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Gesellschaftlicher
Zusammenhalt in
Baden-Württemberg

English Summary
**Social Cohesion in
Baden-Württemberg 2022**

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Baden-Württemberg

MINISTERIUM FÜR SOZIALES, GESUNDHEIT UND INTEGRATION

| BertelsmannStiftung

SUMMARY

Background

Since March 2020, the coronavirus pandemic has been exerting a significant influence on social cohesion in Germany. The reasons for this lie mainly in the COVID-related restrictions placed on public life, the resulting economic recession, the associated psychological and social burdens felt by the population and children and young adults in particular, intensified political debates on the trade-offs between public health and civil liberties, and the growing spread of conspiracy theories. Though far from over, the coronavirus pandemic has left a lasting mark on society. The study presented here is part of a broader Bertelsmann Stiftung project, the “Social Cohesion Radar,” which has been exploring the state of social cohesion in Germany, in regional contexts, and in international comparison for more than ten years. The foundations of this project, as well as the present study itself, were developed in collaboration with a research team from the Jacobs University Bremen. The current study was made possible with the financial support of the Baden-Württemberg Ministry of Social Affairs, Health and Integration.

Data basis

In 2019, just before the outbreak of the pandemic, a comprehensive study of social cohesion was conducted in the German state of Baden-Württemberg. Providing a baseline from which to draw upon, this study has made it possible to examine in greater detail what has changed during the course of the pandemic. For this purpose, a total of 2,716 people aged 16 and older were surveyed online by Norstadt GmbH on behalf of the Bertelsmann Stiftung in Baden-Württemberg from December 2021 to January 2022. Their responses have been compared with those of 1,398 people who were interviewed by telephone in January and February 2019 by the Infratest opinion research institute, also on behalf of the Bertelsmann Stiftung. Survey data for Baden-Württemberg from two additional nationwide surveys conducted in 2017 and 2020 have also been used for these purposes.

Research question and concept

This study examines how social cohesion in Baden Württemberg has changed over time, how different population groups experience it, and what impact the pandemic has had on cohesion. Furthermore, it focuses on the life situation of adolescents or young adults aged 16 to 24. The study is based on the multidimensional concept underlying the Social Cohesion Radar, which views social cohesion as the quality of connectedness in a territorially defined community. Strong cohesion is characterized by (1) resilient social relationships, (2) the positive emotional attachment of its members to the community, and (3) a strong orientation toward the common good. These three areas of cohesion are each broken down into three sub-dimensions, giving a total of nine dimensions. Each individual dimension is measured through a series of questions in the survey.

Key findings

Social cohesion has declined significantly in Baden-Württemberg since 2019

In 2019, Baden-Württemberg still maintained an overall score of 63.8 (on a scale 0 to 100) on the index of social cohesion. This score fell by 10 points to 53.8 for the surveys held in December 2021 and January 2022. Given the minimal changes observed in the past, this decline is particularly noteworthy. Between 2017 and 2019, for example, the overall index score in Baden-Württemberg rose by 0.8 points, from 63 to 63.8. Previous nationwide surveys also typically showed very little fluctuation. Comparable surveys for all of Germany also indicate that the decline is not specific to Baden-Württemberg, and that the developments specific to the survey period itself cannot account for the lower scores alone.

Cohesion has declined in all nine dimensions and all regions

Social Cohesion Radar studies distinguish nine different dimensions (social networks, trust in fellow citizens, acceptance of diversity, identification with the community, trust in institutions, perception of fairness, solidarity and willingness to help, respect for social rules and social participation). For each of these nine dimensions, the study records a significant decline in the pertinent scores. The scores for Identification (- 20 points), for Social Networks (- 14.5 points), and for Solidarity and Helpfulness (- 12.6 points) fell the most. The smallest decline was recorded in the Perception of Justice (- 1.3 points) dimension, which registered particularly low scores already in the 2019 survey. Similar trends are observed at the district level as well, as the study featured shows the same declines underway in 11 administrative units within the state of Baden-Württemberg.

For the first time, a majority of respondents also perceive a disruption of cohesion in their own neighborhood

In addition to conducting an objective measure of cohesion in the nine dimensions, the Social Cohesion Radar also regularly asks respondents directly about their subjective assessment of cohesion. The most recent survey shows that almost half of the respondents (48 %) now agree with the statement that cohesion is at risk. For the first time ever, however, only a minority of respondents (47 %) consider cohesion in their own neighborhood to be “good” or even “very good.” In 2019, this figure was still at 80 %. One likely reason for this decline is that, in contrast to previous crises, the pandemic has had a tangible across-the-board negative impact on almost everyone’s daily lives and has thus also changed people’s view of their immediate neighborhood.

At-risk groups experience significantly less cohesion

The 2019 study showed that social cohesion is experienced differently by different population groups. This can be interpreted as an indication that certain at-risk or vulnerable groups are less integrated into society and face greater barriers to participating in social life. The results of the current study again show that poorer populations, those not in employment, individuals with lower educational attainment levels, people with a migration background and the chronically ill experience less social cohesion. Lower scores are also found among people living in large urban areas and 45- to 64-year-olds. It should also be emphasized that women and single parents also perceive lower levels of cohesion compared with men or people living in other or non-traditional familial arrangements.

Widespread sense of being political dispossessed has a strong impact on how cohesion is experienced

A uniformly strong effect of feeling left behind by policymakers emerges across all nine dimensions. About 60% of respondents feel that their government has not done enough for people like themselves in the context of the coronavirus pandemic. These respondents – regardless of their socio-economic status – give lower scores for cohesion in all nine dimensions, in some cases considerably so. Unsurprisingly, this effect is most pronounced in the dimension of Trust in Institutions. Here, people who feel neglected have a score of 18 points below the comparison group. Younger respondents, women and people with a migration background are more likely to feel that their needs have not been sufficiently considered by policymakers. In contrast, respondents with a higher formal education level and higher income are less likely to report this perception.

Increase in psycho-emotional stress during the pandemic

Overall, the coronavirus pandemic has led to considerable psycho-emotional stress among the population. About 30% of the respondents report feeling frequently or even constantly tired and/or exhausted since the outbreak of the pandemic. One in five respondents complain of suffering regular or constant problems with concentration. Anxiety, nervousness or decision-making difficulties have also increased. At the same time, however, 60% of respondents say they have suffered little or not at all as a consequence of the coronavirus pandemic measures.

More conflicts between different population groups

A total of 62% of those surveyed say that cohesion in Germany has become weaker as a result of the pandemic. Around one in five thinks the pandemic has weakened cohesion in their own neighborhood. The majority of respondents also believe that society will emerge weakened from the pandemic in the long term. Two-thirds of respondents say that, from their perspective, conflicts between different population groups have increased, and a relative majority say they tend to encounter more hostility than solidarity in everyday life. In their own family and among their own friends and acquaintances, 17 and 14% of respondents, respectively, report an increase in quarrels and conflict.

Susceptibility for conspiracy theories widespread among the population

Conspiracy theories have drawn a great deal of attention during the pandemic. The study shows that the basic potential for believing in conspiracy theories is relatively high. After all, 42% of respondents report thinking that the government conceals the truth about many events, 54% believe that politicians do not reveal their true motives and 32% believe that there are secret organizations at work with considerable influence on the decisions made in politics.

General situation for young people is viewed critically in some cases

In addition to measuring cohesion, this study focused on the situation of young people between the ages of 16 and 24. While an overwhelming majority (85%) of respondents believe their respective places of residence are good places for a young person to grow up in, a closer look at the findings also reveals some problems. Between 29% to 36% of respondents felt that there is a lack of attractive recreational and support services as well as contact persons for young people in their neighborhoods. More than half of the respondents believe that the needs of young people have not been sufficiently considered during the coronavirus pandemic. More than 40% of respondents overall also stated that the general situation had worsened for young people, while around half perceived no change.

Young people particularly affected by the pandemic

At the time of the survey in December 2021 and January 2022, respondents between the ages of 16 and 24 were significantly more likely to have already been infected with the coronavirus than older respondents. Similarly, younger respondents were more likely to report observing severe cases in their own surroundings and to have experienced severe symptoms themselves.

Higher psycho-emotional stress in young people than in older people

Respondents between the ages of 16 to 24 also exhibit greater psycho-emotional stress in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic than those over 25. For example, 28% of young respondents say they always or often feel anxious and nervous compared to 15% of older respondents. Difficulty concentrating is reported by 40% of young respondents but only 18% of older respondents. Feeling exhausted and tired is reported by 47% of respondents between the ages of 16 and 24, but only 29% of older respondents. Young people are also more critical of how the government has handled the pandemic and are significantly more likely to feel that their needs have not been adequately addressed (71% and 58%, respectively).

Recommendations for action

The study results point to numerous areas where policymakers and civil society leaders can begin tackling the problem of weakened cohesion as we face crises in the future. This includes introducing targeted measures that improve the opportunities for participation among those population groups experiencing weaker social cohesion. Reducing the barriers to participation experienced by women or people with a migration background is one such example. Providing formats facilitative of dialogue and areas where people can meet and engage with each other can help restore some of the interpersonal trust that has been lost. Providing adequate funding to civil society organizations seeking to revitalize the social life of local communities as quickly as possible is also essential.

The Living Values program

The Living Values program explores issues relevant to social cohesion and the ways in which religion and values influence how we live together in diverse societies. We conduct research and publish studies on these topics in the framework of our Religion Monitor and Social Cohesion Radar. Our program works with various projects and approaches aimed at strengthening values in society and actively builds networks involving civil society actors committed to social cohesion.



If you are interested in learning more about our activities or would like to receive updates on recent research findings, studies and events, please use the QR code provided or click on the link below.

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