

Social cohesion, diversity and inequalities in Australian communities

James O'Donnell

School of Demography, Australian National University, Canberra, Australia

E-mail: james.odonnell@anu.edu.au

Abstract

Social cohesion, in reflecting the peace, harmony and connectedness of society, is an issue of growing significance around the world. While recent global events have been marked by a degree of conflict, division and polarisation, social cohesion in Australia has been reasonably resilient, and remarkably so during the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite the fears of some academics and policy makers, the cohesiveness of Australian society has coincided with world-leading levels of immigration and ethnic diversity. Nevertheless, social and economic inequalities are a substantial weight on social cohesion, not least for the way in which they impact migrant communities. In the following analyses, I draw on a combination of data sources to explore the relationships between diversity, inequality and social cohesion in Australia. Findings suggest that diversity and particularly public support for multiculturalism has been a great source of strength for Australian society. However, financial stress, economic inequality and the inequitable personal, social, economic and health outcomes of COVID-19 in migrant communities pose a substantial threat to social cohesion. Addressing the sources of inequality and alleviating their effects ought to be an urgent priority for governments and the community in protecting the harmony and collective well-being of Australian society.

A cohesive nation?

Is Australia a cohesive nation? On some measures, and in the aggregate, Australia has a high level of social cohesion. Social cohesion here refers to the peace, harmony and connectedness of society and is most commonly indicated by the degree of trust people have in one another and in government, their sense of belonging and their participation in their communities (Chan et al. 2006). Internationally, Australia scores reasonably highly on the degree to which people trust others and the feel pride in their nationality — at least compared with other developed countries (EVS/WVS 2022). Perhaps most encouragingly, Australia seems to have avoided, to this point, the deep social and political divisions and polarisation seen around the world (Carothers & O'Donohue 2019). Indeed, evidence

suggests that social cohesion in Australia sharply increased during the COVID-19 pandemic and remains high in 2022 on several indicators (O'Donnell 2022).

The cohesiveness of Australian society comes despite, or perhaps because of, high levels of immigration and ethnic diversity. Australia has one of the largest foreign-born populations in the world and one of the highest levels of net migration relative to its total population (UN 2022). This is notable in the context of social cohesion, in that for some time, immigration and diversity has been theorised to be detrimental to cohesion (Putnam 2007). While the evidence for such an effect in Australia is mixed (Leigh 2006, McKenna et al. 2018), immigration and diversity is embedded within processes of population growth and change (O'Donnell & Evans 2021) that require consistent renewal of social bonds

and connections. The fact that Australia has maintained its relative degree of unity as ethnic diversity has grown is remarkable and cause for deeper enquiry, particularly given the tumultuous global geopolitical context and deep divisions elsewhere in the world.

Social division and inequality, however, remain as powerful threats to social cohesion. Economic disadvantage and deprivation have been shown to be the strongest predictors of individuals' social support networks, their levels of trust, sense of belonging and engagement in their communities (Markus 2021). More broadly, absolute deprivation is a direct symptom of societal malfunction that leads one to question whether such deprivation can truly co-exist with social cohesion. Can Australia be considered cohesive where, for example:

- Australia's First Nations people are expected to live, on average, 8 years less than non-Indigenous Australians (ABS 2018)?
- 2.5 million Australians have experienced homelessness at some point in their lives (ABS 2015)?
- One-in-three people from non-English speaking backgrounds feel discriminated against on the basis of their skin colour, ethnic origin or religion over just a one-year period (O'Donnell 2022)?
- Overseas-born Australians have been 62 per cent more likely to die of COVID-19 than the Australian-born population (ABS 2022a)?
- People in the most economically disadvantaged neighbourhoods have been three times more likely to die of COVID-19 than people in the least disadvantaged neighbourhoods (ABS 2022a)?

The degree to which social cohesion in Australia coincides with demographic change, immigration, diversity and social inequality is the subject of the following analyses. Elaborating on the above points, I describe recent population trends in Australia, particularly in relation to immigration and diversity, and analyse their relationship to social cohesion. Potential threats to social cohesion are examined, particularly arising from social and economic inequalities before and since the COVID-19 pandemic.

Population growth and change

Recent demographic history provides the critical context for the way in which social cohesion has developed in Australia. Population growth and change are intricately linked to the maintenance of social cohesion at local and national levels, in that the bonds and connectedness between people must be continually renewed and updated as new people enter the population. In communities that experience low population growth and change, social cohesion can derive from the accumulated connections and interactions people have made with the same set of neighbours over a period of years and perhaps decades. In high-growth communities, by contrast, bonds and connections must be re-created with new sets of neighbours to maintain overall levels of cohesion.

At least prior to the COVID-19 pandemic the Australian population grew rapidly. Over the last 50 years, the Australian population has doubled (ABS 2022b). Over the last 20 years, almost 6.4 million people have been added to the population at an average of 322,000 per year (ABS 2022b). The rate of population growth over the last 20 years

makes Australia one of the fastest growing developed countries, behind only the likes of Singapore and Luxembourg (UN, 2022a).

Whether the level of population growth has been good or bad is a matter of perspective. Growth has though unmistakably changed the characteristic of many communities. In Sydney, the proportion of people living in apartments increased from 15 per cent in 2001 to 26 per cent in 2021 (ABS 2022c). Other towns and cities have not experienced this level of apartment growth, even Melbourne. Melbourne though, like many fast-growing cities and towns in Australia, continues to grow outwards. A major emerging concern for communities popping up on the outskirts of our cities is access to services, to jobs and to the social, community and economic infrastructure that will allow new communities to grow, thrive and be connected within and across their cities and regions. Thus, social cohesion must be continually renewed in some communities where their social and built environments change, while in newly established communities, cohesion must be constructed almost from the ground up.

Immigration and diversity

Immigration has been the most substantial driver of population growth in Australia. Between 2007 and 2019, net overseas migration to Australia averaged 228,000 people per year, accounting for around 60 per cent of Australia's total population growth (ABS 2021a). The proportion of people born overseas increased from 11 per cent in 1947 to 30 per cent today (ABS 1947, 2022c). This is one of the largest shares in the world, behind only some of the Gulf States and Singapore, all of whom have large guest worker programs (UN 2022).

Particularly striking is the way in which shifting migration flows over time have created a mosaic of migrant, ethnic and cultural diversity in Australia. As the source countries for Australia's immigration flows have gradually shifted in the post-WWII period from western Europe to south and eastern Europe, the Middle East and increasingly to south and east Asia (Raymer & Baffour 2018), new arrivals to Australia have added to the cumulative stock of migrants drawn from all corners of the world. As new arrivals bring with them aspects of their cultures and languages and pass these and their ancestries to future generations, increasing migrant diversity also gives rise to growing ancestral, cultural and language diversity. If two Australians were selected at random today, there would be an approximately 50 per cent chance they were born in different countries, a two-in-three chance that their mothers were born in two different countries and a two-in-five chance that they speak different languages at home (ABS 2022c).

Ethnic diversity is increasingly widespread. While diversity remains highest in the majority cities — in Sydney, for example, there is around a 70 per cent chance that two randomly selected people will speak different languages (ABS 2022c) — the largest increases in diversity over the last 15 years have been in regional centres, towns like Melton, Armidale, Alice Springs, Shepparton, Tamworth, Dubbo, Toowoomba, Wagga Wagga and Mildura (ABS 2007, 2022c). Between 2006 and 2021, the proportion of the population born overseas in these nine towns combined increased from 16 per cent to 26 per cent, while the proportion who speak a language other than English at home increased from 6 per cent to 24 per cent (ABS 2022c).

Nevertheless, the most immigrant-rich communities remain concentrated in Sydney and Melbourne. These communities are truly diverse. Some would even call them “super-diverse” (Vertovec 2007). In Fairfield in western Sydney, for example, residents were born in more than 120 countries and speak more than 100 languages at home (ABS 2022c). In these communities, people may choose to live near others from similar backgrounds and form new ethnic and cultural enclaves in Australia. However, the wider geographic communities in which they live comprise people from many different backgrounds, and there is little sense in which immigrant groups in Australia could be said to be residentially segmented or segregated from the rest of society (O'Donnell & Evans 2021).

Diversity and social cohesion

Immigrant-rich and ethnically diverse communities are cohesive and resilient places and have a unique sense of vibrancy. However, this is not always well captured in academic theory and quantitative data. Putnam's (2007) “hunkering down” or constrict hypothesis theorises that people withdraw from community and civic life in the face of ethnic diversity, resulting in lower levels of community-level social capital (near synonymous with social cohesion) in diverse communities. While the hypothesis has received mixed overall support in empirical research, reasonably strong cross-national evidence indicates that ethnic diversity is negatively associated with the level of trust people have in one another and with the sense of cohesion and co-operation people have within their neighbourhoods (Dinesen et al. 2020).

Encouragingly, evidence for a detrimental impact of diversity in Australia is weak. Recent research suggests that while ethnic diversity is associated with lower levels of volunteering in Australia, there is no relationship between diversity and interpersonal trust, neighbourhood cohesion or the sense of belonging people have in Australia (McKenna et al. 2018). Foreign-born populations in Australia, for their part, have reasonably similar levels of trust in other people and in government as the Australian-born population (Markus 2021). However, with relatively shallow roots in Australia, recently arrived immigrants typically express a weaker sense of belonging in Australia and in their communities and lower engagement in social, community and civic activities (ABS 2015, Markus 2021). Belonging and engagement, though, typically increase the longer that foreign-born populations have lived in Australia (O'Donnell 2022).

Public support for multiculturalism and ethnic diversity is likely to be an important asset to Australia in maintaining social cohesion in the face of continued immigration and ever growing diversity. In the 2022 Mapping Social Cohesion survey, 88 per cent of people agree that multiculturalism has been good for Australia and 77 per cent agree that accepting immigrants from many different countries has made Australia stronger (O'Donnell 2022). This sentiment has become stronger over time and likely contributes positively to social cohesion in Australia.

Remarkably, social cohesion in Australia and support for multiculturalism appear to have strengthened during the COVID-19 pandemic. At the height of the pandemic in 2020, Australians reported a greater sense of national belonging and personal worth, increased acceptance of people from

different backgrounds, and a greater sense of social inclusion and justice in Australia (Markus 2021). Reflecting support for governments' health and economic measures during 2020, there was a sharp increase in the proportion of adults who believe the Federal Government can be trusted to do the right thing all or most of the time, and a decrease in the proportion who think the gap in incomes between rich and poor is too large. At local levels, people were more likely to believe their neighbours are willing to help and get along with each other, more likely to believe that people generally can be trusted, and more likely to believe that multiculturalism has been good for Australia, and that immigrants benefit Australia's economy and society (O'Donnell 2022).

The spike in social cohesion during the pandemic speaks volumes for the capacity of Australians to rally around and support each other through difficult times. This galvanising response, particularly at neighbourhood and community levels, provided powerful support for individual well-being, with research showing that neighbourhood social cohesion was strongly protective of mental health, particularly against depression, during Melbourne's long, second lockdown in 2020 (O'Donnell et al. 2022). A galvanising response to crises is not without precedent, and academic theories and research suggest people develop stronger social and psychological ties to people in response to adversity (Mancini 2019). It is striking, though, that social cohesion strengthened in Australia, alongside growing support for multiculturalism and ethnic diversity, and amidst global unrest, protest and sharply polarised views with respect to the pandemic, immigration and a range of other social and political issues.

Social and economic inequalities

National-level trends in social cohesion, however, mask substantial inequalities. Substantial variation exists across individuals and communities in the extent to which people trust one another, feel a sense of belonging and social inclusion in their communities and in Australia and the ability to engage and participate in community life (O'Donnell 2022). These reflect critical social inequalities that weigh down national-level cohesion.

Economic inequalities are a key driver of social inequalities and a substantial drag on social cohesion. Household finances, in particular, are the single most important predictor of how people perceive cohesion in Australia (Markus 2021). People who are struggling to pay bills or who describe themselves as poor or "just getting along" are much less likely to say they have a great sense of belonging in Australia, have a much lower sense of happiness and self-worth, perceive substantially weaker social inclusion and justice in Australia, are less likely to trust other people or the government and are more likely to disagree that multiculturalism has been good for Australia (O'Donnell 2022).

Financial stress appears to have become more common over the last 15 years. Between 2006 and 2020, the proportion of people who could not raise \$2,000 in an emergency increased from 13 per cent to 19 per cent (ABS 2021b). Meanwhile the proportion of adults who say they are poor, struggling to pay bills or just getting along increased from 30 per cent in 2009 to 37 per cent in 2019 (Markus 2021). While the government's economic response to the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g. through the JobKeeper job subsidy scheme and increased

income support payments) interrupted this trend for the better, the withdrawal of support and the emergence of cost-of-living and inflation pressures in 2022 means this was a temporary reprieve. Between July 2021 and July 2022, the proportion of adults describing themselves as poor, struggling or just getting along increased from 31 per cent to 37 per cent (O'Donnell 2022).

Housing costs contribute substantially to financial stress, particularly in the tight housing markets of the major cities. One of the most widely used measures of housing affordability stress is the 30/40 rule, which refers to the proportion of households in the bottom 40 per cent of the income distribution who pay more than 30 per cent of their income in housing costs. Based on the ABS (2022d) Survey of Income and Housing, 42 per cent of renting households were in housing stress by this measure in 2019–20, an increase from 35 per cent in 2007–08. In Sydney, the proportion increased from 44 per cent in 2007–08 to 59 per cent in 2013–14 and 54 per cent in 2019–20, while in Melbourne, it increased from 42 per cent in 2007–08 to 48 per cent in 2013–14 and 48 per cent in 2019–20. Housing stress is strongly related to broader financial stress, with households experiencing housing stress under the 30/40 rule being approximately twice as likely to report not being able to raise \$2,000 in an emergency than households not experiencing housing stress (ABS 2022d). While we wait on more data, it appears likely that the current economic climate is exacerbating housing and financial pressures and straining individual and collective wellbeing (Biddle & Gray 2022).

Social inequalities and diverse communities

Economic disadvantage impacts on foreign-born populations and diverse communities and adds to other forms of disadvantage. While the foreign-born population is increasingly widespread across Australia, the most immigrant-rich and ethnically diverse communities remain located in relatively disadvantaged parts of the major cities particularly Sydney and Melbourne (O'Donnell & Evans, 2021), and areas where housing and financial pressures are likely greatest. Diverse communities in the major cities also experience high rates of population change, with new immigration flows from a diverse set of source countries contributing to high rates of population change and turnover (O'Donnell & Evans 2021), and potentially making it more difficult to establish and maintain lasting interpersonal connections. Meanwhile, discrimination reported by people from non-English speaking backgrounds remains common, alongside prejudicial attitudes among the wider population to immigrants from non-European countries (O'Donnell 2022).

Ethnically diverse and economically disadvantaged communities were also disproportionately impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Up until the outbreak of the Omicron variant in December 2021, people in the most diverse local communities in Sydney were almost five times more likely to have contracted COVID-19 than those in the least diverse communities (NSW Health 2022), and more than twice as likely to be issued a fine or court attendance notice for breaching public health orders, despite disproportionately high self-described compliance with lockdown rules (Rahman 2021). Unemployment rates increased by an

average of 2.1 percentage points in the first year of the pandemic in the most diverse communities, twice as large as the increase in the least diverse parts of Sydney (National Skills Commission 2022). While vaccination rates rapidly caught up, the roll-out of the vaccines was more than one-third slower in the most diverse communities (Department of Health and Aged Care 2022). As previously mentioned, overseas-born populations have been 62 per cent more likely to die of COVID-19 than the Australian-born population, after controlling for their relatively young age profile (ABS 2022a). These outcomes likely reflect pre-existing inequities, combined with a failure to plan and mitigate against vulnerabilities and the lack of access to government programs like JobKeeper (Shergold et al. 2022)¹.

Emerging evidence suggests that such disproportionate outcomes had damaging effects on the personal, material and social well-being of overseas-born Australians. On the Mapping Social Cohesion survey (O'Donnell 2022), the proportion of adults who have a great sense of belonging in Australia declined from 53 per cent in 2019 to 35 per cent in 2022 among overseas-born Australians from non-English speaking backgrounds, an 18 percentage-point decline. This compares with a 9 percentage-point decline for people born in Australia. Over the same period, the proportion of overseas-born Australians from non-English speaking backgrounds who report being happy declined 13 percentage points (no change for the Australian-born population), while the proportion who report being satisfied with their finances declined 8 percentage points (compared with a 2-point increase

in satisfaction for the Australian-born population). Meanwhile, average increases in the levels of trust in other people and in the Federal Government during the pandemic were significantly higher for the Australian-born population. Through these impacts, the disproportionate health, social and economic outcomes of COVID-19 pose a distinct threat to social cohesion in Australia.

Conclusion

Australia is in several respects a cohesive nation. Australians report reasonably high levels of trust and national pride, have very strong support for multiculturalism and ethnic diversity, have supported each other through the COVID-19 pandemic, and have responded positively to government efforts to protect health and economic well-being. However, beneath the surface lie inequalities that weigh down current social cohesion and threaten its future. Several inequalities are longstanding, borne out by forms of deprivation, including housing and financial stress, poverty, homelessness, discrimination and the Indigenous life expectancy gap. While the response to COVID-19 was positive overall, the pandemic also exposed and exacerbated disadvantage, particularly in ethnically diverse and migrant-rich communities. Such outcomes are critically important to social cohesion, as the experience of disadvantage is strongly tied to a person's sense of belonging in society, their personal and social well-being, their sense of fairness and social justice, the quality of their interpersonal connections and social networks and their involvement within communities.

¹ See a summary of their findings: Shergold, P. (2022) Lessons from a pandemic, *Journal & Proceedings of the RSNW* 155(2): 189–192. <https://royalsoc.org.au/images/pdf/journal/155-2-Shergold.pdf> [Ed.]

The experience of disadvantage and its deleterious personal and social outcomes warrants a strong community and policy response. In designing such a response, a great deal can be learnt from the COVID-19 pandemic — both in terms of what was done well and what was done poorly. Australians responded positively to state and federal government measures and placed their trust in government to a substantially greater extent than prior to the pandemic. However, the vulnerabilities of diverse and disadvantaged communities to COVID-19 and associated lockdowns were foreseeable and greater steps ought to have been taken to minimise and prevent the health, economic and social harm. The roll-out of vaccines was belated but ultimately successful, demonstrating what can be achieved with adequate policy focus and commitment. Unfortunately, much of the damage was done by the time of the vaccine program's success, underscoring the need to address social inequalities and vulnerabilities far in advance of the next crisis.

Efforts to address inequalities and strengthen social cohesion will go some way to ensuring individual and collective well-being, maintaining peace and harmony and strengthening the social fabric that holds society together. While the long-term effects of the pandemic on social cohesion remain to be seen, individual and communities are resilient and looking forward to a return to normal life. Mounting health, social and particularly economic challenges in the current period though are likely to take their toll, potentially laying the seeds for societal discord. Active and considered approaches to addressing these challenges and alleviating their inequitable effects is

an important first step in maintaining and growing the cohesion of Australian society.

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