



The full study is available
in German only:

**Gesellschaftlicher Zusammenhalt
in Zeiten der Pandemie.**

Ergebnisse einer Längsschnitt-
studie in Deutschland 2020 mit
drei Messzeitpunkten.

English Summary

Social cohesion in a pandemic era

Results of a longitudinal survey with three survey
waves conducted in Germany in 2020

Key findings

Social cohesion: Social cohesion remained stable throughout 2020. A slight increase in certain aspects of cohesion was observed in the middle of the year which, however, more or less evaporated by the end of the year. The perceived threat to cohesion has also changed little over the course of the last year, and has even shrunk somewhat. People living in precarious circumstances are the least likely to report a reduced fear of threats to social cohesion. This group also shows the strongest return to perceptions reported at the start of the year.

Trust in others: While the middle class proves to be relatively unaffected by corona-related impacts, fluctuations in interpersonal trust are particularly evident among people living in precarious circumstances: This group, which reports the lowest level of interpersonal trust overall, reported a sharp increase in interpersonal trust by the year's midpoint – that is, the period between Germany's two lockdowns – though this falls at the end of the year. Overall, the coronavirus pandemic tends to have a negative impact on interpersonal trust, although the changes measured across individual polling points are generally marginal.

Humanity: On average, respondents surveyed at the end of the year tend to believe that people in Germany care for and help each other. The pandemic has thus resulted in a greater visibility of solidarity in some areas. Notably, however, this more positive perception of the last year is not found among people with a lower economic status. Throughout the year, this group reports a more or less unchanged and proportionally more pessimistic perception. In other words, when it comes to perceptions of demonstrate fellow humanity, this group differs more strongly from other social groups.

Satisfaction with democracy and trust in government:

Perceptions among different social strata of democratic processes are also drifting apart. People with lower levels of education in particular are associated with a decline in satisfaction with democracy over the course of the year. In contrast, those with middle and upper educational attainment levels report a slight increase in satisfaction. The economic middle class stands out with regard to changes recorded in responses over the course of the year on this point. This group shows a particularly large number of respondents reporting greater satisfaction with democracy by the end of the year. Similar but less- clear trends can be seen regarding trust in the federal government. A closer look at individual responses across the year show that perceptions on this point are generally more positive. Overall, and even among those in the economically weakest group, more respondents report a growing rather than waning confidence in the federal government. Particularly significant, however, is the reported gain in confidence among the middle class, which exceeds that found among those with upper income levels, whose reported confidence levels were even higher in February/March of 2020. Overall, policymakers seem to be much more successful in getting people in the middle and upper socioeconomic classes on board with their pandemic response measures than they are with people with lower education and income levels.

Concerns about the future: In the second half of the year, concerns about what the future holds increases among all groups surveyed. The middle class shows the strongest increase in worries about the future, while the largest share of those with major concerns about the future is found among those living in precarious circumstances. Significantly fewer people with higher socioeconomic status report worrying about the future, and the increase in their concern

over the second half of the year is also much smaller than that reported by the other two groups.

Young people under 30: Concerns about the future and feelings of loneliness are particularly pronounced among those respondents under the age of 30. This part of the population feels particularly hard hit by the situation. However, at the end of the year, this age group also reports the largest number of those who feel the measures to combat the pandemic are appropriate.

People living in precarious circumstances: Nearly all results of the study show that the developments of 2020 will have a negative impact on people living in precarious circumstances, that is, those with low incomes and a low level of formal education. This finding highlights the risk that the pandemic holds for exacerbating divisive tendencies in society in the medium term.

Divisiveness: For most respondents, frequent debates with others in their circle about the pandemic is an aspect of everyday life. But not all respondents see these disagreements as indicative of divisiveness. Middle-aged, low-educated respondents living in precarious circumstances in particular feel that society is heavily divided. This perception is often accompanied by a lower level of trust in government, greater opposition to pandemic response measures, and a growing fear that societal consensus is increasingly out of reach.

Data basis and methodology

This study is based on three sets of data collected in 2020: The first set of data was collected from February 5 to March 28 through a telephone survey of 3,010 people aged 16 and older on issues regarding social cohesion. A total of 1,000 participants in this representative survey took part in the second survey conducted between May 27 and June 9. Some 611 people were available for the third survey carried out from December 7 to 14. Common for a panel survey of this kind, the decline in the number of participants found here falls within the expected range. Unlike a representative cross-sectional survey, however, these results cannot be extrapolated to the population as a whole. Calculating representative values was possible for the first two of the three conducted surveys only. These results are documented in the previous study (Bertelsmann Stiftung 2020b).

Survey data are thus available for a total of 611 individuals at three points in time in 2020, which allows for conclusions to be drawn about the social impact of the coronavirus pandemic over time. Conducting a longitudinal survey of the same individuals makes it easier to track and understand changes in attitudes than would be otherwise possible through a comparison of several cross-sectional surveys of different individual respondents conducted at different points in time. Sample quality was statistically tested for all three survey waves. A two-stage weighting procedure was applied for the initial sample. The first stage involved calculating a design-related weight to compensate for the greater probability of contacting individuals in large households with landlines and to ensure an accurate share of landline and mobile telephone sampling as well as regional allocations for the interviews conducted. The second stage involved making adjustments, through an iterative procedure, to known distributions of the population in terms of age, gender, education, migration background and residential status. For the panel sample of the second and third survey waves, additional longitudinal weights were applied.

We based our drawing of the initial sampling of addresses for the first survey on the sampling design established by the Arbeitskreis Deutscher Markt- und Sozialforschungsinstitute e.V. (ADM). Based on the Gabler-Häder method, this approach involves generating telephone numbers synthetically, as generally accessible directories such as telephone books offer only a very limited selection framework, even in the landline network. In order to include mobile-phone users in the survey, a dual-frame approach was used in which both landline and mobile phone sampling frames are used to draw the sample and then combined. In the case of landline sampling in multi-person households, the person to be interviewed is selected at random. The last-birthday method, which involves selecting an interviewee by determining who in the household has most recently had a birthday, has proven to be a valid instrument for this purpose. In the mobile phone sample, the primary user of a non-work-related mobile phone is interviewed. The minimum age required to participate in the survey was 16 in both cases.

The first survey was significantly more comprehensive than the two follow-up surveys. Lasting an average of 30 minutes, the first interview covered several different aspects of social cohesion. Interviews conducted as part of the later survey waves lasted an average of twelve and ten minutes, respectively. Details presented in the methodology report regarding the sample, weighting procedure and panel approach used remain valid.

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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