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# Immigration, Diversity and Social Cohesion

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This briefing discusses the meaning, dimensions, measurement and determinants of social cohesion. Drawing on research in the US, UK and other European countries, it focuses on what we know and don't know about the relationship between immigration, diversity and social cohesion.

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### Key Points

- There is significant policy concern about the impacts of immigration on social cohesion. However, most research analyses the relationship between diversity (typically measured in terms of racial and ethnic composition of the population) and social cohesion, not between immigration (typically measured based on place of birth and/or nationality) and social cohesion.  
[More...](#)
- There is no universally agreed definition of social cohesion. Most definitions involve notions of 'solidarity' and 'togetherness'. A wide range of

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### Understanding the Evidence

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(which is typically measured using data on foreign-born or [foreign nationals](#), see the Migration Observatory briefing "[Who Counts as a Migrant? Definitions and their Consequences](#)"). One of the most common measures of diversity is the index of ethnic fractionalization, which measures the probability that two randomly selected individuals (who may or may not be migrants) in a

## The UK population has become more diverse over time

In 1995, individuals born outside the UK accounted for about 7% of the country's population. By 2015, this was over 13%. This increase was mirrored by an increase in the share of individuals of non-white ethnicity in the population: the proportion of individuals of non-white ethnicity, both UK-born and foreign-born, grew from 6% in 1995 to 13% in 2015 (Figure 1). As highlighted in the Understanding the Evidence section, it is important to note that migration and ethnicity are very different issues, and that most analyses of diversity and its impacts on social cohesion are based on ethnic diversity rather than country of birth.

### Figure 1

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## There is no universally accepted definition of social cohesion

Although commonly used in policy debates in the UK and other developed democracies, there is no universally accepted definition of social cohesion. Social cohesion is often identified as 'solidarity' and 'togetherness'. Social disorder, or rather social disorganization is often thought to be the opposite of social cohesion. Frequently social cohesion is simply defined as 'solidarity' and somewhat interchangeably used together with the term 'community cohesion'. As is the case with the related concept of social capital, cohesion seems better identifiable through its possible outcomes. Forrest and Kearns (2001: 2129) provide the following popular summary of the domains of community and social cohesion: common values and a civic culture, social order and social control, social solidarity and reductions in wealth disparities, social networks and social capital, place attachment and identity.

Other British policy reports highlight the peaceful co-existence of diverse groups as the heart of social cohesion and identify a cohesive community as one where:

*"there is a common vision and a sense of belonging for all communities; the diversity of people's different backgrounds and circumstances are appreciated and positively valued; those from*

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## Social cohesion is most commonly measured in

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common indicators used in empirical research, although some studies include traditional measures of social capital such as membership in associations and political participation, as well as crime and “collective efficacy” i.e. the extent to which neighbours pull together to solve community problems (Sampson et al. 1997, Blake et al. 2008). Some researchers argue that a preoccupation with trust as an outcome seems unjustifiable since generalized trust is but one of the dimensions of social cohesion and is one of the measures most vulnerable to the effects of diversity, unlike others such as associational membership (Hooghe 2007).

It is important to note that very few studies measure the actual level of social contact between neighbours in diverse communities despite the significance of contact for the establishment and maintenance of community cohesion (Cantle 2005). Consequently, the premises of “contact theory” are not directly tested: namely, whether increased contact between people from different ethnic groups decreases prejudice and thus stimulates cooperation (Allport 1954, Hewstone 2000, Hewstone 2006). We will see how important is to account for the role of actual contact in the next section of this briefing.

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## Does increased diversity undermine social cohesion?

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neighbourhood trust (most of the neighbours in this community can be trusted). Most of the empirical literature

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al. (2008) comparing US and Canada observed a strong negative effect of diversity on trust; however, they also found that contact may neutralize but not make this relationship positive. Most notably, Putnam (2007) argues that diversity seems to alienate people in general and in his words pushes them towards 'hunkering down' i.e. towards segregation and isolation. More recently, Abascal and Baldassarri (2015) point out that diversity indices obscure the distinction between in and out-group contact. Using the same data as Putnam (2007), they show that diversity is negatively associated with trust only for white respondents but not for any other ethnic group.

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[Return to top](#)

## The evidence from Europe and the UK is more mixed: income inequality and deprivation may be more important determinants

Some cross-national comparative research in Europe shows similar results with trust used as a proxy for cohesiveness (Gerritsen and Lubbers 2010). However, the use of trust as the sole predictor of community spirit and togetherness has been severely criticised (Hooghe 2007) since generalized

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Data from British neighbourhoods also do not conform to findings from the US. Fieldhouse and Cutts (2010), comparing

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of diversity since the association between diversity and economic deprivation is taken into account. Still, with British data based on the Citizenship Survey 2005, Laurence (2009) argued that rising diversity is associated with lower levels of neighbourhood trust.

The studies based on British data such as Laurence and Heath (2008), Letki (2008) and Sturgis et al. (2010) have raised the question whether it is income inequality, in particular deprivation and impoverishment of an area, rather than diversity per se that serves to estrange people, a sentiment echoed in much of the British policy research and reports based on qualitative in-depth interviews (Cantle 2005). Most recently, Sturgis et al. (2013) establish that neighbourhood ethnic diversity in London is positively related to the perceived social cohesion of neighbourhood residents with control for economic deprivation. Moreover, it is ethnic segregation within neighbourhoods that is associated with lower levels of perceived social cohesion. Both effects are strongly moderated by the age of the respondents with diversity having a positive effect for the young.

Kawalerowicz and Biggs (2015), exploring 2011 London riots, find that rioters were more likely to come from economically disadvantaged neighbourhoods and neighbourhoods where ethnic fractionalization was high. Further exploration of the intersection between ethnicity and disadvantage is thus very pertinent.

Some analysts have argued that contact plays an important role in moderating the relationship between diversity and

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the Oxford Diversity Project) and the Ethnic Minority British Election Study 2010 conclude that if anything diversity should

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diversity has no detrimental effect. This is a result primarily focusing on the white British majority. Importantly, it seems that diversity may undermine local (neighbourhood) social capital yet has little effect on individuals' total levels of engagement (Laurence 2014). Thus, individuals in diverse communities have less neighbourhood-centric networks but other active and healthy ones.

There have also been calls to account for the difference between positive and negative contacts in diverse settings. The recent Casey report (2016) suggests that negative interactions can compound to create a volatile atmosphere at the neighbourhood level. With European data, Laurence and Bentley (2017) provide intriguing evidence that in more diverse communities, the frequency of positive inter-group contact but also negative inter-group contact increases. Increasing diversity may therefore lead to a polarisation in attitudes towards immigration as a result of, and not due to a lack of, inter-group contact. This research suggests a role for mediators at the community level, such as community centres that provide a non-confrontational environment for people of a variety of backgrounds and interests. Similarly the All Party Parliamentary Group on Social Inclusion (2017) argued that strong institutions are needed at the neighbourhood level to facilitate interaction (such as welcome centres).

Datasets such as Understanding Society and the Citizenship Survey allow further examination of the role of contact in different settings: neighbourhood, workplace, voluntary

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**Evidence gaps and limitations**



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...since at local authority level, there is a strong correlation between previous diversity levels and recent migration (Saggar et al. 2012).

Another limitation relates to disagreements about how to define and what indicators to use to measure social cohesion. Frequently, when a measure other than trust is used as seen from the literature overview, no negative relationship between cohesion and diversity can be detected and this is important since the instruments on which the measurement of trust is based in survey analysis are far from perfect (Nannestad 2008).

Furthermore, in the last few years, there has been an expansion of the literature on the integration of migrants and minorities in Europe that reflects on the possible impact of the multicultural model on patterns of incorporation. There is a growing concern that segregation, allowed through multiculturalism and tolerance of separate parallel lives of minorities and the majority, negatively affects the prospects of migrants to accumulate human capital relevant for successful employment in the receiving society (and future employability) such as language fluency (Cameron 2013). In a similar fashion to the cohesion and trust debates, integration research produces conflicting and mixed results. Koopmans (2010) claims that multicultural policies which ensure that non-EU15 immigrants are granted easy access to equal rights do not provide strong incentives for host-country language acquisition, labour market participation and the formation of interethnic contacts. By contrast, Wright and Bloomfield (2012) do not find any support for the

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...with majority members allow for better position in the occupational hierarchy for minorities

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challenged by broad interpretation of what cohesion might mean and the work of Heath (2018) points to this complexity. It is crucial to consider generational change and the rich tapestry of migration, majority and minority experiences in the adaptation process should become a primary focus of research to add depth to otherwise heated debates that are often based on extrapolations and assumptions.

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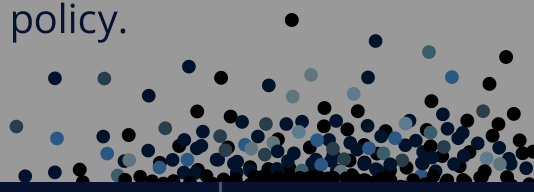
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