The full study is available only in German:

Gesellschaftlicher Zusammenhalt in Deutschland 2020.

Eine Herausforderung für uns alle. Ergebnisse einer repräsentativen Bevölkerungsstudie.

English Summary

Social Cohesion in Germany 2020

A challenge for us all. Results of a representative population survey

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Summary

Study background and issues addressed

The topic of social cohesion has gained significantly in importance in recent years, while attracting increasing attention. Over the long term, the megatrends of globalization, digital transformation and demographic change are driving rapid, comprehensive and fundamental societal changes. Concern over cohesion has grown as a result. Currently, the coronavirus pandemic and its social and economic consequences constitute a particular challenge for communal life. The present study was originally intended to examine long-term processes of social change on a longitudinal basis. As such, it was designed to produce a time-series comparison with the findings of its predecessor study from 2017. However, in view of the dramatic developments underway since the outbreak of the novel coronavirus, the research objective was expanded, and the design of the study adapted accordingly. In addition to the originally planned data-collection round in February and March 2020, an additional survey round was conducted in May and June in order to capture the changes taking place in the first half of this year. Thus, this study provides a current snapshot of societal developments taking place during the first months of the pandemic, and evaluates them with reference to long-term trends. However, the results of this study must always be considered against the background of the ongoing dynamics of current developments.

The survey tracks five key questions:

1. How has societal cohesion developed in Germany and its individual federal states since 2017?

2. To what extent does the sense of cohesion differ between different demographically or socioeconomically defined population segments?

3. What geospatial factors can be identified as having an influence on cohesion, for example with regard to population density or availability of infrastructure?

4. How are the coronavirus pandemic and its economic and social consequences affecting people in various life situations, and what is the impact on social cohesion in general?

5. How might we go about maintaining or strengthening social cohesion?

The study is based on a multidimensional model of social cohesion that the Bertelsmann Stiftung has used and further developed in various other studies since 2012. Social cohesion is defined as the quality of communal life within a specific community, for example a nation, a federal state, a region or an urban district. The model consists of nine dimensions that can be grouped into three broad areas:

While social cohesion measured on the basis of these nine dimensions is a quality of collectivities such as a federal state, this study additionally distinguishes the sense or perception of cohesion. The latter terms are used when the nine dimensions are used to calculate scores for individuals, groups or specific social situations.

Methodology

The nine dimensions of cohesion were assessed on the basis of 36 individual indicators. They are aggregated in the form of individual index scores, each of which range from a value of 0 (no cohesion) to 100 (maximum cohesion). The scores assigned to the nine individual dimensions can in turn be aggregated in an overall index, which also takes values ranging from 0 to 100.

The empirical foundation of the study is a representative telephone-based survey conducted in two stages during 2020, with a longitudinal design. In the first wave, carried out from 5 February to 28 March, a total of 3,010 people aged 16 or above were surveyed. In the second wave, conducted from 27 May to 9 June, a total of 1,000 people who had already participated in the first wave were interviewed a second time. The questionnaire used in the first wave was more comprehensive, with the telephone interviews lasting an average of about 30 minutes. In the second wave, the average duration was 12 minutes. The interviews were carried out with respondents using both landlines and mobile phones. In making its long-term time comparison, this study refers to data from the predecessor study conducted in 2017. In order to ensure comparability, index scores for both 2020 and 2017 were calculated using a new, more comprehensive weighting system. Thus, the 2017 scores reported here may differ slightly from those published at the time.

The predecessor study from 2017 focused particularly on comparing regional differences in the level of cohesion. The current study increased the focus on group-level differences in the perception and evaluation of cohesion. Although the 2020 study retains the comparison between German federal states, the analysis centers this time on differentiating the results according to population segments, social circumstances, geospatial categories and infrastructure classifications. However, it also gives greater prominence to the research on how the coronavirus pandemic is influencing cohesion.

Key findings of this study

Social cohesion has remained stable in Germany since 2017

In the three years since the last survey, the overall index of social cohesion for Germany as a whole has shown only minimal change. According to the revised calculation, the aggregate index score for 2017 was 60 points on a scale from 0 to 100; in 2020, at 61 points, the score is only slightly higher. This confirms the finding of both the previous study and an additional survey on social cohesion in Baden-Württemberg published in early 2020, that social cohesion is a relatively persistent phenomenon showing only moderate shifts over time.

Germany's federal states show very similar values, but the difference between the East and West is growing

Overall, levels of social cohesion within the federal states are relatively similar. While the average across Germany as a whole is 61 points, the states of Bavaria, Rhineland-Palatinate, Saarland and Schleswig-Holstein, each with 63 points, show the highest aggregate scores. Brandenburg and Saxony, with 57 points, and Bremen, with 55 points, show the lowest scores in the overall index. However, the federal states display a larger range of differences within the individual dimensions. With regard to identification with the community, for example, the difference between the highest score in Mecklenburg-Vorpommern (86) and the lowest score in Bremen (67) is fully 19 points. The differences between the federal states are also high with regard to the dimensions of "respect for social rules," "acceptance of diversity," and "trust in institutions." As in the previous studies, there is a striking systematic difference between the eastern German states (including Berlin) and the western German states. The average score for the eastern states has remained constant since 2017, standing currently at 58 points, while the average score for the western states has increased by two points to 62.

Higher scores for the acceptance of diversity, while scores for the perception of fairness remain low

The nine individual dimensions have also shown comparatively little movement over the last several years. The "acceptance of diversity" dimension, however, has seen an increase from 77 to 82 points, which means that society has on average become more open to diversity. For all other dimensions, the fluctuations are smaller, and largely negligible. There is no sign that any dramatic societal divisions have emerged over this period of time. In looking at the absolute levels of the individual dimensions, rather than at changes over time, it is clear that the acceptance of diversity receives the highest scores, by some distance. The dimensions measuring identification with the community (76 points), respect for social rules (74) and social networks also display comparatively high scores. As in the previous survey, the perception of fairness shows the lowest score, even though it has improved slightly from 38 to 41 points. The dimensions of "solidarity and helpfulness," "civic participation" and "trust in institutions" also fall at lower end, all with around 50 points. The score associated with trust in people, at 56 points, is only marginally higher.

Even during the coronavirus pandemic, cohesion has thus far proved resilient

A comparison of the February and March 2020 results with those from May and June shows that social cohesion has thus far proved largely resilient. Even in the first months of the crisis, its levels remained stable. For most people, it offered a secure network that provided them with support. However, a closer look shows significant differences between population groups in the way they have been affected by the pandemic and its consequences.

The burdens imposed by the pandemic have impacted different groups differently

A surprising 97 percent of respondents in the second survey wave indicated that they were coping well with the current situation despite its difficulties. However, a more detailed analysis reveals significant underlying differences. For example, younger respondents and people in difficult economic circumstances were more likely to express general worries about the future. The picture also becomes more diverse as the questions turn to specific stressors. For example, issues associated with short-time work programs, work from home and child care were not distributed evenly across the population. Young respondents with low incomes were more likely to have been affected by short-time work compensation programs, while older respondents with higher incomes and higher levels of education were more often working from home. In addition, child care was more often a challenge for people in precarious life circumstances.

Cohesion was perceived as having strengthened after the first months of the pandemic

Surprisingly, significantly fewer people in the second survey wave said they believed that cohesion in Germany was at risk. This opinion is traditionally widespread, with 46 percent of respondents in February stating that this was the case. In March, this share fell to 40 percent, and in May and June, it had declined further to 36 percent. A similar trajectory is seen for satisfaction with democracy: While in February and March, only 50 percent of respondents indicated that they were satisfied with democracy in Germany, this share climbed to 60 percent in the second survey wave. During the time of social distancing and contact restrictions, more people needed support and help than under normal circumstances. Here too, the respondents seem to have had rather positive experiences. While in February, 41 percent of respondents were of the opinion that most people did not care what happened to other people, only 21 percent said they thought this way in May/June.

Worries initially rose in the course of the crisis, but then receded

The study asked whether people were worried about the possibility of economic or financial crises, poverty, unemployment, or illness. Changes in the intensity of these anxieties and concerns were evident over time, both between the two survey waves, and even during the course of the first wave. During the first survey wave, the prevalence of these specific concerns increased in March as compared to February. However, in May and June, these shares declined again, to levels even below their starting values. This may be an indication of relief at the fact that – at least to that point – Germany had been relatively successful in overcoming the challenges of the pandemic.

Strong cohesion is linked to lower levels of concern

The stronger a person's perception of social cohesion during the first survey wave, the less concern they showed in the second survey wave in connection with the coronavirus pandemic. In addition, respondents' worries about their own futures and about people from their own families and social environments, along with the reported feelings of loneliness and impression that the pandemic was placing significant stress on societal cohesion, were aggregated and correlated with the overall index for cohesion. This is an indication that being well integrated into society offers particularly strong assistance in helping an individual to manage crises and unusual challenges. This thesis is supported by the fact that people who experience stronger cohesion in their own lives also show a greater degree of mental resilience, or ability to cope with stress.

The long-term view of the future is mostly positive

Asked how they would assess their prospective personal life circumstances in five years' time, respondents in the second survey wave were generally quite optimistic. On a scale of 1 (very bad) to 10 (very good), 15 percent assigned themselves a score of 9 or 10, with an additional 70 percent giving themselves scores between 6 and 8. Only the groups of people who were already in precarious life circumstances assessed their future prospects more negatively.

In general, some social groups experience cohesion as being comparatively weak

People who live alone or are single parents, who have a migration background, or who have low incomes tend to perceive social cohesion within the society as being comparatively weak. This is also true for people who report restrictions in their daily lives, for example due to physical disability or illness. A comparatively low level of education is also associated with a weaker perception of cohesion. In addition, it appears that on average, the supporters of certain political parties – specifically the CDU/CSU, Alliance 90/the Greens, the SPD and the FDP – perceive social cohesion as being relatively stronger than do supporters of the Left party or people who are politically unaffiliated. Supporters of the AfD report a particularly low level of cohesion. The objective differences with regard to place of residence play a comparatively minor role with regard to cohesion, with the subjective assessment of local infrastructure being more important. The questions of whether someone lives in a rural area or in a city, or in a booming or economically isolated region, also play a relatively insignificant role with regard to cohesion. Respondents' subjective evaluation of their local infrastructure has greater influence on their perceptions of cohesion. Here, it is clear that satisfaction with leisure-time and healthcare offerings are linked to higher levels of cohesion.

What can be done to maintain and strengthen cohesion?

Participation opportunities for population groups that currently show low scores for cohesion must be expanded. This refers particularly to people in precarious socioeconomic living circumstances, but also to single parents and people living alone, people with low levels of formal education, people with a migration background, and people who experience restrictions in their daily lives due to illness or disability. New forms of political participation or involvement are needed for groups that are increasingly losing faith in politics, and which are skeptical about the democratic process. Particular with regard to the provision of social infrastructure in peoples' immediate environment, it makes sense to introduce new participation formats, and to make well-targeted improvements in the small-scale supply of infrastructural amenities.

The Living Values program

In the Living Values program, we examine social cohesion and especially the role played by religion and values for living together in diverse societies. We regularly research and publish new studies on these topics in the Religion Monitor and the Social Cohesion Radar. In addition, we actively seek to strengthen values through practical projects and methodologies, and work to build networks between civil society actors engaged in our field.

If you would like to learn more about our work, or receive regular information about new research results, studies and events, please use the QR code provided or visit the link below.

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