

The complete study is only available in German:

**Radar gesellschaftlicher Zusammenhalt**

Sozialer Zusammenhalt in Deutschland 2017

*Bertelsmann Stiftung (Hrsg.)*

English Summary

## Social Cohesion in Germany 2017

## Key findings in brief

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Despite all the dire predictions, Germany continues to exhibit a high level of social cohesion. Even the country's growing cultural and religious diversity is not at odds with its degree of togetherness. Yet, there are clear indications of potential threats: for example, the generally perceived lack of social justice and the gaping cleavage in togetherness between east and west as well as between structurally weak regions and such that are flourishing. To that end, cohesion is much weaker in Germany's eastern federal states than its western ones. The federal states with the highest levels of cohesion are Saarland, Baden-Württemberg, and Bavaria.

These are the core findings from the Social Cohesion Radar (SCR), for which Bertelsmann Stiftung collected fresh data in 2017 by surveying more than 5,000 people throughout the country. The goal was to examine cohesion in terms of its strengths, weaknesses, causes, and effects. For this empirical study, social cohesion is defined as the quality of communal life and is viewed as a multidimensional phenomenon. High levels of cohesion result from strong social relations, a positive feeling of connectedness to the community, and a strong focus on the common good.

On the **overall index of social cohesion**, which utilizes a scale of 0 to 100, Germany's federal states score between 57 and 63 points, thereby all being above the scale's average of 50 points. Despite these favorable results, three quarters of the respondents report they feel social cohesion in Germany is endangered at least to some degree. The results, however, vary widely across the federal states. While Hamburg (27 percent), Bremen (31 percent) and Rhineland-Palatinate (33 percent) have the lowest percentages of people expressing a clear concern, people living in Thuringia, Brandenburg, Saxony, and Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania are particularly pessimistic. In fact, 55 percent of the respondents in Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania agree with the statement that "cohesion is endangered."

On the other hand, 68 percent of respondents throughout the country describe the level of cohesion in their immediate environment as good, with just under 7 percent saying there is little cohesion. Thus, people's concrete everyday experiences are better than what they assume is the case for the country as a whole or what the public debate seems to suggest. This impression changes little when the federal states are considered separately:

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Only a minority of respondents feels there is little cohesion in their own community, a belief that is expressed most often in Hesse and Bremen, at 13 and 12 percent, respectively. People in Saarland have the most positive perceptions, with 81 percent saying social cohesion is strong and only 3 percent saying it is weak.

On the federal level, people in Germany are very accepting of **diversity**, a dimension that scores 79 points on the measurement scale, in absolute terms the highest value found among all dimensions. Respondents also feel that **social rules** are generally respected (77 points). In addition, they identify closely with their community. Markedly lower scores can be found in the domain of connectedness. In terms of **perception of fairness**, for example, only a very small subset of respondents believes that economic prosperity is distributed fairly. Agreement rates vary from just 1 percent in Brandenburg to 15 percent in Bremen. In all of Germany's federal states, the vast majority of people feels that economic gains are not being distributed in an equitable manner.

This injustice as perceived by the respondents corresponds to empirical data which show that **actual inequalities and a lack of opportunities to participate** do in fact exist in German society. Social cohesion is thus weaker in areas where there are high levels of unemployment and where many people live in poverty or are at risk of it – something that becomes even clearer at the regional than at the state level. Above all, high levels of **youth unemployment** correlate negatively to cohesion. A similar correlation exists for areas with a large number of **students who have failed to attain a minimum qualification in the secondary school system** and for areas with **aging populations**. In contrast, cohesion is stronger in those areas where the average **standard of living** is high and where more people view globalization positively. One factor that does not influence social cohesion is the number of **foreigners or migrants** living in a region or federal state.

Finally, a relationship can be found between **values** and social cohesion. For example, cohesion is higher in regions in which humanistic values, such as honesty, and a willingness to assume responsibility, play a leading role. Conversely, it is lower in areas where security-related values predominate, such as stability, protecting oneself from danger, and harmony. Other values emerged as salient on the national level, where a strong focus on achievement correlates negatively with cohesion, and being open to new developments correlates positively.

### How do the states and regions differ from each other?

In sum, it can be concluded that cohesion is stronger in those regions and states in Germany in which cosmopolitan attitudes prevail and in which more young people live and can find jobs. It is also true of those areas which have been more successful preventing social exclusion. This is not as often the case, on average, in **Germany's eastern states** and they therefore score lower on the overall index than their western counterparts, as was also found in the 2014 SCR study. Moreover, there is always an eastern federal state ranking last for each of the single dimensions and for the overall index, if one classi-

fies Berlin as an eastern state. There are, however, **regions in western Germany** that also exhibit comparatively low levels of cohesion. They can be found in northern Lower Saxony, for example, and in southern and eastern North Rhine–Westphalia.

The current study suggests that social cohesion tends to be higher in more sparsely populated regions than more densely populated ones, even if the former include structurally weak rural areas. This finding is based on the fact that, in contrast to the period from 1990 to 2012, Germany's **city-states** (Berlin, Hamburg and Bremen) have performed worse in the overall index than its larger non-city states. One reason for this could be the unequal distribution of economic prosperity and the growing divide between rich and poor that are evident in the country's major cities. Along with their counterparts in Thuringia, Saxony and Brandenburg, more than 70 percent of the respondents in Hamburg and Berlin feel that economic gains are not distributed in a just manner. Bremen is an exception here. The city-states also rank poorly when it comes to respecting social rules, with conflicts apparently more likely in tight urban spaces home to a diversity of interests. That makes it all the more remarkable that in all of the country's city-states, diversity is widely accepted even though considerably more people of non-German heritage live there than in more rural regions and in Germany's eastern states (where acceptance of diversity is particularly low).

### How can we strengthen social cohesion?

As studies have shown, social cohesion depends on structural factors, but it is also a question of mentalities: Cohesion benefits from individuals who have an open outlook on life and who believe that all people, regardless of social status, heritage or culture, have something in common.

When looking for practical solutions for strengthening the degree of cohesion, we must therefore examine mentalities as much as we do policy tools capable of **reducing social inequality and preventing poverty**. Thus, educational, social, and economic policy responses must be combined with an awareness of the opportunities that arise when **proactive, inclusive steps are taken to promote a sense of community**. Policy makers must do their part here, as must civil society. When people live in close proximity but rarely interact or engage with each other, measures must be taken to include them more in community life, for example by promoting volunteering activities that reflect modern lifestyles. And opportunities for cross-cultural and inter-religious exchange that can help reduce feelings of not belonging are needed most where people encounter each other every day: In the cities and towns in which they reside.

Special attention must be given to Germany's eastern federal states. The lower scores for cohesion found there reveal that the policy goal of **aligning living standards in the east and west** has clearly not been achieved. To that extent, efforts must be made to improve the **economic situation** in the eastern states and to develop civil society – by getting local people involved – while also promoting the acceptance of diversity.

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When it comes to fostering social cohesion, more attention must also be paid to larger **cities**, since threats to cohesion are more visible there than elsewhere. Yet, as a result, cities must respond more quickly to the **challenge** of rethinking their approaches and **developing innovative solutions**. At the same time, the **possibilities** for increasing cohesion also become apparent in cities, for example when the people residing there show they have learned how to deal with diversity and build trust.

Strengthening cohesion is a political issue, something that becomes evident when one considers that, as the study demonstrates, the federal states and regions in Germany with higher levels of cohesion are more open to addressing sociopolitical challenges such as the recent task of welcoming and integrating large numbers of refugees. To that extent, initiatives for building cohesion within the community also **have a role to play in integration policy**, a topic that today's diverse societies must concern themselves with in particular. Another noteworthy finding is that those areas in Germany with a strong sense of community are home to **people who are happier and more satisfied**.

## Social Cohesion Radar: Model and methodology

The presented findings are based on the Social Cohesion Radar, an empirical study carried out by researchers at Jacobs University Bremen in 2017 on behalf of Bertelsmann Stiftung. The study is based on a representative survey of more than 5,000 people conducted by the infas social research institute. Combining the survey results with socioeconomic, demographic, and cultural data enabled the researchers to gain a clearer understanding of which factors have a positive or negative impact on social cohesion.

A follow-up to its predecessor from the year 2014, this study also goes one step further, since it does not rely on already available information but makes use of survey data that were collected and evaluated especially for the current research project. This has made it possible for the first time to examine cohesion in greater detail than just at the level of Germany's 16 federal states – namely, by “zooming in” on 79 regions, thereby taking a differentiated and yet representative look at the conditions under which cohesion arises and is experienced in everyday life. The sample size of over 5,000 people ensures that even in Germany's smallest state – Bremen – significantly more respondents were queried than is the case in surveys of the general public, for which less people are usually interviewed.

Another new feature of the current study is that, in addition to relative findings, it allows for absolute statements about cohesion and its various dimensions. This results in more possibilities for drawing comparisons within the study and will make it easier in forthcoming efforts to ascertain changes over time as measured on an absolute scale.

All SCR studies – which include two international analyses and an in-depth examination of cohesion in the city of Bremen – work with a multidimensional model of social cohesion. The model has three domains divided into a total of nine dimensions, with empirical indicators assigned to each dimen-

sion. The dimensions can also be summed to calculate an overall score for social cohesion. The three domains and nine dimensions are:

**1. Social relations**

- 1.1 The quality of social networks
- 1.2 The trust people have in others
- 1.3 Acceptance of diversity and other lifestyles

**2. Connectedness**

- 2.1 Identification with the society one lives in
- 2.2 The trust people have in society's institutions
- 2.3 The extent to which people believe they are being treated fairly

**3. Focus on the common good**

- 3.1 Solidarity and the degree to which people are willing to help others
- 3.2 The willingness to abide by basic social rules
- 3.3 The degree to which people participate in civic life and political processes

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