

COVID-19 Survey

BRIEFING NOTE

SOCIAL COHESION

What has changed during the coronavirus outbreak?

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The *Understanding Society* COVID-19 study is a monthly survey on the experiences and reactions of the UK population to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The survey is an integral part of *Understanding Society*: the UK Household Longitudinal Study. Researchers can link the data from the COVID-19 survey to answers respondents have given in previous (and future) waves of the annual *Understanding Society* survey.

The survey is funded by the Economic and Social Research Council and the Health Foundation.

Fieldwork

The COVID-19 survey is an online questionnaire.

The first wave of the COVID-19 survey was fielded in April 2020. Fieldwork for Wave 2 took place in late May and fieldwork for Wave 3 was carried out in late June. A telephone interview is offered to respondents who wish to take part but live in a household where no-one is a regular internet user. Fieldwork for the telephone interviews was in late-May to early-June 2020. Fieldwork for the online survey is carried out by Ipsos MORI and for the telephone survey by Kantar

The sample

17,450 participants completed the web survey in the first Wave. 14,607 participants completed the web survey in Wave 2 and 14,123 completed the web survey in Wave 3.

For more information on the design, fieldwork and using the COVID-19 survey data please see the [User Guide](#).

Access the data

The COVID-19 survey data is available to researchers via the UK Data Service, Study Number 8644.

University of Essex, Institute for Social and Economic Research. (2020). Understanding Society: COVID-19 Study, 2020. [data collection]. 3rd Edition. UK Data Service. SN: 8644, 10.5255/UKDA-SN-8644-3.

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Survey content

The 20 minute questionnaire includes core content repeated monthly to track changes through the pandemic, as well as rotating content. In Waves 1 – 4 the survey carried questions on:

- Coronavirus symptoms and test results
- Management of long-term health conditions
- Housing
- Caring responsibilities
- Loneliness
- Employment, training and looking for work
- Financial situation
- Partnership changes and 'living apart together'
- Division of domestic labour
- Relationships within the household
- Life satisfaction
- Mental wellbeing
- Sleep
- Nutrition
- Diet and food security
- Home schooling
- Special educational needs (age 12-17)
- Food and alcohol consumption
- Exercise and smoking
- Travel to work
- Contact with family and friends outside the household
- Contact with grandchildren
- Transport use
- Neighbourhood cohesion
- Religion
- Volunteering

Core content is repeated to track changes through the pandemic and rotating content is added on new topics reflecting the changing social, economic and policy context, as well as question proposals from researchers.

Social cohesion

What has changed during the coronavirus outbreak?

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The early days of social distancing restrictions during the Covid-19 pandemic saw a rapid response from local communities demonstrating the support for the NHS, backed by large numbers of volunteers joining the government-supported NHS Volunteers Responders scheme. There have been also signs of increased neighbourliness – we saw numerous media reports about communities coming together through newly formed self-help groups as well as through increased (socially distanced) contact with neighbours when the amount of time spent at home and in the local area dramatically increased. On the other hand, we also witnessed increased levels of ethnic harassment as well as reports on local fights over the lack of compliance to ‘social distancing’ rules. This brings us to the question: did the pandemic make us and our communities come more together or apart?

This briefing note explores changes to social cohesion around the time of the Covid-19 pandemic, particularly among vulnerable groups and communities. We examine both the changes in overall levels of perceived cohesion, as well as patterns of positive and negative changes around the pandemic period compared with patterns of changes observed in pre-pandemic times.

Data & Measures

Data and sample restrictions. We use the following waves of *Understanding Society*: Covid-19 Wave 3 (June 2020), mainstage Wave 3 (2011/12), mainstage Wave 6 (2014/15) and mainstage Wave 9 (2017/18) (for two out of five measures). We restrict the sample to England only. Given that the devolved nations have different policies and timings of restrictions related to social contact, it is important to consider them separately. Furthermore, to examine the changes of social cohesion in less and more disadvantaged neighbourhoods, we use Index of Multiple Deprivation, which is not available in a fully comparable version for all devolved nations.

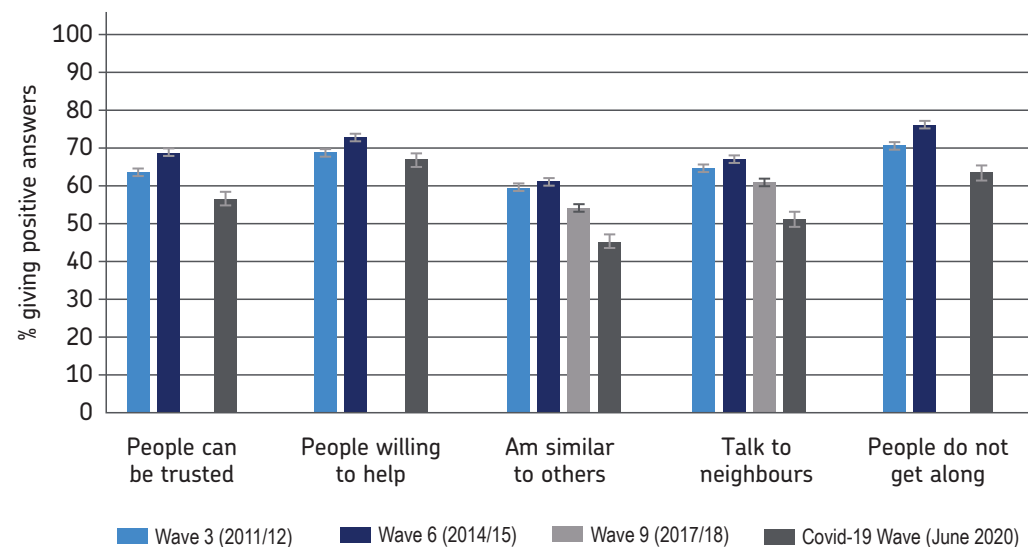
Measures of social cohesion. Neighbourhood social cohesion is assessed by five items, measured on a 5-point scale (1-strongly agree; 5-strongly disagree):

- 'I regularly stop and talk with people in my neighbourhood',
- 'People around here are willing to help their neighbours',
- 'People in this neighbourhood can be trusted',
- 'People in this neighbourhood generally don't get along with each other', and
- 'I think of myself as similar to the people that live in this neighbourhood'.

We reverse the scale where appropriate so that higher values always represent greater cohesion.

Social cohesion scale is computed by adding up **the** scores of the above five measures, therefore it ranges from 5 (lowest cohesion) to 25 (highest cohesion). In cases where the respondent is missing only one item we impute their mean response (rounded to integer) based on the four other items.

Figure 1: Share of people feeling positive about social cohesion in their neighbourhood before and during the Covid-19 pandemic

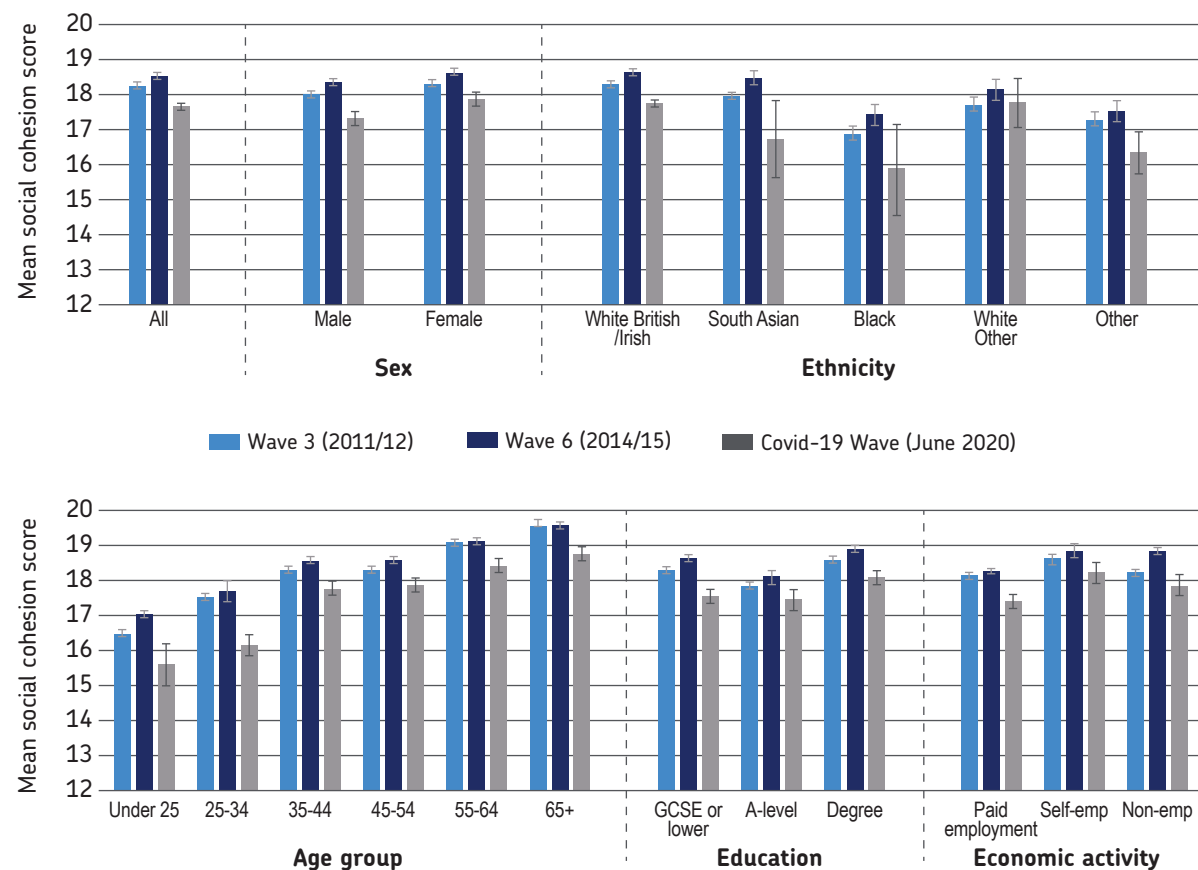


Notes: 'Positive opinion' here means that the respondent chose either 'strongly agree' or 'agree' answer to a positive statement about social cohesion in their local area or a 'strongly disagree'/'disagree' answer to a negative statement. Weighted results with 95% CI. N= 30,839-34,555 (Wave 3), N= 27,608-28,383 (Wave 6), N=26,169-26,182 (Wave 9), N=11,164-11,170 (Covid-19 Wave).

Source: M Borkowska & J Laurence (2020) *Coming together or coming apart? Changes in social cohesion during the Covid-19 pandemic in England, European Societies*, DOI: [10.1080/14616696.2020.1833067](https://doi.org/10.1080/14616696.2020.1833067)

- The percentage of people feeling positive about the relationships in their local neighbourhood was the lowest in June 2020, compared to 2011/12, 2014/15, and 2017/18.
- A decline in social cohesion was noticeable across all measures, both behavioural, such as talking to neighbours (which might have been related to social distancing restrictions) and attitudinal, such as feeling similar to others or thinking that local people get along well.
- One somewhat positive exception is that the share of people believing that others in their local area are willing to help remained quite high – 67%, which is only marginally lower than in the previous waves (at Wave 6 it was 73% and at Wave 3 – 69%).
- On the opposite end of the spectrum was the feeling of being similar to others in the neighbourhood – only 45% of people agreed with this statement in June 2020. This is about 10 percentage points less than in 2017/18, 17 percentage points less than in 2014/15 and about 14 percentage points less than in 2011/12.

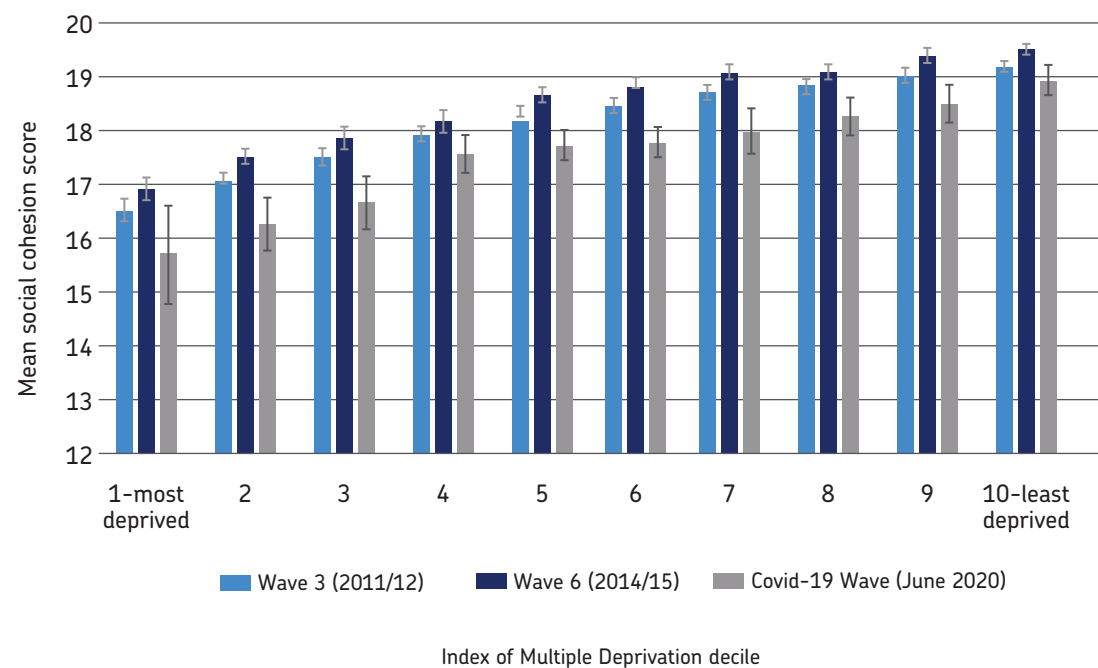
Figure 2: How does social cohesion vary across socio-demographic groups?



Notes: Weighted results with 95% CI. N=37,375-37,893 (Wave 3)
N=34,178-35,928 (Wave 6), N= 11,124-11,401 (Covid-19 Wave).

- On a scale from 5 to 25, in June 2020, the average social cohesion score was lower, 17.6, compared to 18.6 in 2014/15 (Wave 6) and 18.2 in 2011/12 (Wave 3)
- People from South Asian, Black and 'Other' ethnic minority background experienced larger declines in social cohesion around the time of the Covid-19 pandemic compared to those from a White British and Irish background.
- Both men and women, people across different age groups and economic activity groups experienced a similar decline in cohesion around the pandemic period.
- People with degree level education saw a somewhat smaller decline than those with A-level or lower education.

Figure 3: Social cohesion and area deprivation

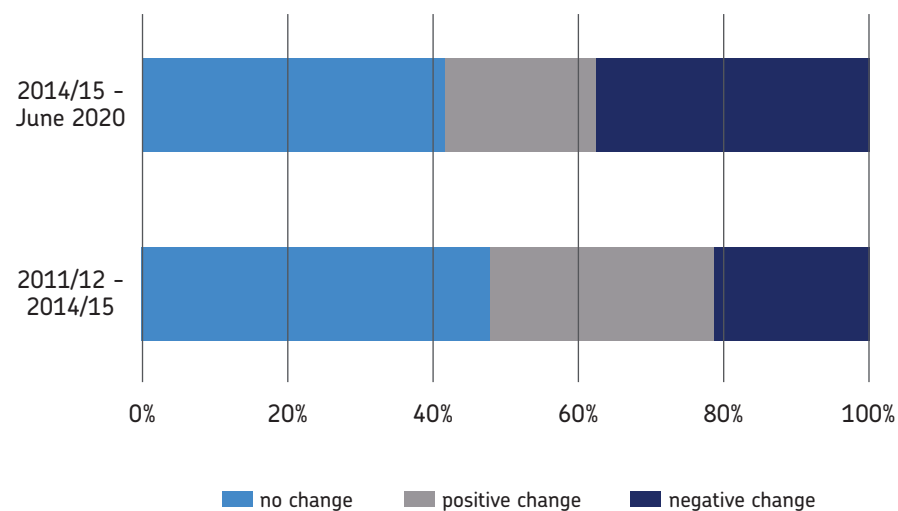


Notes: Weighted results with 95% CI.

N=37,894 (Wave 3), N=35,940 (Wave 6), N=11,423 (Covid-19 Wave).

- People living in the most deprived neighbourhoods reported lower levels of perceived social cohesion during the pandemic compared to those living in the least deprived neighbourhoods.
- Given that the reported social cohesion before the pandemic tended to be lower in more deprived neighbourhoods, this means that the inequalities in terms of social resources have recently become wider.

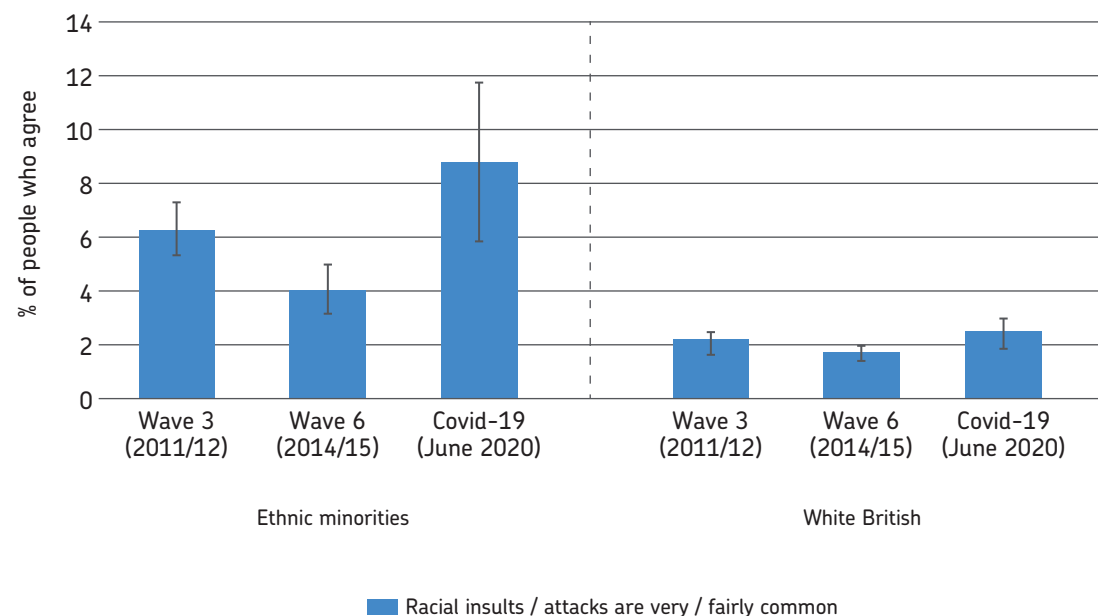
Figure 4: Positive and negative changes in social cohesion before and during the Covid-19 pandemic



Notes: Figure 4 shows percentage of people experiencing positive and negative changes in the overall social cohesion between Wave 3 and Wave 6 (2011/12 – 2014/15) and between Wave 6 and Covid-19 Wave (2014/15 – June 2020). An individual is coded as experiencing a positive/negative change if his/her overall social cohesion score (on a scale from 5 to 25) is at least 2 points higher/lower at time t, compared to the value reported three waves earlier (t-3). Weighted results with 95% CI. N = 20,883 (Wave 3/Wave 6), N=8,998 (Wave 6/Covid-19 Wave).

- Views about the quality of social relationships in one's local area are fluid – people change their opinions (both from more positive to more negative ones and vice versa) over time, despite the fairly stable aggregate level of social cohesion.
- In the pre pandemic period (between Wave 3 and 6), 52% of people changed their views about overall social cohesion of their local neighbourhood. During the pandemic, this percentage was even higher – 58%.
- However, between Wave 3 and 6 the 'net' change was positive (about 10 percentage points more people changed from negative to positive views than vice versa), whereas during the pandemic the opposite was true (about 17 percentage points more people changed from more positive to more negative views).

Figure 5: Perceived extent of racial insults/attacks before and during the Covid-19 pandemic

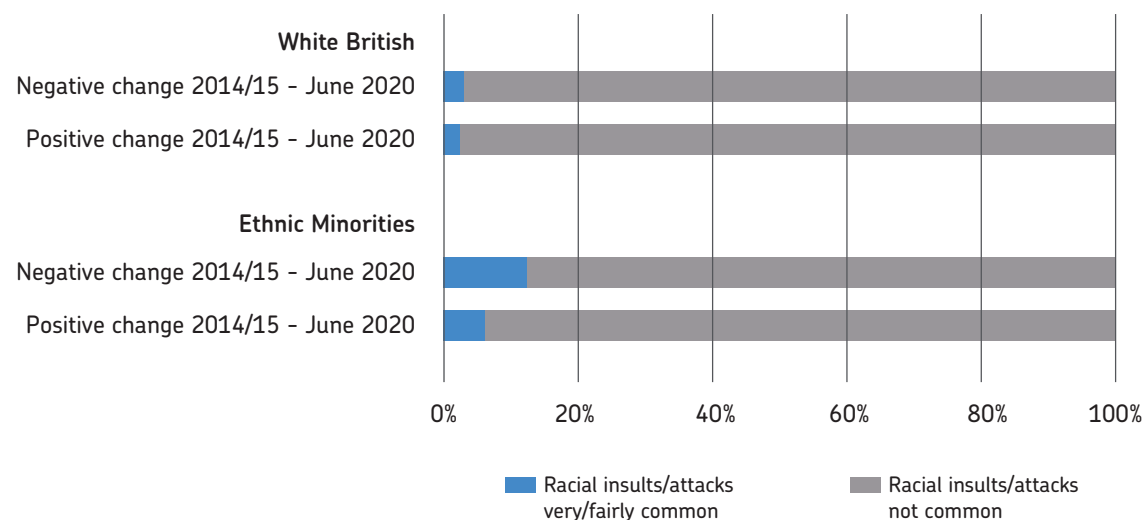


Notes: Weighted results with 95% CI. N=36,104 (Wave 3), N=29,458 (Wave 6), N=10,789 (Covid-19 Wave).

Source: M Borkowska & J Laurence (2020) *Coming together or coming apart? Changes in social cohesion during the Covid-19 pandemic in England*, *European Societies*, DOI: [10.1080/14616696.2020.1833067](https://doi.org/10.1080/14616696.2020.1833067)

- The percentage of people from ethnic minority backgrounds who reported that racial insults or attacks are 'very common' or 'fairly common' in their local area increased from 4% in 2014/15 to about 9% in June 2020 (after decreasing by about 2 percentage points between 2011/12 and 2014/15).
- The percentage of White British who reported very/fairly common incidents of racial insults/attacks remained relatively stable between 2011/12 and June 2020 (about 2 in 100 people from White British background said that racial attacks were common in their local area).

Figure 6: Changes in perceived social cohesion and beliefs about the extent of racial insults/attacks



Notes: The graph shows percentage of Ethnic Minorities and White British/Irish who reported positive and negative change in social cohesion between Wave 6 (2014/15) and Covid-19 Wave (June 2020) by the extent of perceived racial insults/attacks in the area (measured in June 2020). Weighted results with 95% CI. N=7,926

- Among Ethnic Minorities who reported a negative change in social cohesion between 2014/15 and June 2020, 12% reported that racial insults/attacks were very or fairly common in their local area. This proportion was two times smaller (6%) among those who reported experiencing positive change in social cohesion.
- Among White British/Irish respondents, the proportion of those reporting very/fairly common incidents of racial insults/attacks was similar among those who experienced both positive and negative changes in social cohesion between 2014/15 and June 2020 (about 3%).

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