

Social Cohesion Radar

Measuring Common Ground

Social Cohesion in Germany

Executive Summary



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Summary and findings

Social cohesion is a much-discussed topic in Germany. Often-posed questions include: Is it declining and why? What might the potential consequences be? For the most part, social cohesion is seen positively, as an important resource a community can draw on. Despite that, there have been relatively few attempts to measure it. Designed to help close that gap, this study is the first to compare social cohesion within Germany. It provides a quantitative assessment across nine dimensions, which are grouped into three domains - social relations, connectedness and focus on the common good - and aggregated into an overall index.

As part of the study, social cohesion has been measured for all 16 German states in four observation periods between 1990 and 2012. The calculations were carried out using indicators taken from national and international studies, and official statistics at the federal state levels. The result should be understood as an innovative, diagnostic tool suitable for assessing social cohesion in Germany, and not as the last word on the subject, let alone judgment of the people living in the country's various states.

The most important findings:

1. Clear difference between west and east:

Social cohesion is stronger in all of Germany's 11 western states than in the 5 eastern ones. In our five-level grouping, the eastern states can be found in the lower mid-range (Brandenburg and Saxony) and at the bottom (Thuringia, Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania and Saxony-Anhalt) of the ranking. The gap between west and east is currently even larger than it was directly after reunification (observation period 1990 to 1995). Unlike in other areas, when it comes to social cohesion Germany's eastern states have - in relative terms - not caught up with their western counterparts. There has, however, been an increase in social cohesion within the country's eastern states, despite the extenuating factors found there: a weaker economy, lower employment levels, a higher risk of poverty, a population that is, on average, older than in the west, and a lower degree of urbanization.

2. Hamburg as leader:

Social cohesion is currently strongest in Hamburg. High levels can also be found in Baden-Württemberg, Saarland, Bremen, Bavaria and - to a slightly lesser degree - in Lower Saxony.

3. Stability among states:

The position of the individual states in the overall ranking has remained largely stable across the four observation periods. Social cohesion does not shift quickly or easily, but tends to be a relatively persistent factor within a community. The states that have been able to improve their relative position over the long term include Hamburg, Bavaria and Lower Saxony. Those experiencing a relative decline include Bremen, Schleswig-Holstein, Thuringia and Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania. Overall, Bremen's position has fluctuated most, with the state falling in the rankings twice and rising once.

4. Different profiles of cohesion:

When all nine dimensions are considered, the 16 states group clearly into five different clusters: the country's three city-states (Berlin, Hamburg, Bremen); the larger southern states (Baden-Württemberg, Bavaria); the larger western states (Hesse, Lower Saxony, North Rhine-Westphalia);

the smaller western states (Schleswig-Holstein, Rhineland-Palatinate, Saarland); and the five eastern states. While the city-states lead the way in a number of dimensions, they also have a weak spot: the relatively low level of respect for social rules. In contrast, the two major southern states are very well balanced, with no obvious weaknesses. The situation in the eastern states is less positive, but they in turn have their specific strengths, such as a relatively high level of respect for social rules and, for the most part, a high degree of regional identification.

5. Absolute shift:

Overall, social cohesion in Germany has increased rather than declined during the last 25 years. Particularly in terms of positive developments, there has been a rise in the acceptance of sexual minorities, a long-term decline in the fear of crime and a constant increase in the trust placed in (local) institutions. A number of negative trends can also be seen, however, including a gradual decrease in the willingness to let immigrants maintain their native customs and culture.

6. Key supporting factors:

Above all, social cohesion is promoted by higher levels of prosperity and lower levels of poverty, with the presence of urban environments also playing a major positive role. In contrast to what is commonly believed, ethnic diversity is not a threat to cohesiveness. On the contrary, communities home to a relatively large number of immigrants are much more likely to be socially cohesive.

7. Condition for happiness

People living in states with high levels of cohesion exhibit higher subjective levels of wellbeing as seen, for example, in their subjective assessments of how satisfied they are with life. The rule of thumb is clear: The more social cohesion the better.

With this study, we are presenting the first empirically sound, comparative overview of social cohesion in Germany - its current levels, relative trends and major determining factors, as well as its impact on how satisfied the country's inhabitants are with their lives. While happiness undoubtedly cannot serve as the sole criterion for social policymaking, the study's findings nonetheless show how important social cohesion is for quality of life. However, other potential consequences of cohesion - economic activity, the quality of democracy, society's overall ability to solve problems, and educational levels, to name but a few - were not examined by this study. More research is required here, something we will undertake in the next phase of the Social Cohesion Radar project.

What policy measures exist that could be strategically implemented to increase social cohesion? We still know too little to advance policymaking recommendations that go beyond the admittedly very general goal of increasing prosperity and jobs and preventing poverty. We would need a deeper understanding of how social forces interact with overall societal conditions to generate cohesion on the state level. Moreover, it cannot be expected that a one-size-fits-all solution exists that can be used everywhere. For example, the situation in Germany's city-states is unique and cannot be directly equated with the country's larger states.

Virtually all of Germany's states - with, perhaps, the exception of Baden-Wurttemberg and Bavaria - have individual strengths and weaknesses when it comes to social cohesion. The weaknesses, we would suggest, offer the best possibilities for intervention. In the case of the three city-states, this applies to the "lack of norms," meaning the low level of respect accorded the social rules of coexistence, something that presumably results from the anonymity of living in a major urban center.

Societal control is undoubtedly stronger in more rural settings. In Saarland, there is primarily room for improvement when it comes to accepting diversity; in Lower Saxony in the area of trust in others; in Hesse, North Rhine-Westphalia and Rhineland-Palatinate in identification with the community and civic participation. In the eastern states there is a more general need for improvement. Here social cohesion must be promoted across the board, above all through measures targeting structural and economic issues. When it comes to social cohesion, it thus seems that Germany still has a way to go before it can be considered a truly unified country.

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