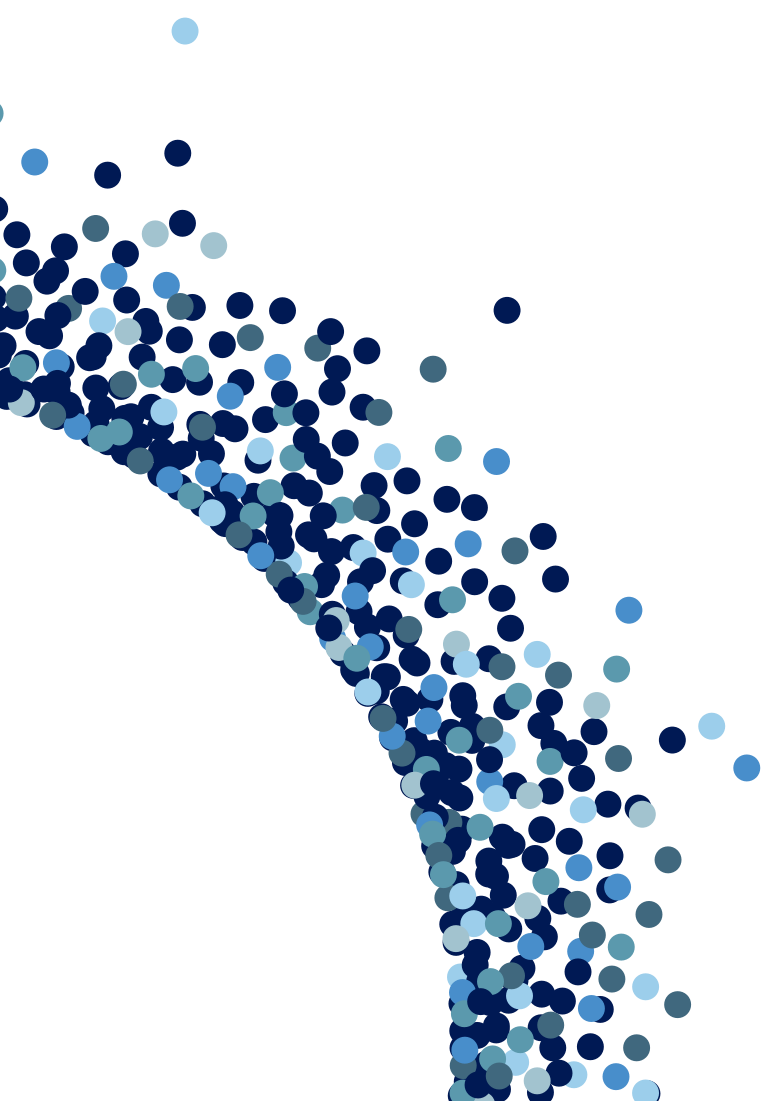




BRIEFING

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.

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.

There is no universally agreed definition of social cohesion. Most definitions involve notions of 'solidarity' and 'togetherness'. A wide range of indicators have been used to measure and analyse social cohesion. The most common indicators include measures of trust and common social norms.

The empirical evidence from the US suggests a negative relationship between diversity and cohesion. The evidence from the UK and rest of Europe is more mixed. Results differ depending on the indicators used.

British and other European studies have raised the yet unresolved question whether it is income inequality, in particular deprivation and impoverishment of an area, rather than diversity per se that serves to estrange people.

Understanding the evidence

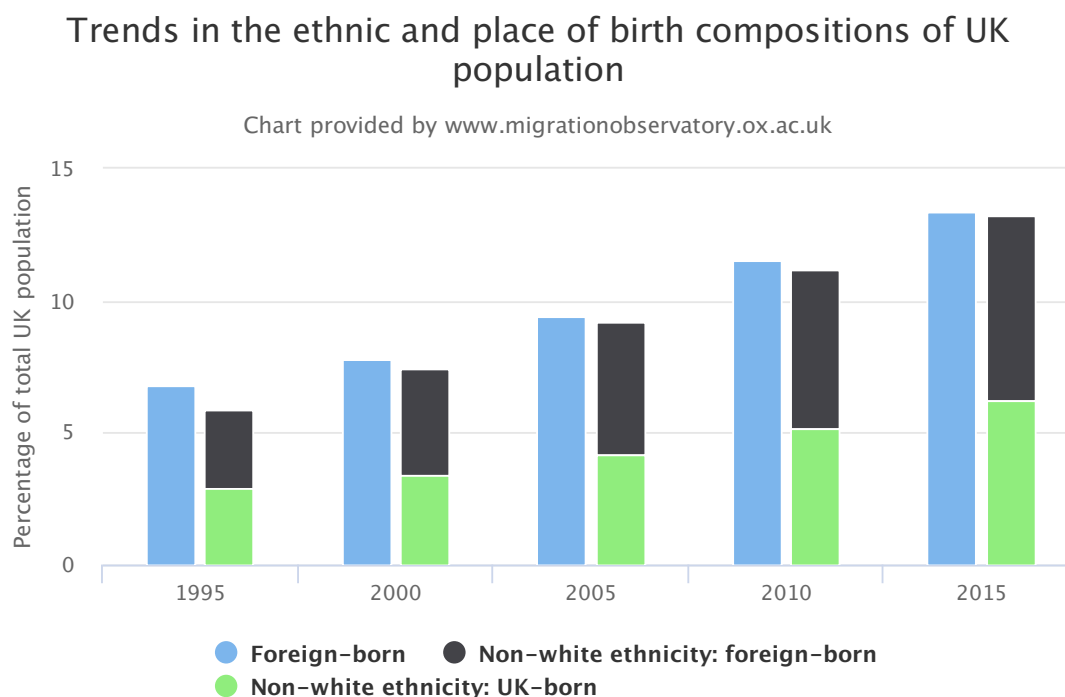
There is significant policy concern about the impacts of immigration on social cohesion. However, most research analyses the relationship between diversity and social cohesion, not between immigration and social cohesion. In theory, diversity can be defined and measured in different ways, e.g. by ethnicity, religion, place of birth, nationality and so on. In practice, most empirical studies define diversity by the racial and ethnic composition of the neighbourhood, rather than immigration status (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 neighbourhood belong to the same ethnic group.

Data sources typically used in studies of diversity and social cohesion in the UK include the Census (for measuring diversity) and the [Citizenship Survey](#) which was discontinued in 2011 but included a range of questions about attitudes toward and experiences of immigration and integration, as well as other topics relating to community life.

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



Source: UK Labour Force Survey. Note: there are minor changes in the definition of the ethnicity variable over time.

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 different backgrounds have similar life opportunities; and strong and positive relationships are being developed between people from different

backgrounds in the workplace, in schools and within neighbourhoods” (Cantle 2005: 14).

Social cohesion is most commonly measured in terms of trust and common social norms

The lack of a unified definition raises a variety of challenges for the measurement of social cohesion. Most researchers have assumed that high levels of cohesion and social capital in a community will be reflected in high levels of trust between individuals and the observance of common social norms. Therefore, trust and norms are among the most 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.

Does increased diversity undermine social cohesion? The evidence from the US suggests a negative relationship

Frequently, the focus in social cohesion studies is on trust – generalized (whether most people can be trusted) or neighbourhood trust (most of the neighbours in this community can be trusted). Most of the empirical literature on this subject finds that the relationship between diversity and trust is negative – the more diverse a community is, the less likely individuals in it are to be trusting. The trend seems to hold especially strong for the US. Costa and Khan (2003) established with the General Social Survey that people in more diverse neighbourhoods trust their neighbours less and are less likely to be politically or communally involved. Alesina and La Ferrara (2000, 2005) found that trust in general and more specifically interpersonal trust is lower in more racially heterogeneous communities in the US. Stolle et 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.

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 trust is but one of the components of social cohesion. Studies which focus on different dimensions of social capital besides interpersonal trust offer evidence that economic inequality and the democratic patterns in European societies are more important for explaining European countries’ different levels of social capital and cohesion (Gesthuizen et al. 2009).

Data from British neighbourhoods also do not conform to findings from the US. Fieldhouse and Cutts (2010), comparing the US and the UK, suggested that in Britain, diversity has a negative effect on both shared social norms and civic participation, but that these negative effects are offset by the positive effect of co-ethnic concentration. In other words, areas that are more diverse have higher rates of co-ethnic density which in turn, Fieldhouse and Cutts suggest, assists the building of more cohesive communities. Laurence and Heath (2008) and Letki (2008), looking at different predictors of social cohesion in the 2005 and 2001 Citizenship Surveys, argue that there is no strong evidence for an eroding effect of diversity once 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 cohesion. With British data based on the Citizenship Survey 2005, Laurence (2011) argued that rising diversity is associated with lower levels of neighbourhood trust, although people with “bridging ties” (i.e. ties connecting individuals belonging to different minority groups) have less negative experiences. Similarly to Abascal and Baldassari in the US (2015), Demireva and Heath (2014), using the Managing Cultural Diversity Survey 2010 (administered by the Oxford Diversity Project) and the Ethnic Minority British Election Study 2010 conclude that if anything diversity should be encouraged to cement the integration progress of migrants and foster stronger identification with Britain in the second generation as for non-white British populations living with more out-groupers does not impact negatively upon trust. Heath and Demireva (2013) establish that high levels of bonding social capital coexist with positive orientations towards integration, high levels of British identity and low levels of hostility to white people. Laurence (2014) observes that contact moderates the negative effect of community diversity – in other words for those that have formed ties, 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 associations and more research is needed in the formation and strength of inter-ethnic contacts, positive and negative. For example, Laurence et al. (2018) demonstrate that workplace diversity has a very positive effect but that individuals experiencing negative contact can diminish this trend.

Evidence gaps and limitations

As highlighted at the beginning of this briefing, a key limitation of the available literature remains its focus on diversity and social cohesion, rather than immigration and social cohesion. Communities can become more diverse without immigration and immigration does not always increase ethnic or racial diversity. It is therefore very difficult to use the available research to make strong claims about the relationship between immigration and social cohesion 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 Bloemraad (2012) do not find any support for the hypothesis that multiculturalism has undermined the integration of immigrants and minority groups, using data from the European Social Survey and US Community, Involvement Democracy Survey. With British data (Understanding Society), Nandi and Platt (2013) find that minorities express strong British identity with an increase across generations, a strong and positive finding. With German data (Lancee 2012) establishes that bridging ties with majority members allow for better position in the occupational hierarchy for minorities.

A common feature of the studies reviewed here is that they focus on a few aspects of integration such as identity or employability whereas it can be argued that integration is a multidimensional, multi-stage phenomenon that cannot be reduced to one or two outcomes. A notable exception is the work of Lessard-Phillips (2016) which discusses the multi-dimensionality of integration and links contact with a variety of other integration outcomes such as neighbourhood segregation or cultural incorporation. We are still somewhat 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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The Migration Observatory

Based at the Centre on Migration, Policy and Society (COMPAS) at the University of Oxford, the Migration Observatory provides independent, authoritative, evidence-based analysis of data on migration and migrants in the UK, to inform media, public and policy debates, and to generate high quality research on international migration and public policy issues. The Observatory's analysis involves experts from a wide range of disciplines and departments at the University of Oxford.



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