

'The State of Us'

Is community cohesion in decline in the UK?

The report

Communal life in Britain is claimed to be under threat. This is the starting point of a new government-commissioned report *The State of Us* (2025) published by the British Future and Belong Network. Some of these threats, the report goes on, are driven by long-term trends that have undermined connections within UK communities over many decades. These include the decline of community infrastructure and institutions, weaker family units, growing inequality, declining trust in institutions, and chronic neglect from policymakers. This is quite a list. But what is making matters even more difficult, the report asserts, is the recent mismanagement of immigration, cost-of-living pressures and social-media-driven extremism. The bonds that typically hold society together – civic participation and a shared sense of belonging – are under growing pressure. Sociologists have noted the rise of public protest and the rioting that has scarred the UK in recent years. But they also ask: 'What exactly is going on here?'

Community connection in decline

The new report draws on a broad evidence base, including a nationally representative survey, over 100 responses to an open call for evidence, expert roundtables and community focus groups. It presents a picture of a steady decline in community connection, intensified by some acute drivers of social division. Factors such as money, time, social confidence and the availability of community infrastructure (for example, community centres, youth clubs and pubs) can all affect the ability to participate fully in their community (see Figure 1).

People in focus groups spoke about the decline and closure of community spaces, particularly in areas with higher deprivation and in more rural areas that had fewer existing community spaces and institutions. When surveyed on what factors undermine community cohesion among people from different backgrounds today, patterns of recent migration figure strongly (Figure 2).

Themes of immigration and asylum policy were also present in all of the focus group discussions. Generally, participants expressed support for what they perceived as 'skilled migration' in sectors such as health, social care and hospitality. However, there was much greater concern about people arriving in the UK on small boats, who were generally described as 'illegal immigrants'. Were respondents drawing here on their own real experience, or on hostile coverage in the media and online? That is not clear, but most people in the sample had had no contact with asylum seekers.

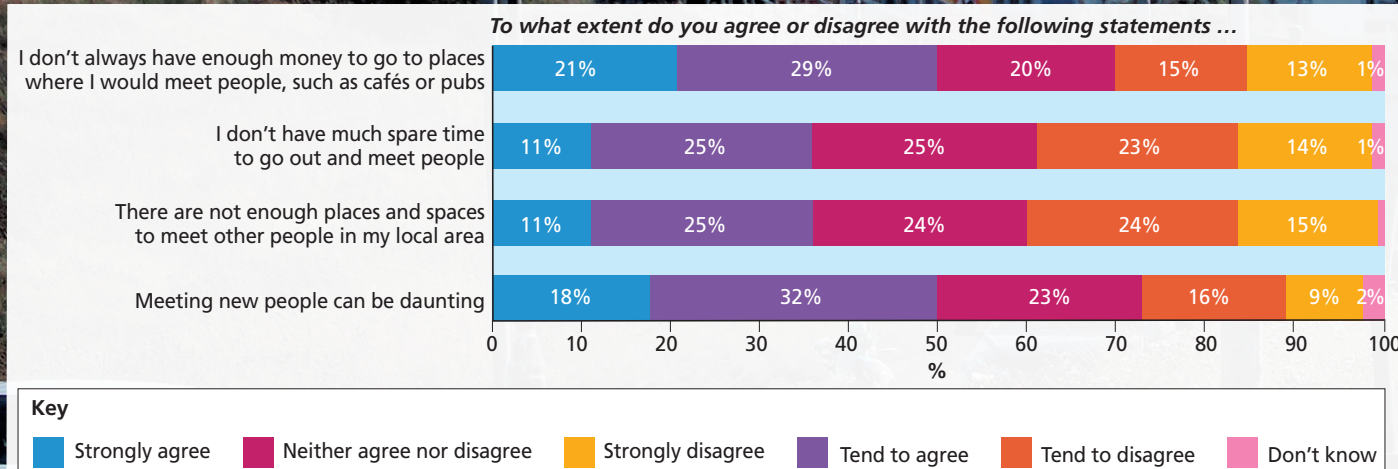


Figure 1 Potential barriers to community participation

Which of the following issues do you think have the most negative impact on how people from different backgrounds get on together in the place where you live? Please rank them: with number 1 being the most negative

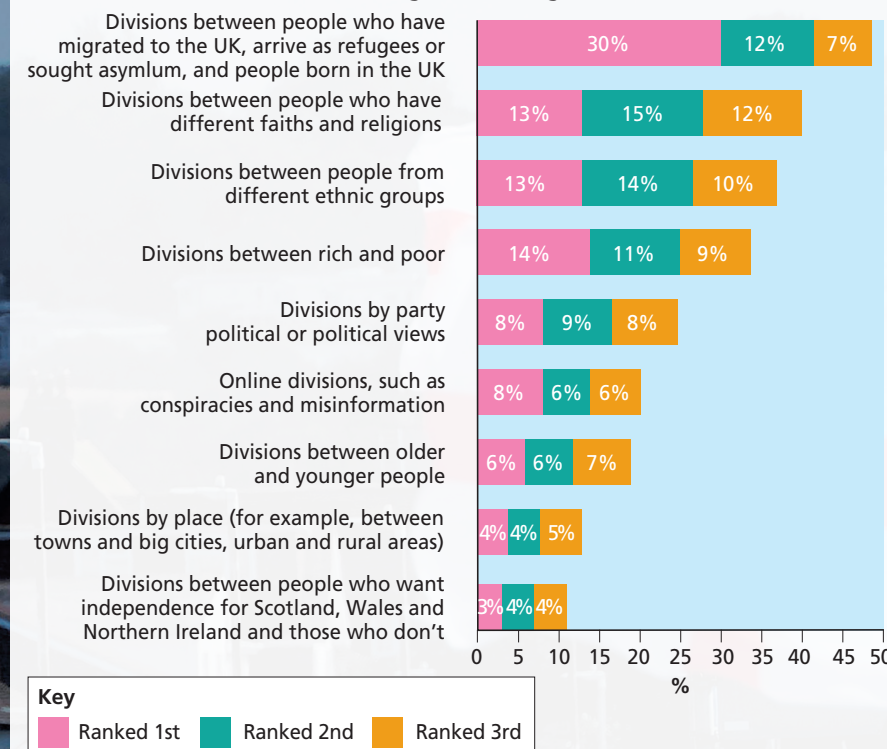


Figure 2 What factors do people feel undermine community and cohesion locally?

Which of the following options do you feel are most important for addressing social divides and helping people from different backgrounds to live well together?

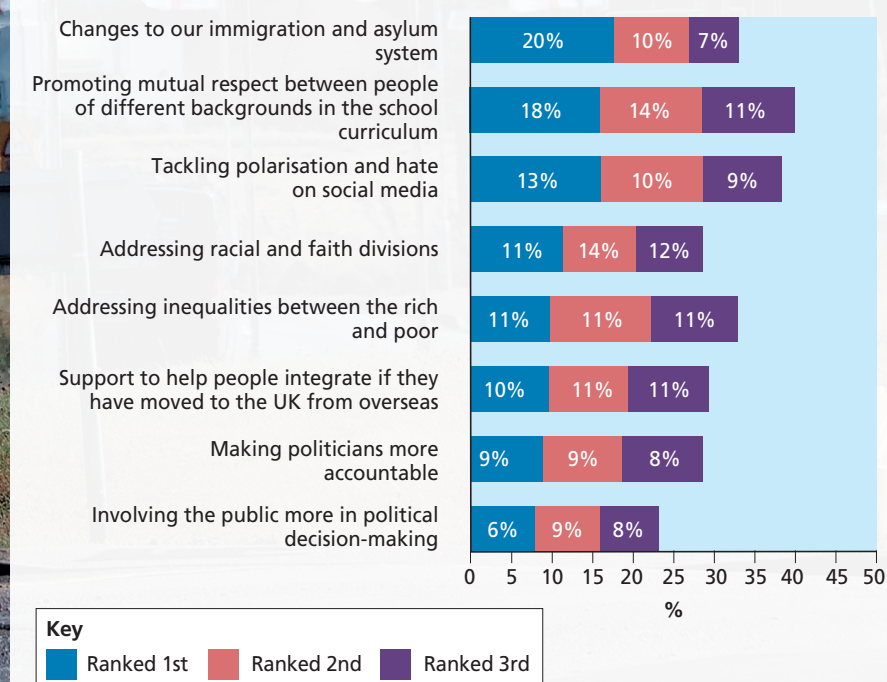


Figure 3 What factors do people feel would help address social divides?

Addressing the divides

So, what about ways forward to improve cohesion? Changes in asylum figured strongly here, among pre-set options, but so too did promoting more understanding of social difference in schools, addressing inequality and challenging hate on social media (see Figure 3). Participants also talked about the need for more face-to-face contact between people living in divided and disconnected communities. Reflecting some of the survey findings, provision of infrastructure and more physical spaces for people to mix were also seen as important. The research found scope for increased collaboration between third-sector organisations, as well as with schools, employers, sports and arts organisations, youth and employment projects. Time for a change perhaps – but who pays?

John Williams is a managing editor of *Sociology Review*.