunteer sample, possibly because in these middle years volunteers tend to engage in volunteering around schools, sports and community centres more easily integrated into family routines (Rochester et al., 2010). The proportion of detention volunteers of retirement age matched the profile of volunteers nationally. Many interviewees were actively ‘looking for something to do’ with their spare time when they began volunteering, and accounts of the reasons people stopped often hinged on changing work or family situation (cf. Rochester et al., 2010). There are economic – direct and opportunity – costs associated with entering key spaces of engagement, i.e. visiting detention centres (although some groups are able to refund travel for visitors) and participating in demonstrations. Those mobilising generally seem to be relatively economically secure, although a somewhat lower proportion of survey respondents were in employment than in the national volunteer sample, probably due to their age profile.

**Table 1**  
Comparison of survey respondents with national volunteer/UK population data.

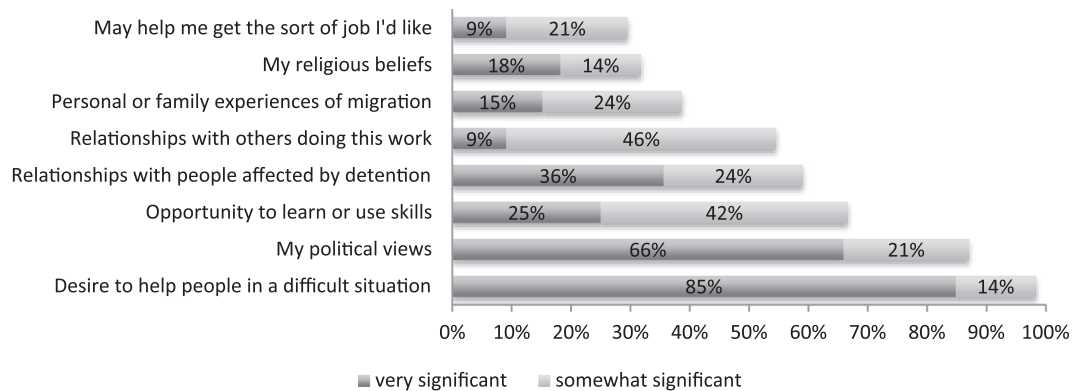
	Detention volunteers (1)	UK volunteers (2)	UK population (3)
<b>Gender</b>			
Female	74%	57%	51%
Male	26%	43%	49%
<b>Age</b>			
16–25	15%	9%	16%
26–34	23%	11%	16%
35–49	16%	27%	26%
50–64	19%	26%	22%
65 and over	27%	27%	20%
<b>Economic status</b>			
Employed	47%	59%	61%
<b>Education level</b>			
University/equivalent	94%	34%	27%
<b>Migration &amp; ethnicity</b>			
Born outside the UK	30%	–	13%
Black or minority ethnic	18%	9%	13%
<b>Political views</b>			
Left-of-centre	81%	–	29%
Don't know/prefer not to answer	10%	–	25%
<b>Religious beliefs</b>			
No religion	50%	25%	26%
Christian	30%	67%	60%
<b>Intensity of volunteering (hours during last 4 weeks)</b>			
< 10 h	50%	79%	–
10–19 h	27%	12%	–
20–39 h	12%	6%	–
> 40 h	11%	3%	–

(1) Survey sample. Very small missing values excluded  
 (2) Cabinet Office 2015 Community Life Survey.  
 (3) Census 2011 (except for Political Views, taken from YouGov, 2014). Note age categories approximate ± 1 year as bands do not align exactly with the other data sources. UK employed figure is for ages 16–74.

they do tend to have somewhat more diverse backgrounds than the general population. Nearly a third of survey respondents were born outside the UK (half in other EU countries, half outside) more than double the general population. 18% identified as black or minority ethnic, double the proportion of national volunteers, and somewhat higher than the general UK population. 16% were EU nationals, and 6% were third country nationals, who may be subject to immigration control themselves. Many had parents or grandparents born abroad or had lived abroad themselves. One might expect that these experiences facilitate one’s ability to put oneself mentally in the shoes of someone in detention – it is hardly surprising that personal migration experience/family heritage was reported relevant to the motivation of 39% of survey respondents; for 15% these experiences were very significant.

Detention volunteers also appear to have certain socio-economic advantages. Most do not live in poverty – they are also dramatically highly educated, the vast majority having a university level qualification, compared with around one third among volunteers nationally and slightly less in the UK population as a whole. They tend to be seen by supporters of the detention regime as an articulate and insulated segment of society: as one security officer bluntly put it, ‘It’s the middle class trying to screw us again’ (Hall, 2012, p. 128). It has been established that subjective perceptions regarding one’s own economic security are related to pro and anti-migrant attitudes and that opposition to migration is less strong among people with university degrees (Blinder, 2011).<sup>6</sup>

Thus, the indications are that many detention volunteers tend to be white, citizen, and relatively secure (although there is evidence of diversification of activism outside detention centres, which is discussed in Section 4.2). This prompted interesting reflections on the power relations involved in visiting and campaigning activities. Some interviewees talked self-consciously about feeling ‘white liberal guilt’, a ‘saviour complex’ or imagining themselves in a ‘rescuer’ role, reflecting how a sense of privilege connected to moral personhood. Several participants contrasted their own privileged mobility with those of the



**Fig. 1.** How significant are following factors in motivating you to do this work?

Not everyone engages to the same extent, with variation from regular, substantial commitments, to more transient or episodic engagements (cf. Rochester et al., 2010). But 76% were involved at least once a week, and respondents engaged more intensively than the national volunteer sample, 50% spending 10 or more hours in the last 4 weeks (compared with 21% nationally). Logically, respondents in full-time employment engaged least intensively, 29% active at least once a week, compared with 68% of retired volunteers. Generally, these availability-related factors seemed to impact more on intensity of activity than particular types of motivation.

Beyond the practical issue of having time, other elements of positionality also appear relevant in producing empathetic and active responses (cf. Malkki, 2015). Detention volunteers are not a dramatically diverse group, according to the survey and group co-ordinators, but

people detained. This resonates with Malkki’s observation that:

[E]thical and political solidarities... [do] not emerge from setting aside the particularities of one’s own location or its histories; quite the contrary, they [come] from intimately engaging with the responsibilities and vulnerabilities of that location.’ (2015, p. 52).

One visitor, asked explicitly about the relevance of her position as a UK citizen, commented: ‘I do to some extent feel like I am representing my own country when I am visiting and I often apologise to people for

<sup>6</sup> Although it is worth noting that an arts coordinator facilitating exchange between detainees and economically deprived local people encountered levels of empathy that took him by surprise, given common assumptions about resentment of migrants in this group.

how this country is treating them...’ By contrast, another, also a British citizen, mused: ‘I don’t feel any burden of citizenship... it doesn’t really make sense to me as a concept... [It’s more about] humanity and... people just because they are humans...’ We will see in the next section how these feelings of solidarity and the desire to ‘push back against privilege’ may shape relationships with people detained (King, 2016).

Conversations with volunteers often touched on broader political beliefs. For the majority, detention was not a ‘single issue’ of concern, but part of their broader world-view and a socially engaged stance, with prior or concurrent experience in human rights, migration, anti-racism, community or faith-related volunteering/activism (see also McGinley, 2014). As the majority of respondents described themselves as left-of-centre, compared with a minority of the population as a whole, and volunteers were relatively clear in their political views compared with the general population. Although some were reluctant to ‘politicise’ their involvement, as discussed earlier, 87% felt their political views were a significant part of their motivation (66% very significant). This may be apparent from the beginning or crystallize over time. Around 80% felt their engagement had some impact on their political views.

Religion was a less conspicuous theme, but very important for some. People detained often experience an intensification or revival of religious identity (McGregor, 2011). Yet although most groups include members of faith communities, they tend to be secular in orientation. Voices within the Church of England have called for it to take a much more proactive stance on detention (Williams, 2019). Around half of detention volunteers surveyed reported no religion, compared with a quarter of volunteers nationally and the general population. They were half as likely to identify as Christians than volunteers nationally or the population as a whole. But those who were religious often drew important connections between faith and their involvement. Religion was a motivating factor for around one third of survey respondents, nearly twice as much as for volunteers nationally (Cabinet Office, 2015). Interviews suggested that faith can be an important source of staying-power and infuse the engagements of some volunteers, who referred to a sense of spiritual calling, the power of prayer and a religious duty to challenge injustice and suffering (see also Snyder et al., 2015).

Other social dimensions may also influence people’s sense of purpose. The somewhat younger age profile of detention volunteers (see Table 1) than volunteers nationally is in line with not only greater availability in this age bracket, but also younger people’s tendency towards more open attitudes to migration (Blinder, 2011). The gendering of volunteering was also marked: 75% of survey respondents were women (consistent with McGinley, 2014; contrasting with 57% of volunteers nationally) while 90% of detainees are men. This received little spontaneous commentary by interviewees, who when asked directly about gender were cautious to avoid what they felt were glib and stereotypical explanations about femininity. Indeed, public opinion polls suggest that there is little evidence to suggest that there is a significant gender difference in attitudes to migration (Blinder, 2011). But this gendering is consistent with wider evidence that women are more likely to volunteer in ‘caring’ fields such as education, health, international aid and human rights (Low et al., 2007). Moreover, there has been significant media exposure of abuses at Yarl’s Wood women’s centre, resonating strongly with the feminist movement. It is also interesting how the theme of protective motherhood was invoked in AVID’s visitor testimonies, for example:

When I first started... I was visiting young men my son’s age, and that was quite something. To think about what would it be like for my son in a foreign country with absolutely nobody to help him.’ (McGinley, 2014, p. 29, see also Mann, 2015).

Thus, some were struck by stories that inspired empathy because they resonated with their own social experience in some way, invoking caring relations.

Physical proximity is clearly neither a necessary or sufficient condition for a meaningful ethical encounter (Gill, 2016). However, it is

important to note that the ethical encounter was often particularly potent for volunteers experiencing more direct forms of proximity. The less remote geography of UK detention centres, by comparison with some other contexts (Mountz, 2017) is a factor here. Some mobilize initially in response to the opening of a detention centre in their local area, with the sense of something happening ‘on their doorstep’ giving the issue a more personal relevance, as well as creating obvious opportunities for action. 70% of survey respondents had a detention facility in their local area. Others were powerfully affected by knowing someone who had been detained, either from their own social worlds or when they started visiting detention centres – 59% of survey respondents were motivated by relationships with detainees. For these people, this is not about injustice and suffering imposed on an abstract, bare humanity, but of ‘real people’.

The research also bears out that social networks are a significant pull factor for social movements: spreading awareness, increasing receptiveness and providing social rewards (Goodwin and Jasper, 2015). Social networks were the most popular entry point for detention volunteers surveyed: 37% knew someone already involved, 27% learned about it by word of mouth, 17% through an educational institution and 10% knew someone who was detained. 55% were motivated by relationships with other volunteers. Often students and retired participants enjoyed being part of a team/office setting. Some were particularly attracted to groups organizing in an egalitarian and participatory fashion:

I remember we were all sat round a table... everyone was taking part... it just felt nice... It wasn’t just about [detention but a] way of seeing the world and interacting with people... on a non-hierarchical basis.

Yet, at the same time, there are tensions between conviviality and solitude in these engagements. Some interviewees actually appreciated being able to visit a detention centre or attend events/engage online without needing to collaborate closely with a wider group of other people, suiting their personal availability or inclination. Co-ordinators commented that many of their visitors were shy about discussing their involvement with social contacts, fearing negative reactions. For example, one retired participant who had been visiting detention centres for several years reflected: ‘It’s just better left alone really... if there’s a major political difference. [I]n some conversation recently I was surprised by how much [my son] approved.’ Another younger but similarly experienced visitor commented:

Friends and family... didn’t know this world... I found it very hard to share experiences... talking about detainees [feels] like showing off about how exotic the people I know are... [S]o alien to most people’s worlds. So shocking.

In summary, this section has illuminated what nourishes civic mobilization by considering the values and positionalities of those involved. First it identified salient themes in how detention is articulated as a cause for concern. The state’s rationale for detention is that it is necessary for the immigration bureaucracy to secure removal of ‘unwanted migrants’ in the public interest. To varying degrees, volunteers pushed back against the normalization of administrative incarceration. They were united in identifying the indefinite nature of detention as a significant injustice; in their concern for the significant suffering that detention creates; and in noting a lack of fair play in the functional formalities of detention. To varying degrees, they also set detention within a wider political frame, linking their critique of the detention system with injustice in the national immigration regime (questioning state interpretations of national interest) and injustice on the global scale. There were some nuances and diversity in volunteers’ pre-occupations, but the vast majority agree that substantial change to the detention system is required, indeed a majority of those surveyed favored ending detention and a more open immigration regime.

The section has also probed the socio-spatial positionalities that

bear on civic mobilization. ‘Having time’ is unsurprisingly relevant at a practical level, with many of those engaging being at a point in their lives when they have relatively fewer or more flexible responsibilities. Participants’ sense of purpose appears to be informed by their backgrounds and beliefs: many were informed by left-leaning political beliefs fused with a sense of moral responsibility associated with relative socio-economic security. For some, faith plays a role. More direct forms of proximity to the issue (living close to detention centres, having social relationships with people detained, and to a lesser extent intergenerational or direct experiences of migration and discrimination) can act as potent motivators. Social networks and sociability play an important role in recruitment and motivation. A feature of mobilization that has not been developed in detail here is the fact that for many it was also an opportunity to use or develop skills: this suggests a curious, active disposition, further illustrated in the next section. Having established some key insights regarding the values and positionalities supporting civic mobilization, the next section examines how this is translated into action.

#### 4. Action

Research highlights the importance of the cognitive shift that occurs when people begin to believe that they have an *opportunity for meaningful action*, of making a difference (Goodwin and Jasper, 2015). Organisations are clearly important mediators, making choices about how they ‘frame’ causes for concern and promote particular kinds of action (Goodwin and Jasper, 2015). Importantly, experiences of taking action over time may reinforce or reshape motivations – through civic involvements, people may construct new analyses, self-understandings, roles and identities (Rochester et al., 2010). Literature on migration-related social movements encourages us to consider ‘how alliances and practices of solidarity are constructed at different scales, ranging from local to global’ as well as how wider political processes may offer or close down opportunities for change (García Agustín and Jørgensen, 2016). The relationships between different actions, spaces and timeframes – between helping individuals locally and political action nationally, between incremental changes and more radical transformation, between immediate impact and longer-term goals – is often the subject of keen debate (Gill, 2016).

Detention volunteers stressed ample opportunities for different kinds of action, suiting people with different availabilities, capabilities and inclinations (cf. Rochester et al., 2010). This section first explores the ways that volunteers help individuals, which 77% of survey respondents had been involved with, then considers the different kinds of campaign activities that many participate in. In doing so, the analysis probes volunteers’ experiences of taking action; how these practices challenge the spatial logics of detention; the tensions and complementarities between different avenues of action.

##### 4.1. Helping individuals

Many volunteers felt that supporting individuals offers the opportunity to do something ‘practical and tangible’. As outlined in Section 2, people may be very isolated in detention: ‘spatial practices of disciplined mobility undermine the affective and emotional ties between detained people and family, friends, and support networks who might aid them.’ (Martin, 2015, 235). In this context, visiting groups can play a key role. Advertising their contact details through official channels and/or by word of mouth, when contacted by a detainee the group will try to find a volunteer to visit them each week, aiming to provide emotional and practical support. One-to-one meetings with a visitor can offer an opportunity for people in detention relieve isolation and boredom and share concerns. Access to legal representation is uneven and the visitor or their organisation may be able to help find a legal advisor. Often people are detained without their possessions and contact telephone numbers – visitors may be able to help locate friends, key

personal items and documents needed for the person’s case. While most organisations focus on helping individuals in detention, some also try to provide support for people after release.

Beyond the intrinsic satisfaction of helping in these ways, there were other rewards. There was pleasure associated with building relationships: the process of developing communication and trust; enjoying each other’s company; learning that someone had been released and, occasionally, sustaining friendships after release. Some talked about learning to ‘be present’ with people: ‘When I am actually there with a person, I do just completely live in that moment, with that individual, and everything just slips away.’ Many volunteers found that building relationships with people in very demanding situations fostered their sense of perspective on their own struggles in life.

Visiting offered ample and diverse learning opportunities. 67% of survey respondents (the majority of whom had some experience of visiting) reported that the opportunity to learn or use skills was part of their motivation. 89% felt that engaging with detention had an impact on their knowledge of countries and cultures and 76% said it added to their skills base in some way. Experienced visitors described with evident appreciation meeting people of wide-ranging nationalities, backgrounds and faiths, whom they would not have encountered in the normal run of their lives. For instance: ‘I have seen a much wider variety of human beings, at far closer range, than one would expect in one quiet suburban lifetime.’ Initial expectations do not always play out. For instance, some expected to visit refugees, but had found they also saw people with visa complications or who had served a prison sentence (since 2007 growing number of ‘Foreign National Offenders’ are scheduled for deportation). This prompted debate in some groups about ‘deservingness’, forcing adjustment as people learned, through relationships with detainees and wider group discussion, about the intersections of the criminal justice and immigration system (see also Mann, 2015).

Visiting also brings challenges, which can sap motivation, or lead people to stop. At a practical level, it can be time-consuming, awkward work. One may have to allow several hours a week for travel, security checks at reception, the actual visit, and related tasks during the week. Some found security checks intrusive and interactions with detention officers uncomfortable (for example having to negotiate permission to take in pen and paper, or not being able to move table for more privacy) (see also Mann, 2015). Volunteers often reported intense frustration about how the system works and how hard it can be to get adequate and timely legal and medical assistance. Many spoke of difficulties connecting and establishing trust across language and cultural barriers, and concern about managing expectations about what help they could provide. Women volunteers occasionally comment on self-consciousness about entering an all-male environment for a social visit, the odd flirtatious undercurrent, deliberate carefulness (e.g. dressing conservatively), or preference for visiting people of the same sex (Mann, 2015).

Visiting can be emotionally demanding, in ways that affect volunteers beyond the circumscribed space and time of the visit itself. When a strong cause for concern and urge to act is crystallised into a one-to-one relationship, there is often a heavy sense of personal responsibility. The principle of being consistent and not letting people down was reinforced by group co-ordinators, in an effort to counter the uncertainty that people who are detained often are experiencing in most other areas of their lives. Sustained interaction with people in really hard life situations can be depressing; people working in migrant support often grapple with ‘compassion fatigue, burn out, secondary traumatic stress syndrome and vicarious traumatisation’ (Gill, 2016, p. 109). 67% of survey respondents said that the work had an impact on their psychological welfare (13% noting a ‘strong impact’). Visitors often felt upset and stressed when a contact was going through a difficult time, particularly if at risk of suicide, self-harm or forced removal. Feelings of ‘affective and ethical insufficiency – or not having been or done enough’ (Malkki, 2015, p. 54) were common. Some talked of a weariness of the

whole business: both the relentless urgency of many situations they were confronted with, and the tedium and loneliness of supporting people through long and emotionally demanding detentions. There were accounts of people ‘burning out’ and attrition among volunteers who found the whole business too much. This resonates with the notion that sometimes ‘[direct] experience establishes too close a contact’ (Hannah Arendt in Gill, 2016, p. 107).

Strategies to deal with these challenges exist, at personal and organisational levels. Most organisations have a selection process and initial training aiming to shape expectations, ensure suitability, and prevent voyeuristic or irresponsible engagement. Most survey respondents had received some form of organisational training in immigration and detention policy, the issues people face, and the role of the visitor as defined by the organisation. This typically lasts a few hours, with some follow-up training opportunities. At times that they found the work challenging, the majority turned to co-ordinators, other volunteers (informally or in organised support groups) or friends and family. Some sought help from wider networks like AVID, faith communities, or counselling (occasionally projects are able to provide some professional counselling support). Other strategies included taking breaks, particularly after traumatic experiences, visiting in pairs and limiting visiting time (beyond the limits imposed by the centre). There was also an emphasis from some on maintaining clear boundaries regarding what personal information or gifts they would give people they visited (something advised/required by many groups). These strategies can perhaps be understood as experiments in maintaining the ‘optimal frequency and intensity of contact – close but not too close’ (Gill, 2016, p. 185) and trying to foster and protect constructive encounters between visitor and the person in detention.

A discourse of resilience surrounds visiting. Generally, people expect visiting to be tough work. This can be part of the initial attraction: as one student visitor put it, ‘It’s not just talking about something, you’re actually going and *doing* something, and you’re going into a prison... it’s kind of cool on some level, to... take action.’ An experienced visitor commented:

I think it attracts very strong people probably. I suspect people stop visiting very early on it they can’t handle it... [It’s] not enjoyable, almost ever! But really important... I always LOATHE going to visit. I hate it. [Laughter]... Every time I have to go... But then when I actually go I feel how incredibly important it is to be there, to do it.

Sometimes emotional management and self-care entailed a certain level of normalization (Mann, 2015), for instance resigning oneself to frustrating security practices, or thinking of trying to get people out of detention as ‘a game [which I worry at times] makes me objectify the individuals concerned in a way creepily similar to UKBA.’ One visitor felt she had ‘learnt how to be resilient to the point of callousness... but on the whole as I see it, it is better to work in this way than not try at all.’

Visitors also reflected in interesting ways on the politics of ‘helping individuals’. At the level of inter-personal relationships, visiting holds many possibilities in terms of how people may interact. Visitors often talked about the process of defining a ‘role’ in the relationship, in the context of language and cultural difference, unequal power relations and uncertain timeframes (cf. Darling, 2011). The migrant-visitor relationship is inevitably embedded in race, class and gender politics. Research on pro-migrant mobilization has highlighted the popularity but also the limitations of notions of hospitality and humanitarianism, which situate the (white) citizen as the host and provider of assistance, and migrant as (exotic) guest and vulnerable beneficiary (Darling, 2011). These kinds of dynamics can be reinforced or challenged by the organisational context. With the gradual institutionalisation of visiting projects as ‘service providers’ to detained ‘clients’, many organisations have developed visitor role descriptions. Often volunteers found this provided a helpful starting point and framework for the relationship. At the same time, even when sensitively prepared, they can also act as a

distancing device, creating pre-determined routines and boundaries governing the relationship, nested within the disciplinary controls of the detention system itself. For example:

There are some people [visitors] who are very focused on getting information, and doing it by the book, the checklist, more like an interview with question and answer... I viscerally dislike that style because I think it invokes Home Office, solicitors, judges and it’s just not appropriate.

While this resonance is generally not deliberate – indeed ‘[e]xtreme fidelity to the technical demands of one’s role’ is a recognised psychological response to avoid being emotionally overwhelmed by engagement with people in traumatic situations (Gill, 2016, p. 109) – it is clearly problematic, and was something that those emphasising solidarity explicitly sought to avoid. The comments of many volunteers and coordinators suggested considerable sensitivity to the interpersonal politics of the visiting space and the struggle to develop genuine human relationships across difference and in the context of the confinement of one party. For instance, some stressed the importance of making clear their opposition to the detention system; allowing the person to ‘host’ them in the visiting space by getting them a cup of tea and responding warmly and openly to enquiries about their own personal life; and making efforts to continue contact and friendship after the person was released or removed. Testimonies from people who have been detained highlight how important these relationships can be, on a practical and emotional level (McGinley, 2014). At the same time, underscoring the fact that relationship-building is a two-way, voluntary process, co-ordinators noted that sometimes when the visiting relationship was not working from the viewpoint of the person detained, that person would avoid or stop contact or request a different visitor.

Volunteers also sometimes reflected on the relationship between visiting projects and the state. Like the asylum regime, detention melds subjugation with elements of care ‘in subtle and insidious ways... which ultimately leads to the strengthening of bureaucratic rule’ (Gill, 2016, p. 8). In this context, civil society efforts to ‘help individuals’ can run the risk of being co-opted or lending legitimacy to the detention system. Most obviously, some NGOs accept roles in the administration of detention. For example, in 2011, the children’s charity Barnardo’s agreed to agree to run welfare and social care services for asylum-seeking families in pre-departure accommodation, prompting considerable criticism. Taking Home Office money to run projects in detention remains controversial in the voluntary sector. The co-ordinator of an arts project commissioned by centre management reported – with mixed feelings – receiving feedback that these kinds of projects, by providing an outlet for expression and giving staff and detainees something to talk about, reduced violence and fed into ‘dynamic security’ in detention centres, i.e. non-forced social control.

But beyond direct sub-contracting, many visiting projects have some sort of established relationship with a detention centre. The Detention Centre Rules envisage a ‘visiting committee’ existing for each centre, and recognised through this mechanism, some groups are allowed to advertise within the centre, have designated officers to liaise with, and a seat at stakeholder meetings where they can raise issues and lobby for improvements to detention conditions, through changes to procedure and practice. Meanwhile, centre managers and security officers are sensitive to the possibility of criticism by ‘do-gooders’ (Hall, 2012, p. 128) and many participants mentioned instances when access was refused to volunteers or organisations deemed to be uncooperative or trouble-making (see also Mann, 2015). Thus, the detention system exerts various forms of discipline on civic groups that engage with it. As in other settings, the wish to maintain (better) access can contribute to ‘a degree of capitulation to existing configurations of power’ (Gill, 2016, p. 158) for example by visiting groups self-censoring, or strategically choosing their battles with management, and militate against adopting a more oppositional stance to detention, with some organisations also discouraging their volunteers from engaging in demonstrations and



direct action (cf. Dauvergne and LeBaron, 2014). Other (typically less formal) groups deliberately eschew recognition, precisely to avoid these kinds of pitfalls. Many groups liaise with the national Association of Visitors to Immigration Detainees to help navigate their local challenges.

Questions naturally arise about the relationship (and possible trade-offs) between the huge amounts of time and energy invested in supporting individuals, versus campaigning for change. Overall, 85% indicated that most of their time was spent supporting individuals, the rest primarily working to change the system. While some argue there are ‘horses for courses’ (i.e. not every individual or organization is well-adapted to campaigning), others stressed the potential for a complementary relationship between visiting and campaigning (‘Politics starts from the very personal relationships that you have with people.’). As is often the case with migrant and asylum support groups, most of the actions of visiting projects work from the inside and do not explicitly challenge the immigration and detention system as a whole, but by supporting individuals and engaging in localized tactics to improve their treatment, they have the potential to contribute to a wider community of struggle (Gill, 2016). Moreover, many visitors do simultaneously or subsequently support campaigns for change to the detention system. This complementarity is also reflected at organisational level, with some organizations systematically utilizing insights derived from casework to enrich advocacy. This kind of witnessing is vital: indeed, much of what we know about detention ‘comes from advocates doing the work of documentation against obscurity, publicity against silence, and challenge against impunity.’ (Mountz et al., 2013, p. 536).

#### 4.2. Campaigning for change

For many years detention grew largely unnoticed. While there have long been calls for change (Welch and Schuster, 2005; Silverman, 2012), long-standing activists suggested that during the 1990s and 2000s, the issue did not tend to be a priority for mainstream migrant and refugee, human rights or civil liberty organizations, and it was difficult to engage wider attention. But in the last decade, civil society engagement with detention has gathered greater momentum. This section explores the goals of recent campaigns and how people relate to different kinds of action.

Efforts to change the system have crystalized into a number of campaigns. First, in an effort to reduce suffering in detention, a prominent series of campaigns have argued that certain categories of people are particularly vulnerable to harm and should not be subject to detention. For instance, a diverse alliance took shape in 2009 to end child detention, resulting in substantial reduction (although not elimination). Medical Justice has campaigned against the detention of vulnerable people, prompting policy changes through political lobbying and strategic litigation. Women for Refugee Women initiated a ‘Set Her Free’ campaign in 2014, aiming to end the detention of women seeking asylum. The tendency to focus on categories depicted as vulnerable is a wider and often successful feature of civic mobilization around migration issues, attracting recruits and public and media sympathy (Pupavac, 2008), as illustrated recently in relation to child detention in the US. However, it tends to stratify the detained population into people deemed more and less deserving of compassion. While acknowledging the importance of eliminating harm to vulnerable people, some participants emphasized that to some extent everyone is vulnerable in detention and were concerned that focusing on particular categories tends to reproduce the problematic notion of the ‘deserving’ and ‘undeserving’ migrant, diverting attention from more universal questions around the right to liberty.

On this note: a second focus of campaigning is to improve legal safeguards. For instance, a barrage of litigation supported by Detention Action ended the Detained Fast Track; and there is a long-standing campaign by the Bail Observation Project to improve judicial oversight. Particularly prominent is the strong campaign for a 28-day time limit

(Detention Forum, 2018). The current legal framework, despite stating that detention should be a last resort, fails to define clearly what constitutes a reasonable period for detention. Campaigners argue that having a statutory time limit would mitigate the psychological distress of detention and put the onus on public authorities to make more careful decisions and act more diligently. Many survey respondents mentioned a time limit as one of the changes that they would like to see. Volunteers, detention NGOs and other national organizations have rallied around this as a pragmatic improvement to the current system of indefinite detention, although those that believe that the ultimate goal should be to end detention are wary of suggesting that there is an ‘acceptable’ time limit.

Third, there is a campaign for community-based ‘alternatives to detention’ (Detention Action, 2016). The rationale is that detention is an expensive, alienating approach to immigration control and that community-based case management approaches (ensuring prompt access to necessary advice and support in cooperation with civil society) allow the authorities to engage more effectively with migrants. This is viewed as more likely to lead to better outcomes in terms of well-being during the immigration process and grants of leave to remain, as well as cooperation with negative decisions, because people are ‘satisfied that all options to remain in the UK have been fairly explored’ (Detention Action, 2016, 34). The concept of ‘alternatives’ generated mixed feelings among volunteers interviewed. Some lauded it as a pro-active and pragmatic effort to reduce detention and minimize harm, given immigration control is a ‘fact of life’ (Detention Action, 2016, p.61). Others felt that the alternative to detention should simply be liberty and that the approach involves co-opting NGOs into immigration control structures. Regardless of the position taken, it is clear that the debate on alternatives has focused people’s minds on how detention relates to techniques of disciplining mobility in wider spaces (cf. Martin, 2015).

Finally, alongside campaigns for reform, there are long-standing calls to end detention altogether from networks like Barbed Wire Britain. This was given further impetus since 2014 by Movement for Justice by Any Means Necessary, a left-wing anti-racist civil rights group, organizing large demonstrations outside detention centres under the banner ‘Shut It Down’. More recently, the NGO Right to Remain initiated ‘These Walls Must Fall’, a campaign aiming to build broad-based support among individuals, organizations and communities to end detention. The call to end detention seems to be spreading. As one activist put it: ‘[W]e feel less isolated saying shut down detention.... before it was like you can’t say that because it’s not winnable, we’ve got to be meek and ask for the small things...’

Given that most survey respondents favored abolition, it is interesting that many detention organizations do not officially advocate or emphasise this as a goal. Just as institutionalisation can create pressures for visiting groups to maintain access, in campaigning it creates pressures to establish credibility with political decision-makers and evidence of impact for funders, which can tend to channel energies into working for more modest ‘asks’ deemed more realistic and achievable in the current context (cf. Dauvergne and LeBaron, 2014). It is a tightrope that can be walked, however: Bail for Immigration Detainees and Medical Justice have taken the position that detention should end, while focusing on smaller incremental changes as short/medium-term priorities, *and* maintaining access to detention centres (although it might be argued that because of their specialist legal and medical expertise, their access is harder to deny and their evidence harder to dismiss). The fear is sometimes voiced that securing modest changes can work to legitimise detention – to make it ‘better’ and more ‘humane’ – rather than challenging its fundamental basis. At the same time, ‘[a]lthough it is easy to dismiss these actions as fiddling while Rome burns, they [can mean] a great deal to the migrants who benefit from them at the time’ (Gill, 2016, p. 174). As a ‘Freed Voices’ activist put it:

I am going to be a bit controversial here by saying that, for me, abolition is the second step... I believe that we owe this pragmatism

to the people in detention right now, at this very moment. (Like one of our newest members, who was re-detained last week.) So, how we are going to achieve radical change? Let's start with a time-limit. (Mishka, 2018)

These four campaigns illustrate the diverse goals and strategies of the detention movement. But they do not capture the full breadth of activity aimed at changing the system. For instance, there are cross-cutting efforts to publicize and commemorate deaths in detention which raise public awareness, emphasizing that these are human lives that matter and are 'grievable' (Mountz, 2017, drawing on Butler, 2004, also Gill et al., 2018). There have also been efforts to improve detention conditions in terms of access to mobile phones and the internet and issues around detainee labour.

Detention campaigns build alliances across different spaces and communities. First, there are various ways that people outside connect with people *in* detention. Given the multi-layered marginalisation of people subject to detention, the voices of citizen advocates have tended to predominate in the detention debate (something which many are sensitive to: at one demonstration in 2015 the apparent privileging of these voices over those of former detainees on the speaker platform generated hot debate). NGOs have long been keen to project through social media the 'human stories' of detainees as part of their campaigns – of course, despite the frequent effectiveness of these in engaging sympathy, this can also raise issues in terms of playing to stereotype and notions of who is a 'good migrant' deserving of inclusion (Mountz et al., 2013, cf. Pupavac, 2008). Some organisations engage more directly with detainee-led protests, energized by opportunities to amplify their demands, for example:

[During a wave of hunger strikes] somebody sent a text saying, 'We're occupying the courtyard, please send helicopter...' In conversation with a Channel 4 news producer, I mentioned that text... They got a f\*\*king helicopter!... Talking to people afterwards on the phone... they were cheering! Chanting 'freedom, freedom, freedom!' [T]hat energy and jubilation was just really... inspiring.

Demonstrations outside detention centres also sometimes achieve forms of contact. For instance, in many demonstrations at Yarls' Wood, advance co-ordination has allowed people at the fences and inside the centre to see and wave at each other, taking turns to shout, sing, and make speeches relayed by mobile phone and loudspeaker. While former detainees and people living at risk of detention are often too fearful or preoccupied with the demands of everyday life to engage in activism, their experiences may also politicize (McGregor, 2011). Their voices are becoming louder, as one organizer put it:

We had members who had been detained or were getting detained... we had to deal with this fight... For a lot of people it's scary ... But some people do... [join demonstrations then others] see them getting stronger and more proud of themselves.

As a result, there has been growing public advocacy by former detainees (for example via Freed Voices, Samphire and Movement for Justice). One organiser noted they avoid 'giving a victim testimony', instead stressing how they have become experts and activists through bitter first-hand experience, and the changes that they demand, giving their advocacy 'a whole different tone and character'.

Second, at local level, there have been campaigns against the establishment or expansion of specific detention centres which can generate wider alliances, including a more NIMBY element purely concerned with local environmental issues, as witnessed in within Campsfield anti-expansion campaign in 2014–15.<sup>7</sup> Some suggest that

<sup>7</sup> Although the long standing Close Campsfield Campaign is firmly abolitionist, using the news of planned closure in 2019 as an opportunity to emphasise that many detainees have simply been moved to other centres, and that all centres should be closed.

the rise in detention was in part (unofficially) a government response to the successes of anti-deportation activism in the 1980s (and the perception that isolating people from potentially supportive communities and social networks and would facilitate removal). But while this is an effect of detention, at the same time, cities where people are detained (and to which those released may be dispersed) are also increasingly being drawn into the challenge to detention, with 'These Walls Must Fall' working to mobilize statements of support from communities, councils and trade unions in Bristol, Liverpool and Manchester.

Third, at national and international level, networking, alliances and publicity around detention have grown. Since 2009 the Detention Forum has played a prominent role, creating a space for voluntary sector networking to campaign for specific changes and celebrating successes. Professional, humanitarian and human rights organizations have weighed in with concerns in recent years (e.g. British Medical Association, Bar Council, Red Cross, Children's Society and Amnesty). There are also opportunities for global networking via the Platform for International Cooperation on Undocumented Migrants, Migreurop,<sup>8</sup> the Global Detention Project and the International Detention Coalition. The forging of these networks and alliances has contributed to a sense of momentum and an ability to secure media attention (cf. García Agustín and Jørgensen, 2016). There has been hard-hitting media coverage (e.g. undercover documentaries by Channel 4 in Yarls' Wood, and the BBC in Brooke House); and the hostile environment, Windrush and Brexit have kept immigration enforcement constantly in the headlines, meaning that detention is not relegated to an ugly sideshow but is central in public debates about immigration in the UK. Media coverage of government responses to migration dynamics across Europe and North America reinforces awareness of the detention issue in the UK.

There were some differences of opinion among volunteers about what strategies they judged productive (cf. Goodwin and Jaspers, 2015). For instance, some felt that the emotive sound and spectacle of demonstrations are counter-productive: 'actually all [demonstrators] do is disturb the people inside', or that they alienate decision-makers. Whereas others felt more confrontational approaches are essential:

[Groups that] see their job as lobbying politicians... [see demonstrations] as being provocative to those same politicians. And you don't be provocative to people you are asking nicely. Whereas we think... we persuade the more with real action!

Choices are also influenced by personal disposition, for instance: 'I think direct action and civil disobedience [is] vital... I just feel acutely self-conscious as a person... It's not a space I feel comfortable in.'

What political progress has been made? Faced with cumulative and diversifying pressures from civil society, one participant suggested that, 'The political classes... are divided over detention... Under pressure to justify it, they are having trouble...' Numerous official inquiries and inspections have cited major concerns, particularly about vulnerability and lack of a time limit (e.g. APPG, 2015; Shaw, 2016). There has been more parliamentary debate, as a growing number of MPs take up the issue. The Labour Party, Liberal Democrats, the Scottish Nationalist Party and Green Party have all pledged to make reforms and end indefinite detention. However, as one experienced migration campaigner put it, 'Detention... is one of the issues that it's the most difficult to influence the Home Office on. Just because they are so wedded to the idea.' Despite mounting political pressure, the government lacks a concerted strategy for detention reform. The 'Adults at Risk' policy introduced in 2016 has been mired in successive rounds of strategic litigation for its narrowness (Medical Justice, 2018). In 2018 the government introduced the very modest change of automatic bail hearings after four months and announced it would commission a review on time limits and an 'alternatives' pilot for vulnerable women. After a long

<sup>8</sup> A European and African network mobilizing against migrant confinement and camps.

upward trend in the detained population, around 2014–15 this turned somewhat, partly due to the demise of the Detained Fast Track (due to legal action not government initiative). It is questionable whether this indicates any meaningful political shift. The wider political environment remains highly uncertain, with opportunities for change as well as threats, as the Brexit process simultaneously promises to reconfigure the border and immigration regime and to throw the UK into political and constitutional crisis.

In summary, if we understand detention as a set of spatial strategies that function to isolate, contain and exclude people from wider society (Martin, 2015), volunteers' actions challenge these dynamics in multiple ways. Mobilization around detention occurs across different spaces: from the relative intimacy of a personal conversation in the visiting room and planning meetings in community centres, universities and NGO offices, to open air demonstrations, public events in town halls and Parliament, and virtual spaces of social media and political campaigning.

At the individual level, volunteer visitors challenge people's isolation by giving time on a regular basis to be present with people in detention, using the visiting room as a space to build relationships that recognize the individual and aim to help them navigate (and often, challenge) the period of detention. Visitors' freedom of movement and greater access to communications can become a practical aid through which detainees may try to locate documents and personal items and connect with specialist support.

At a more collective level too, the voluntary sector challenges detainees' containment and exclusion through a range of concrete practices: the witnessing work of visiting organizations, the prominent use of personal stories in advocacy, efforts to amplify detainee protest in the national media, supporting direct advocacy by people who have experienced detention, organizing regular demonstrations to remind detainees that they are not forgotten and raise public awareness, and re-connecting detention with communities by mobilizing local and national campaigns against detention. There are divergences on goals and methods, yet both separate campaigns and the conscious search for common ground have created a sense of momentum and enthusiasm among those involved in recent years.

## 5. Concluding remarks

In the context of a burgeoning geographical literature critically mapping the spatial logics of detention and how these systems are increasingly used to discipline and contain mobile populations, this article has contributed insights to a still thin body of analysis on the resistance of 'outsiders'. Focusing on the ecosystem of civic mobilization around detention in the UK, it has illuminated how volunteers are moved to take action and the nature of the actions that they take. The analysis has drawn out some key ways that the values, positionalities and practices of volunteers in the UK challenge and try to 'short-circuit' these carceral spaces (Gill et al., 2018). In concluding I want to draw out some key points in relation to how civic mobilization works to overcome moral distance and create political opening on the detention issue.

In his analysis of the British asylum system, Gill explored the relationships between indifference, moral distance and proximity, considering 'ways in which [ethical] encounters are avoided, averted and suspended' (2016, p.7). He examined how a sense of moral distance is maintained by functionaries, both those insulated from face-to-face interactions the people whom their decisions affect, as well as those, like detention officers, who have sustained direct contact with them. By contrast, this research has focused on volunteers' ethical encounters with detention and what encourages, facilitates and mediates these.

The detention system creates obvious distance between individuals and the wider community. It physically removes people from their social context and confines them in separate and often geographically distant spaces, curtailing the 'right of presence' (Amin, 2002, cited in

Gill, 2016, p. 5). In this process, the government also fosters moral distance and indifference, framing detainees as 'unknown quantities' – a mass of people who could 'be anyone' (bodies that are hard to identify) and 'do anything' (bodies that are unruly) (Mountz et al., 2013, quoting Khosravi, 2009, p. 51).

How is this distance overcome? Most obviously, knowing people who got detained, entering detention centres and talking with people held inside, or making contact across barbed wire perimeters at demonstrations, can create and cultivate forms of literal closeness that are often highly emotive. This article has also shown the less direct ways in which the trauma of detention 'gets out' into wider spaces (Mountz, 2017) through media coverage, awareness-raising and campaigning, entering the perceptual range of the wider public (Gill, 2016). Such ways of 'knowing' individuals in detention – and understanding their life processes and experiences – are a vital antidote to state rationale for detention as containment of risky 'anonymous aliens' (Griffiths, 2012). These processes are not without problems – for instance, the practical and emotional issues as well as the interpersonal and organizational politics of visiting, the power but also pitfalls of 'human stories' and oft-noted marginalization of migrants' voices in advocacy – but it is also clear that there are strategies and developments that seek to address these issues.

The analysis also offers insights into how communities of struggle are being built to challenge restrictive immigration policies (García Agustín and Jørgensen, 2016). While it is easy to identify divergences and tensions regarding practices, goals and methods, there are also important complementarities that reinforce the detention movement. It is clear that for many volunteers it is important to connect their 'hands-on helping' with efforts to secure wider political change: 'Volunteering sometimes becomes more convincing, and therefore more inspiring when it connects to politics' (Eliasoph, 2013, p. 59). At the same time, others involved in campaigns and protests found it motivating and more 'emotionally real' when they could ground their efforts to secure change in 'knowing' people affected by detention (Eliasoph, 2013). At organizational level, too, the use of visiting and casework to enrich advocacy and the growth of networking and alliances between organizations working on different dimensions of detention injustice have provided an increasingly strong basis for efforts to undo political closure on the issue (cf. García Agustín and Jørgensen, 2016, p. 11).

Of course, this mobilization is occurring in a country where national public opinion polls are markedly for reducing immigration and where detention is still firmly subsumed within a wider government discourse of 'managed migration' which depoliticizes and technocratizes (Anderson, 2013). Engaging a larger cross-section of society, beyond the 'usual suspects', remains an issue. Yet this is a process evidently in motion, with efforts to mobilize wider support from MPs, local councils, community groups, trade unions and professional associations. Past research has suggested that much-polluted public preferences for restrictive immigration policy begin to disintegrate when people are confronted with the human costs of bureaucratic controls (Ellerman, 2006). Moreover, as the government's immigration policy agenda bites deeper, fueling deprivation and unease in a diverse society, immigration policy is increasingly impinging on the lives of citizens and secure residents, through personal or family relationships or work roles in public/private service provision (Anderson, 2013). The government's intransigence on the detention issue is confronting growing pressure.

The analysis prompts wider questions that future research might address. It would be interesting to explore how civic mobilization in the UK compares with other national settings, for instance where facilities are more remote, where the system works differently or where public opinion and civil society has a distinct complexion (Mountz et al., 2013). We also might probe similarities and differences between detention and other realms of pro-migrant mobilization, for instance whether detention, at the hard edges of the immigration regime, draws and cultivates a more politically-minded volunteer and how their practices of 'seeking out' relate to and compare with citizen

participation in community-based integration and sanctuary activities which often tend to involve 'giving space' (Darling, 2011, p. 408).

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