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Agenda

MEASURING SOCIAL COHESION

Prepared by Statistics Canada¹

In October 2023 the CES Bureau established the Task Team on Social Cohesion with a one-year mandate to (i) collect information on the survey questions and other data that statistical organizations use to operationalize and quantify selected dimensions of social cohesion, and (ii) identify good measurement practices and data gaps, consider potential advances in survey content and provide information on social cohesion among subgroups in the population. The Task Team members included Canada (chair), Finland, Ireland, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Poland, United Kingdom, Eurostat and OECD.

This document presents the Task Team's report on measuring social cohesion. It provides a conceptual measurement framework and explores national data collection practices relating to social cohesion, including recommendations for further work. In addition, the Task Team has produced an inventory of questions on between-group ties, identified in household surveys fielded by selected national and international statistical agencies. The inventory is presented in a separate Excel file.

The Bureau is invited to review and comment on the document, discuss the recommendations for future work and decide whether the document can be submitted to the 2025 CES plenary session for endorsement.

I. INTRODUCTION

1. Social cohesion refers to the social connectedness, solidarity and trust amongst individuals, within and across communities and within society at large. It is generally understood to measure the strength of the bonds or social 'glue' between societal members. Societies with higher levels of social cohesion are typically healthier, more resilient to external shocks and crises, and experience higher economic growth (OECD 2011).

2. In June 2022, the CES Bureau selected the concept of social cohesion for an in-depth review. The CES Bureau's in-depth reviews focus on strategic or emerging issues of concern for statistical offices. The outcome of the **in-depth review on social cohesion** was endorsed by members of the CES plenary session in June 2023 (UNECE 2023).

3. The CES Bureau decided to **establish a Task Team (TT)** to continue building on this work by collecting, reviewing and analysing information on national measurement practices of social cohesion. Statistics Canada chairs the TT, with its workplan endorsed at the October 2023

¹ Report prepared by Samuel MacIsaac, Grant Schellenberg, Rubab Arim, and David Wavrock, Social Analysis and Modelling Division, Statistics Canada. We acknowledge the valuable contributions and feedback of the Task Team members, which include the national statistical offices of Finland, Ireland, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Poland, and the United Kingdom, and Eurostat and OECD.

Bureau meeting. TT members include the national statistical offices (NSOs) of Finland, Ireland, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Poland and the United Kingdom, and two international organisations: Eurostat and OECD.

4. The TT was instructed to choose a specific aspect or element of social cohesion to focus on. **The TT identified relations between groups as the focus of its work.** This approach emphasises an element of social cohesion that distinguishes it from other concepts, is relevant to tensions observed in many countries, and avoids duplication of prior conceptual reviews.

5. The objectives of the TT are to explore national data collection practices pertaining to between-group ties², including existing and prospective survey content; data gaps; measurement challenges and data alternatives; and research opportunities.

6. The report is based on the analysis of **an inventory of between-group survey questions** identified in household surveys fielded by selected national and international statistical agencies. Metadata and support for this work was provided by TT members.

II. OVERVIEW OF THE TASK TEAM'S CONCEPTUAL PROGRESS

7. *The in-depth review* (UNECE 2023) and several other theoretical³ and empirical⁴ works provide a solid foundation to study social cohesion. However, the concept of social cohesion remains exceptionally broad, leaving much latitude on the range of topics that could be selected for in-depth review and investigation. A further consideration is how social cohesion fits within a broader conceptual landscape where concepts such as social inclusion (UNECE 2022) and social capital (Scrivens and Smith 2013) are widely used. In this context, identifying an element of social cohesion that has minimal overlap with other concepts was a high priority for the TT. This helped clarify social cohesion's conceptual 'value-added.' Moreover, it avoided duplicating evaluative work on related concepts or specific aspects of social cohesion, such as trust in institutions (OECD 2022) and political engagement (Aassve et al. 2024).⁵

8. The distinction between **within-group** and **between-group** ties is a useful conceptual anchor when identifying the aspect of social cohesion for the TT's review.⁶ While concepts such as social connectedness and social inclusion emphasise the ties and connections that individuals have with people *within* their families, networks and communities, the concept of social cohesion emphasises the ties that individuals have with people in other networks, groups

² Social ties are often distinguished as weak or strong, which can be perceived as having a bias towards positive connections between individuals or groups. For the purposes of this report, social ties and social relations are used interchangeably and refer more broadly to varying degrees of positive, neutral or negative relationships.

³ For theoretical work, refer to the following studies (Jenson 1998; Bernard 1999; Kearns and Forrest 2000; Forrest and Kearns 2001; Berger-Schmitt 2002; Jeannotte et al. 2002; Friedkin 2004; Chan, To and Chan 2006; OECD 2011; Schiefer and Van der Noll 2017; Fonseca Lukosch and Brazier 2019).

⁴ For empirical work, refer to the following studies (Rajulton, Ravanera and Beaujot 2007; Dicks, Valentova and Borsenberger 2010; Bottoni 2018; MacIsaac, Wavrock and Schellenberg 2023).

⁵ It is worth noting how this compares to other approaches. For example, Statistics Netherlands' social capital framework (van Beuningen and Schmeets 2013) consists of two constituent dimensions (participation and trust) and a third added dimension of integration capturing social and political polarisation to measure social cohesion (Schmeets and te Riele 2014).

⁶ This distinction is similar to the distinction between bonding and bridging types of social capital, whereby bonding refers to concepts of trust, cooperation and ties within a social identity group whereas bridging refers to trust and relations among those of different social identity groups. Prior work on social cohesion (Jeannotte et al. 2002) highlights such bridging measures to capture between-group tensions (see Jenson and Papillon 2001), specifically in relation to political discussions concerning multiculturalism.

or communities.⁷ Cohesion itself is defined as “the act or state of sticking together tightly”,⁸ highlighting the bond or the distance *between* two or more units. Between-group relationships capture feelings (or affect) that individuals express towards people perceived as belonging to a different group (i.e., out-group members), whether based on ethnicity, place of origin, social class, political orientation or other characteristics.⁹

9. The distinction between within-group and between-group ties can be highlighted by considering a hypothetical society in which all individuals have strong ties within a group or community.¹⁰ No one is left out and social connectedness is strong. Nonetheless, social cohesion in that society would be weak if relationships between groups were non-existent or acrimonious. In such a case, solely focusing on within-group ties would overstate cohesiveness and omit the resentment each group member has for the other group.

10. Within-group and between-group relationships are interrelated. Iyengar et al. (2019) observe that “A vast literature in social psychology demonstrates that any such in-group/out-group distinction...triggers both positive feelings for the in group and negative evaluations of the out group (see, e.g., Billig & Tajfel 1973). The more salient the group to the sense of personal identity, the stronger these intergroup divisions (Gaertner et al. 1993).” While not the focus of this report, within-group ties remain a critical component to measuring social cohesion. As such, this TT report should be used as a complement to within-group dimensions of social cohesion outlined in the UNECE [in-depth review](#) (UNECE 2023).

11. An initial review of survey content indicated that within-group ties are reflected in a broad range of questions, such as those pertaining to connections with family and friends, participation in groups and organisation, sense of belonging to communities, having people to count on and feelings of loneliness. In contrast, far fewer questions on between-group ties were observed. This was a further rationale for the TT’s focus on between-group relationships.

12. Between-group relationships have been central in studies of polarisation across ideological, affective and social dimensions (e.g., Kearns and Forrest 2000; Iyengar et al. 2019). However, polarisation is typically structured along unidimensional axes and does not capture the many groups or identities in society between which relationships exist. The multiplicity of between-group relationships may better be captured by the concept of “bubblisation,” or fragmentation, underscoring the multiplicity of groups and inter-group relationships in society rather than reducing this to polarisation across a single dimension.

13. **Why does the focus on between-group ties matter in the current context?** Given a growing literature on societal polarisation and emerging questions about divisions within society, more information is needed regarding inter-group ties. While the Covid-19 pandemic

⁷ Between-group dissimilarities and tensions have also been referred to as a “meso-level” analysis of latent conflict within societies (Aruqaj 2023).

⁸ [Cohesion Definition & Meaning - Merriam-Webster](#)

⁹ For added clarity, between-group ties generally refer to the affective distance of individuals towards ‘out-groups,’ not affective distance between groups. The affective ties of an entire group would merely reflect the average (or other central tendency metric) ties of its members towards another group. To measure aggregated affective ties of one group’s members would only serve to mask the variation in affective ties among its members. For example, in studying between-group ties based on age, one is not interested in how the average younger individual views older individuals, but rather to identify those younger individuals with high and low affective ties towards their elder counterparts.

¹⁰ It is worth noting that within-group cohesion and distance towards one or more other groups for any given aspect or dimension of social cohesion, does not mean that these groups are cohesive across all aspects of cohesion.

may have brought about an increased sense of unity, particularly in the early days of the pandemic, with displays of support for frontline workers and other displays of solidarity, it has also highlighted deep divisions – with opposition to vaccination being a prominent example. Other examples could include rancorous contestation over social issues and geopolitical conflicts, or the potential role of social media in exacerbating tensions. Given NSOs' mandates to provide timely and relevant statistics on their respective national social structure, measuring social cohesion – or conversely, social fragmentation – is considered a priority.

III. INVENTORY OF BETWEEN-GROUP QUESTIONS

14. **National Statistical Offices (NSOs) have much to contribute to studying social cohesion.** This section focuses on an inventory that compiles survey content submitted by TT members. The inventory includes between-group questions fielded by NSOs. Other sources, such as private surveys, opinion polls, and national election surveys,¹¹ are generally excluded.¹² Though not exhaustive, these sources provide a valuable opportunity to assess the conceptual scope addressed by between-group questions and existing data gaps. Given the potential vulnerability to bias in cross-country contexts, psychometric properties of these questions should be assessed in each country.

15. **Measures must ideally capture both attitudinal and behavioural measures of cohesion.** While attitudinal measures capture individuals' beliefs and feelings towards a range of issues and individuals, behaviours capture observable actions and conducts that are the physical manifestation of these attitudes. For example, both prejudicial attitudes (e.g., stereotypes, stigmas) and discriminatory behaviours act as complementary measures to explaining social distance between groups.

16. **Personal versus societal perceptions.** Survey questions can broadly be categorised into two approaches: questions about social cohesion, including questions about the underlying rationale for perceptions of unity or division, at the **societal level** and at the **personal level**. Questions of each type respectively capture respondents' perceptions of unity and divisions within society as a whole, or their personal ties to groups. The distinction matters insofar as the former perspectives on societal trends capture a respondent's perceived distance between clearly outlined groups, whereas the latter personal ties capture distance between that individual (with no predetermined group affiliation) and specified groups. It should be noted that most inventory questions are classified as personal rather than societal perceptions. The choice of a specific perspective (personal or group perception) warrants careful consideration depending on the variable or indicator, but a mixed approach is generally advisable.

17. Inventory questions offer insights into differences in the use of these two approaches across NSOs. For instance, European surveys (e.g., European Social Survey, European Quality of Life Survey) typically include questions on respondent's perceived tensions between specific groups. Meanwhile, non-European surveys more prominently make use of questions on personal experiences and views.¹³

¹¹ Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (<https://cses.org/>).

¹² Exceptions include the World Values Survey (WVS) and questions from an Institut Public de Sondage d'Opinion Secteur (IPSOS) poll commissioned by the Central Statistics Office of Ireland (<https://assets.gov.ie/262032/7adc792f-7eb8-4027-90d7-0e556d277449.pdf>).

¹³ While there are exceptions such as Statistics Canada's question on the extent to which the broader Canadian population agrees with specific values (2020 GSS), there is typically a narrower focus on one's own experiences

18. Another trend is differences across different national contexts. On the one hand, personal view questions from European surveys in the inventory typically centre around views on integration of external groups and immigrants (i.e., ‘host society’ views). On the other hand, surveys in Canada and New Zealand tend to focus more on the perspectives of immigrants and marginalised groups (e.g., sense of inclusion, belonging). Possible explanations for this trend could be the differing historical context for Indigenous peoples or the multicultural models of the latter two societies, which could complicate the use of ‘host society’ as a useful concept. Ideally, surveys could provide a blend of approaches that would allow for the juxtaposition of survey responses or use them in an integrated way that could shed light on differences between views on societal and personal ties as perceived from an array of different groups.

19. **It is important to acknowledge regional specificities of social cohesion to avoid overlooking crucial contextual differences across geographies, societies and cultures.** As outlined in prior work (UNECE 2023), regional differences may reflect differences in disaggregation, social groups and institutions, and units of analysis. For instance, several countries, such as the example in the preceding paragraph of Canada and New Zealand, may require adapting frameworks to account for ethnocultural and indigenous perspectives of social cohesion. Moreover, context specificity extends across time periods as well given the dynamic nature of constantly evolving social trends. Specific regions may undergo changes over time that could require adaptability to account for this changing context and how it affects measures of social cohesion.

20. Between-group measures were further organised into three broad categories by the TT: 1) fairness, discrimination, and grievances; 2) affective ties and trust between groups; and 3) values and morality. Though there will inevitably be some overlap between categories, the classification remains a helpful tool to distinguish between prominent types of between-group survey content. **Table 1** outlines selected examples of each question type for both societal and individual approaches.

and affective ties. Though questions about tensions between groups and societal trends may seem more abstract to respondents, they do offer insights into perceptions of divisions within society that may not impact the respondent directly, and therefore would not be captured using approaches that solely focus on personal ties.

Table 1 – Categorisation of select between-group survey content

<i>Categorisation of question types</i>	<i>Approaches</i>	
	<i>Perceptions of societal unity and divisions</i>	<i>Personal distance to 'out-groups'</i>
<i>Fairness, discrimination, and grievances</i>	<p><i>Q:</i> In all countries there sometimes exists tension between social groups. In your opinion, how much tension is there between each of the following groups in this country?</p> <p><i>Groups:</i> poor and rich people; men and women; old people and young people; different racial and ethnic groups; people with different sexual orientations; managers and workers; other</p> <p><i>R:</i> A lot of tension; some tension; no tension</p> <p><i>Source:</i> European Quality of Life Survey (EQLS)</p>	<p><i>Q:</i> In the last 12 months have you been discriminated against?</p> <p><i>R:</i> Yes; no</p> <p><i>Q:</i> Why do you think you were discriminated against?</p> <p><i>R:</i> age; skin colour; way of dress or appearance; race or ethnic group; accent or language spoken; gender; sexual orientation; religious beliefs; disability or health issues; other; don't know</p> <p><i>Source:</i> General Social Survey (GSS) (New Zealand)</p>
<i>Affective ties and trust between groups</i>	<p><i>Q:</i> Most people view those [in their 20s/ over 70] with [respect/envy/pity/admiration/contempt] ...</p> <p><i>R:</i> 0 (not at all likely to be viewed that way) to 10 (very likely to be viewed that way)</p> <p><i>Source:</i> European Social Survey (ESS)</p>	<p><i>Q:</i> I'd like to ask you how much you trust people from various groups. Could you tell me for each whether you trust people from this group completely, somewhat, not very much or not at all?</p> <p><i>Groups:</i> People of another religion; people of another nationality; people you meet for the first time</p> <p><i>Source:</i> World Values Survey (WVS)</p>
<i>Values and morality (with an emphasis on themes of diversity and integration)</i>	<p><i>Q:</i> To what extent do you feel that Canadians share the following values?</p> <p><i>Groups:</i> Human rights; respect for the law; gender equality; English and French as Canada's official languages; ethnic and cultural diversity; respect for Indigenous (First Nations, Métis or Inuit) culture</p> <p><i>R:</i> To a great extent; to a moderate extent; to a small extent; not at all</p> <p><i>Source:</i> General Social Survey (GSS) (Canada)</p>	<p><i>Q:</i> Gay men and lesbians should be free to live their own life as they wish.</p> <p><i>R:</i> 1 to 5, where 1 means agree strongly and 5 means disagree strongly; don't know</p> <p><i>Source:</i> ESS</p>

Note: Examples are meant to be representative of broader categories but may not reflect the depth and breadth of each category. Due to varying themes across social survey waves, the examples provided are generally only available for specific waves of each survey.

EQLS – European Quality of Life Survey

GSS – General Social Survey

ESS – European Social Survey

WVS – World Values Survey

21. Category 1: Fairness, discrimination and grievance type questions. Such questions typically fall under the umbrella of socioeconomic grievances over inequality (e.g., economic opportunity, economic mobility) and grievances over discrimination (e.g., racism, sexism, ageism). Beyond measures of discrimination, inequality and social mobility (OECD 2011), the focus here is more specifically on articulating such inequities as grievances that engender social distance between groups – namely those who carry negative affect towards individuals they may perceive as benefiting from such inequities. Grievances between social groups can also stem from perceptions of failing institutions, a lack of political representation, or a society organised around principles no longer viewed as working in one’s favour.¹⁴ This alienation can fuel negative affect towards others viewed as more privileged or benefiting from existing divides.

22. The emphasis on the relationships between groups is qualitatively different from their outcomes (e.g., perceptions of richer/poorer individuals versus actual income inequality). It is grievances over perceptions of inequities and unfairness that erode between-group ties, not societal outcomes *per se*. For instance, a hypothetical society with low levels of inequality could still show signs of low between-group cohesion based on perceptions of significant societal unfairness or ‘horizontal inequalities’.¹⁵ More pragmatically, besides the existence of several socioeconomic inequality metrics to measure societal grievances,¹⁶ there are limitations to reliable objective measures of discrimination and fairness outcomes.¹⁷ Subjective metrics of inter-group affect and feelings are key in measuring between-group ties. Complementary objective (e.g., behaviours, underlying factors of tensions) and subjective (e.g., feelings and affect towards others, values) measures of social cohesion provide a more complete portrait of cohesiveness within society or other regional disaggregation.

23. Though the centre of attention is often on socioeconomic inclusion, the focus here is instead on the effect of inequalities on cohesion and how these inequalities can foster antipathy between ‘haves’ and ‘have nots.’ Grievances, such as perceptions of ‘being left behind,’ either in terms of socioeconomic well-being, political voice or representation, or economic mobility, can fuel the disenfranchisement and alienation of groups. Questions pertaining to hopefulness about the future and social mobility, fairness and equality of opportunity are central to properly

¹⁴ These measures would already be captured under the vast array of within-group dimensions of social cohesion (UNECE 2023). Between-group affect would complement such measures by providing additional insights into social distance between specific social groups. Refer back to paragraph 10 on the interconnectedness of within and between measures of social cohesion.

¹⁵ Horizontal inequalities generally refer to differences in outcomes (e.g., wealth, income) and treatment (e.g., status, experiences of discrimination) of individuals of different social or identity groups (see Stewart 2008).

¹⁶ For example, measures of inequality or social mobility (OECD 2011).

¹⁷ For example, reports of discrimination (e.g., racism, sexism, ageism) may undercount the prevalence of discrimination since there may be a low-reporting rate. Moreover, in cases where discrimination is reported, it is difficult (if not impossible) to objectively quantify the magnitude of its impact on cohesion. Subjective evaluations of one’s experiences with discrimination could provide such nuance. Other objective measures could include political or public service representations of broader society.

depicting the state of between-group cohesion. Such perceptions of marginalisation can exist along social, cultural, economic, political, religious, or other lines. **Box 1** provides examples of survey content on societal tensions articulated as a sense of societal fairness and grievances over experiences of discrimination.

Box 1 – Examples of questions on perceived socioeconomic fairness and experiences of discrimination

Q: How much would you say that the political system in [country] ensures that everyone has a fair chance to participate in politics?

R: Not at all, very little, some, a lot, a great deal, refusal, don't know

Q: Overall, everyone in [country] has a fair chance of [achieving the level of education/getting the jobs] they seek.

R: 0-10, where 0 means does not apply at all and 10 means applies completely; refusal; don't know

Source: 2018 ESS

Q: In the 5 years before the Covid-19 pandemic, have you experienced discrimination or been treated unfairly by others in Canada because of any of the following?

R: Your age; your ethnicity or culture; your race or colour; your religion; your language; your physical appearance; your sex; your gender identity or expression; your sexual orientation; a physical or mental disability; some other reason; did not experience discrimination

Source: 2020 GSS (Canada)

Q: Feeling discriminated [when looking for housing/in education/in public spaces/when in contact with administrative offices or public services]

R: Not applicable; mainly due to age (too young/old); mainly due to sex (male/female/non-binary); mainly due to disability or long-term health problem; mainly due to immigrant or ethnic origin; mainly due to religion/belief; mainly due to sexual orientation; mainly due to other reason; no, I have not felt discriminated against

Source: 2024 European statistics on income, social inclusion and living conditions (EU-SILC), 6-yearly module on 'access to services'

24. **Category 2: Affective ties and trust type questions.** These perceptions of 'out-groups' are distinct from the previous category of overt grievances over inequities and discrimination. In contrast, while there may be overlap between these two categories, this category captures a more subtle sense of proximity, affinity, or trust for other groups. Such social distance measures provide a gradient of inter-group affect, whether readily apparent tensions and grievances exist

or not. This is because social distance and prejudice¹⁸ can exist without the explicit presence of unfairness, discrimination, or grievances.

25. Affective ties towards specific groups include divisions and prejudice against specific groups based on lower trust or less frequent interaction outside one's ethnocultural group (Reitz and Banerjee 2007; Jenson 2010; MacIsaac, Wavrock and Schellenberg 2023). But affect towards identity-based groups is not restricted to ethnocultural groups. Identity groups can also be based on age, gender, sexual orientation, appearance, disability, political views, and other characteristics. **Box 2** provides examples of social distance articulated as feelings towards neighbours and trust in specific groups of people.

26. **Between-group distances across opinion-based groups.** Societies regroup a diverse set of individuals who share equally diverse viewpoints central to democratic debate. However, when ideological divides grow, this can extend to negative affective ties towards ideological 'out-groups.' This shift from ideological differences to affective divisions can erode cohesion by fostering antipathy towards 'out-group' members who do not share the same viewpoints as one's 'in-group.' This fragmentation along opinion-based lines can foster distance between individuals. In an extreme case, diverging values could weaken a society's social contract (refer to the subsequent category on values and moral views). It should be noted that ideological divides need not extend into positive or negative affect, and therefore do not necessarily undermine cohesion.¹⁹ However, divides in morals and values are captured under the third categorisation (see paragraph 29).

27. **Content on ties between opinion-based groups is scarce.** Besides societal tensions and cleavages across identity-based groups, there are also differences in attitudes and opinions and in the general understanding of the world. These can build around latent opinion-based groups through the juxtaposition of 'in-group' versus 'out-group' identity. Such newly formed identity groups around common views are particularly relevant in the face of constantly evolving social trends and the potential for growing societal divisions. Improved measurement of such affective divisions would enhance our understanding and tracking of social cohesion.

28. **Capturing distance between groups can be challenging given the need for survey question/response specificity.** For instance, though informative, social distance between oneself and 'people of a different age' does not capture potential variation in social distance across different age groups. Moreover, using more response categories facilitates research on the magnitude of such distances by allowing for more variability in responses (e.g., favouring 5- or 10-point scales over 2 or 3 response categories). Barring specific questions that lend themselves to fewer response categories (e.g., yes or no answers to having experienced discrimination), allowing for additional variation is often analytically beneficial in measuring the magnitude of grievances or social distance.

¹⁸ Prejudice refers to preconceived opinions about, or a priori feelings towards, an individual based on their group affiliation or group identity. Prejudice against certain groups, whether it be due to lesser affinity, lower trust, or other attitudes, is distinct from discrimination, which refers to the behavioural manifestation of that prejudice.

¹⁹ As an example from the political science literature on polarization, ideological polarisation based on diverging political opinions differs from affective polarisation, which is marked by increasing prejudice, antipathy, or animosity towards 'out-group' members. While the former form of polarisation refers more narrowly to divisions based on differences in opinions, affective polarisation alludes to inter-group antagonism, which can lead to an unwillingness to compromise and an overall climate of incivility (Wolf, Strachan and Shea 2012).

Box 2 – Examples of between-group affective ties and trust questions

Q: How would you feel if you had a new neighbour who [was a different religion to you/was a different sexual orientation to you/was a different ethnicity to you/ had a mental illness/ used a different language to you/ had a disability or long-term health condition]?

R: Very comfortable; comfortable; neither comfortable nor uncomfortable; uncomfortable; very uncomfortable; don't know

Source: 2021 GSS (New Zealand)

Q: Using a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 means “Cannot be trusted at all” and 5 means “Can be trusted completely”, what is your level of trust in each of the following groups of people?

Groups: People in your family; people in your neighbourhood; people you work with; people you go to school with; people who speak a different language than you; people with a different religion than you; people with a different ethnic or cultural background than you; strangers

Source: 2020 GSS (Canada)

Q: To what extent do you trust other people? (Others should be treated as people with whom the respondent is not acquainted (family, friends, neighbours etc. should be excluded)).

R: Scale from 0 (do not to trust at all) to 10 (trust completely)

Source: 2013, 2018 and from 2021 onwards, European statistics on income, social inclusion and living conditions (EU-SILC)

29. **Category 3: Values and morality type questions.** Shared values are considered integral to a cohesive society (Jenson 1998; Bernard 1999; Kearns and Forrest 2000; Forrest and Kearns 2001; Jeannotte et al. 2002). The proximity effect of sharing common values and beliefs can impact group formation and between-group ties.²⁰ For instance, groups with widely diverging values are likely averse to each other. This lack of affinity acts as a barrier to stronger social ties. **Box 3** presents examples of questions on shared values and morals.

30. **Homogeneity in values is not a prerequisite for cohesion.** Rather, the focus should be on the compatibility of values across social groups and that differences in people's moral principles do not isolate groups from others. Differences in values and beliefs can enrich exposure to new ideas and perspectives but can also lead to increased distance between groups that disagree more fundamentally on key moral principles. When measuring social cohesion, similarities in core values and moral principles act as important bridges between groups. Conversely, the lack of common core values and moral principles can act as a barrier to dialogue

²⁰ The principle of homophily, or seeking out people with similar traits (McPherson, Smith-Lovin and Cook 2001), suggests individuals will naturally gravitate towards social networks of ideologically or attitudinally analogous people. This principle supports the notions of both ideational and affective sorting.

and inter-group ties on the basis that the ‘out-group’ may be perceived as unethical, morally wrong, or unprincipled.

31. **Survey questions heavily focus on personal values and morals, with little to no emphasis on societal values.** Few surveys include questions about perceptions regarding societal values or differences in values one has when compared to the broader population. In one exception using the 2020 Canadian GSS, shared values are estimated as the first difference between one’s personal ranking of specific values and one’s perception of the shared values of most Canadians (MacIsaac, Wavrock and Schellenberg 2023). Such an approach yields insights into whether individuals self-identify as distant from what they view as the values of most Canadians. This acts as a valuable measure of the potentially isolating effect in the case where one’s values are perceived as not aligning with those of one’s entourage or society.

Box 3 – Examples of questions on shared values and morals

Q: Thinking about New Zealand, on the scale of zero to ten, how important are the following things in defining New Zealand for you:

- multiculturalism and ethnic diversity
- Māori culture and cultural practices

R: 0 to 10, where 0 means not at all important and 10 means extremely important

Source: 2016 GSS (New Zealand)

Q: ... please say how much you agree or disagree that:

‘It is better for a country if almost everyone shares the same customs and traditions’

R: Agree strongly; agree; neither agree nor disagree; disagree; disagree strongly; don’t know

Source: 2014 ESS

Q: Many things are desirable, but not all of them are essential characteristics of democracy. Please tell me for each of the following things how essential you think it is as a characteristic of democracy.

- Governments tax the rich and subsidize the poor.
- Religious authorities ultimately interpret the laws.
- People choose their leaders in free elections.
- People receive state aid for unemployment.
- The army takes over when government is incompetent.
- Civil rights protect people from state oppression.
- The state makes people’s incomes equal.
- People obey their rulers.
- Women have the same rights as men.

R: 1-10 scale where 1 means “not at all an essential characteristic of democracy” and 10 means it definitely is “an essential characteristic of democracy”

Source: 2017-2021 WVS

32. **Time-variant survey content reflects the dynamic nature of social trends to address evolving needs.** Drawing upon the inventory of between-group survey content, questions relating to values disproportionately focus on themes of diversity, immigration and inclusion. This could reflect growing global migration flows. Immigrants inevitably bring with them a variety of different social values and moral principles based on their sociocultural and religious backgrounds and regions of origin. Similarly, there has been an increase in questions pertaining to social distance on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity to reflect shifts in social values over time.

33. **Beyond questions about diversity and integration as shared values, the prominent focus on immigration and diversity is striking.** Though questions about immigration policy and views on diversity and immigration topics are not strictly affective in nature, they are pervasive. This draws attention to whether such questions are pertinent to studying cohesion. While the ESS and EQLS contain several questions on such themes, questions on ideological outlooks or opinions on policy issues could be viewed as outside the purview of NSOs given their roles to remain neutral, objective and apolitical. Alternatively, it could be argued that such questions provide valuable information on inter-group ties and perceived impacts on social cohesion. These differences underscore the complexities and importance of distinct national contexts when NSOs balance their mandates of informing the public on emerging social trends and the requirement to remain apolitical.

34. **Measuring variation in social cohesion is key to inform on social trends.** An aggregate measure of social cohesion at a static point in time provides little to no value. Variation in both dependent and independent variables is essential to any study attempting to explain the associations between them. It is necessary to study variation in social cohesion across sociodemographic groups (i.e., disaggregation) or across time.

35. **Measuring dynamic versus static variation in between-group ties.** Static studies (i.e., at a single point in time) are more common given the scarcity of longitudinal information. These typically focus on the disaggregation by social and demographic characteristics to capture variation in cohesion across population groups. Yet, from a policy perspective, knowing whether social cohesion is improving, or deteriorating is fundamental to understanding evolving trends.

36. Though dynamic analysis can also be conducted using longitudinal data and pooling survey waves, the sporadic nature of social surveys and comparability across waves can lead to considerable methodological complications. One alternative, albeit more limited to targeted questions, is to resort to retrospective questions. **Box 4** lists examples of questions concerning perceptions of changes in religious prejudice in the United Kingdom over time.

Box 4 – Example of dynamic questions on religious prejudice

Q: First, thinking about religious prejudice in Britain today, do you think that there is now...

R: Less religious prejudice than there was five years ago; more than there was five years ago; about the same amount; don't know or can't say

Q: [If you think there is more religious prejudice now than 5 years ago], do you think that there is now much more religious prejudice or just a little more than there was 5 years ago?

R: Much more now; a little more now; don't know or can't say

Q: [If you think there is more religious prejudice now than 5 years ago], which groups do you think there is now more religious prejudice against, compared with five years ago?

R: Muslims/Islam; Jews; Hindus; Buddhists; Sikhs; Christians (general); Roman Catholics/Catholics; Protestants; Anglicans/Church of England; religions generally; other (specify)

Source: 2010 Citizenship Survey (United Kingdom)

IV. FORWARD LOOKING MEASUREMENT OF BETWEEN-GROUP TIES

37. As previously established, how members of a particular group perceive 'out-group' members is a critical component of social cohesion. Social or affective distance between groups can exist across identity-based (e.g., age, ethnicity, sex, gender) and opinion-based lines (e.g., personal views, values). Between-group distance can also be expressed in terms of grievance and marginalisation. This affective between-group distance, while intrinsically tied to fairness such as inequality and low economic opportunity, alludes more specifically to negative feelings or animosity towards groups perceived as benefitting from this disparity. This includes populist trends whereby individuals may perceive opposition as a marginalised 'the people' versus institutions, elites, or 'the establishment.'

38. Initiatives are already underway to address the need for additional measures of social distance across opinion-based and marginalised groups. This section outlines current content development efforts by TT members as a means of implementing the lessons learnt on the measurement of social cohesion, with the specific focus of bridging between-group data gaps.

39. **In Canada**, the latest Wave 5 of the Survey Series on People and their Communities (SSPC) includes new content on feelings towards 'in-group' (i.e., within-group ties) and 'out-group' members (i.e., between-group ties). In addition, it includes questions regarding individuals' hopefulness about the future, with a specific focus on unity, social mobility and democratic functionality. The SSPC has covered similar themes and offers an excellent range of questions that would complement the new questions on between-group ties. Two main question types were added: perceptions of the future along social, economic and political lines, and 'thermometer' type questions that ask respondents about feelings of 'warmth' or 'coldness' towards specific groups. **Annex 1** provides an overview of lessons learnt from the content development process and Statistics Canada's experience qualitatively testing these questions.

40. The first question type asks respondents about their views of the future, with a specific focus on “unity among Canadians,” “economic opportunities in Canada”, and “the way democracy works in Canada.” The objective is to capture perceptions (unchanged, worsening, improving) of social, political and economic cohesion through the abstraction into the future. This enables us to identify respondents’ impressions of the overall orientation of social unity and grievances rather than solely capturing a single static moment in time. **Box 5** lists these future outlook questions.

Box 5 – Future outlook questions on SSPC (Wave 5)

Q: Thinking about the future in Canada, how hopeful are you about each of the following topics?

1. **Unity** among Canadians

e.g., strong ties or absence of division among Canadians

2. **Economic opportunities** in Canada

e.g., jobs, income, access to housing, economic prosperity

3. The **way democracy works** in Canada

e.g., voting, political representation

R: Very hopeful; Somewhat hopeful; A little hopeful; Not at all hopeful

41. The second question type focuses on ‘thermometer’ type questions. Such questions on affective polarisation are common in the political science literature (Iyengar, Sood and Lelkes 2012; Iyengar et al. 2019). Thermometer questions directly measure of affect towards people of different/similar groups along social, political and economic domains. As such, the objective is to measure between-group affective distance rather than respondents’ views *per se*. Thermometer questions typically range from feeling ‘very cold’ (e.g., 0 on a 10, or the more common 100-point scale in national election surveys) to ‘very warm’ (e.g., 10 on a 10-point scale) feelings towards a specific group, with the middle of the range (e.g., 5 on a 10-point scale) representing neutral affect towards that group. Asking about feelings towards people within one’s social group versus those of other groups provides valuable insights into within-group versus between-group affect. As documented in **Annex 1**, thermometer questions are specifically framed in a way that does not reveal respondents’ personal views or ideological leanings, which ensures apoliticality. **Box 6** presents examples of Statistics Canada’s new thermometer questions.

Box 6 – Thermometer questions on SSPC (Wave 5)

Q: ... how do you feel towards ...

1. ... **Canadians in general**?²¹
2. ... people with **political views** that are **[different from/similar to]** your own?
e.g., people with political opinions or vote differently than you
3. ... people with **views on racism** that are **[different from/similar to]** your own?
Racism refers to any individual action, or institutional practice which treats people differently because of their colour or ethnicity.
4. ... people with **views on gender identity** that are **[different from/similar to]** your own?
Gender refers to an individual's personal and social identity as a man or woman, that is, cisgender or transgender, or a person who is not exclusively a man or a woman, for example, non-binary, agender, gender fluid, queer, or Two-Spirit.

R: Thermometer question responses range from feeling ‘very cold’ (i.e., 0 on a 10-point scale) to ‘very warm’ (i.e., 10 on a 10-point scale) towards a specific group. The middle of the range (i.e., 5 on a 10-point scale) represents neutral feelings towards that group.

42. **Poland** has proposed additions to European Quality of Life Survey (EQLS) questions on tensions between social groups. These questions provide valuable insights into what respondents deem underlying societal tensions. While numerous existing questions on the EQLS focus on tensions across socioeconomic status, genders, ethnicity, age, sexual orientation, and employee status, the proposed new questions focus on divisions along ideological lines and a sense of community belonging. **Box 7** lists these proposed questions.

Box 7 – Proposed new EQLS questions on inter-group tensions

Q: ... tension between ...

1. people with **different political/ideological orientations**
e.g., ‘conservatists’ (or ‘rightists’) versus ‘liberals’ (‘leftists’)
2. groups with **different place of residency**
e.g., urban versus rural
3. people with **different media preferences**
e.g., public (‘national’) versus commercial (‘foreign’) media
4. people with **different orientations towards ‘others’**
e.g., stranger versus community member (‘countryman’)
5. people’s **values within a community**
e.g., homogeneity versus heterogeneity of community ties/values

²¹ The goal of this question is to capture perceived social distance between the respondent and the broader Canadian population. It is intended to measure whether respondents view themselves as a distinct group from most Canadians – which could hinder their sense of unity and perceptions of cohesion within Canadian society.

V. METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

43. **NSOs rely extensively on household surveys for subjective social metrics as it is not possible to gather this information from administrative sources.** Few alternatives are currently available, especially when measuring feelings, societal perceptions and social distance. While administrative data provide a wealth of economic indicators, they provide few sociocultural or political indicators, with voter participation rates and electoral results as notable exceptions.²² Reliance on household surveys to measure facets of social cohesion (notably between-group ties) raises several methodological implications, including periodicity (e.g., how often should data be collected? How can the time gap between collection and dissemination be addressed? The latter is particularly important given that at a certain point of time different factors influence the potential formation of various groups).

44. **Declining response rates of household surveys over time are of concern.** This is especially true given the reliance on such collection methods to measure cohesion, which raises the prospect of unobserved selection bias among survey participants. Non-response rates are certainly relevant to social cohesion as individuals with low trust in government may be less likely to respond to NSO surveys than others. This could result in the strength of social cohesion being over-estimated. Survey population weights may not be sufficient to correct this, particularly if survey non-response is driven by unobserved characteristics (e.g., societal, or ideological viewpoints) rather than by observed characteristics used to construct survey weights (e.g., age, region).²³ Unobserved selection bias is a concern in such cases in addition to potential low sample size issue, particularly when more granular data for different population groups are needed.

45. **Attention to methodology and survey design is critical when developing new survey content.** In addition to *who* responds to NSO surveys, *how* people respond to surveys has implications for measuring social cohesion. Whether it will be survey framing, such as the ordering of questions that risks priming or leading respondents, or the mode of distributing surveys (e.g., in-person, mail, telephone, online), survey design can influence *how* people respond. Accounting for such differences is vital to the rigorous interpretation of cohesion measures. **Annex 2** provides a more detailed overview of typical survey design-related biases when measuring social cohesion, with a specific focus on mode effects.

46. **Alternative data sources are not a panacea to the limitations of survey data.** Content analysis of social media and other internet use data comes with its own challenges. Although such sources rarely provide the sociodemographic characteristics of individuals and there remain doubts regarding the generalisability of the findings as representative of the broader population, content analysis has been employed to measure polarisation in online content and among social groups (Chinn, Hart and Soroka 2020; Waller and Anderson 2021). However, measurement issues persist. Social media could lead to the oversampling and self-selection of specific groups (e.g., younger individuals, users of a particular social media platform), double counts of individuals with more than one account, and the inclusion of accounts not held by individuals (e.g., businesses, ‘bots’). Another example involves studying online Google queries

²² However, such sources of information must be used with caution since the use of electoral data may compromise NSO apoliticality. It should be noted that the focus of this report is on social (or affective) distance rather than ideological distance concerning policy issues or regional politics.

²³ Weighting on the basis of confidence in institutions, voting patterns (e.g., voted in last election or not) or other relevant variables can mitigate the effects of potential selection bias. However, weighting cannot correct all selection issues and biases.

associated with job searches, financial security, and other topics to predict the evolution of subjective well-being measures (Algan et al. 2016). Again, measurement errors arise when analysing search terms, including “spikes” and “cliffs” that introduce substantial statistical noise when studying trends (Algan et al. 2016). However, this raises potentially interesting possibilities using content analysis to study social trends over time. Ultimately, more research is needed to determine how much online data can be used to study aspects of social cohesion rigorously.

47. **Measurement error is an inherent part of empirical analyses.** Inadequate measures to track indicators of social cohesion over time could lead to erroneous conclusions about cohesiveness. Longer durations of time between data collection on specific indicators are likely to exacerbate these challenges. Moving forward, NSOs, researchers and policymakers stand to benefit from more research on how to measure social cohesion, and subjective social measures. To this end, associations with well-being measures (e.g., life satisfaction) and other interconnected concepts could constitute an important step of data validation work.

48. **Disaggregation and capturing ‘hard to reach’ groups remain a challenge.** While larger sample sizes and oversampling of frequently underrepresented groups can mitigate these limitations, disaggregation capacity (especially when cross tabulating several variables) and selection bias, among others, remain limiting factors. Disaggregated measures of social ties provide valuable insights into how cohesiveness varies across demographic, socioeconomic and geographic characteristics. Such insights can be used for research and to inform policy, specifically identifying the characteristics of individuals and groups prone to feeling ‘left behind’ or affectively isolated (i.e., high social distance from ‘out-groups’). It is also worth noting that such challenges cannot be overcome using administrative data sources in which ‘hard to reach’ groups may be underrepresented.

VI. CONCLUSIONS

49. Social cohesion refers to social connectedness, solidarity and trust amongst individuals, within and across communities and organizations, and within society at large. Yet, many measures of cohesion omit between-group ties, which could understate social tensions and fragmentation. The TT elected to focus on such between-group ties by compiling an inventory of existing survey questions, proposed future survey content to fill data gaps, and methodological and analytical considerations.

50. An inventory of between-group measures yields three main types of survey questions pertaining to: (a) fairness, discrimination and grievances; (b) affective ties and trust between groups; and (c) values and morals. Each question type can be further categorised into two broad levels of analysis: (a) questions pertaining to respondent perceptions at the societal level, and (b) personal views and experiences.

51. The inventory highlights the widespread emphasis on topics relating to group identity (e.g., ethnicity, immigration status, age) rather than opinion-based groups (e.g., groups with different political views or views on specific issues). Societal divisions because of differences in values and social or political views constitute a data gap that merits further attention. Except for views on diversity and immigration issues, the opinion-based groups are largely absent in current survey content. Though there must be particular attention to remaining apolitical and the focus on social trends rather than public opinion polling, NSOs play a key role in providing reliable and timely data on their country’s society, including social cohesion.

52. Several new developments aim to bridge this data gap by including new between-group measures that focus on feelings towards opinion-based ‘out-groups’. Examples include feeling thermometer type questions, perceptions of social tensions or unity, and grievances such as cases of sociopolitical and socioeconomic disenfranchisement. For NSOs, the emphasis should be on affective distance between groups rather than public opinion polling and ideological distance. Consequently, metrics would ideally directly measure the connectedness between and within social groups without revealing personal views.

53. NSOs stand to play a vital role in measuring and analyzing the drivers of inter-group unity, and conversely the divisions that impact overall social cohesion. However, declining survey response rates and declining confidence in institutions complicate this task. Addressing ongoing methodological challenges concerning declining survey response rates, survey mode and framing effects, survey design and potential alternative data sources (e.g., social media) are priorities in the study and measure of social cohesion.

54. There are several opportunities moving forward. More work is needed to bridge gaps in between-group measures, which likely vary across regions and sociocultural contexts. Furthermore, scarce evidence compares the advantages and drawbacks of measuring between-group ties and grievances in terms of personal views and experiences, or perceptions of broader societal trends. Comparing the differences in perceived cohesion (i.e., societal-level or disaggregated area-level perceptions of cohesion²⁴) to self-evaluations of inclusiveness and connectedness (i.e., cohesion as measured at the individual-level) could also help determine whether perceptions of cohesion match results based on individual self-reported outcomes. This would shed light on the potential to over- or under-state unity (or conversely, divisions) across various population groups.

VII. RECOMMENDATIONS MOVING FORWARD

55. The inventory of between-group measures and conclusions of this report suggest that NSOs should consider the following four broad recommendations for future work related to social cohesion:

- (a) **Developing new survey content and conducting pilot studies to address data gaps.** More between-group questions, particularly opinion-group related questions, can bridge knowledge gaps. NSOs can gather valuable information through pilot studies (for an example from Canada, see **Annex 1**).
- (b) **Continuing analysis and research.** Conduct research and analysis that combines both within and between measures of social cohesion using a blend of measures. A better understanding of the interrelation between within- and between-group measures would provide valuable information. Equally important, time-series would allow to monitor the impact of various factors over time and offer more relevant insights for countries than cross-country comparisons.

²⁴ For example, in the United Kingdom, the Community and Life Survey (2021-2022) asks respondents “To what extent do you agree or disagree that your local area is a place where people from different backgrounds get on well together?”, which provides insights into local cohesiveness. Prior reviews of social cohesion (UNECE 2023) also emphasise the value in measuring cohesion for different levels of analysis since cohesiveness may differ across regions and such heterogeneity could be overlooked if limited to national measures of social cohesion.

- (c) **Exploring methodological opportunities.** Continue to study data quality (e.g., non-response, selectivity, mode effect biases) and further explore alternative data sources given the limitations of relying uniquely on survey data for specific metrics (e.g., subjective attitudinal measures).
- (d) **Internationally comparable set of indicators on measuring social cohesion.** An indicator framework for measuring social cohesion (e.g., internationally comparable social cohesion index using the same survey content and response scales) would benefit cross-country comparisons. To address the country-specific needs stressed in this report, each country could expand the internationally agreed upon framework as deemed necessary to meet domestic needs.

56. The inventory of between-group measures includes various types of survey questions pertaining to respondent perceptions at the societal level, or personal views and experiences. While the inventory is readily available for all countries, it is essential that countries undertake some methodological work, including cognitive interviews to determine whether the questions are relevant in their national context.

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ANNEX 1: STATISTICS CANADA EXPERIENCE DEVELOPING NEW SURVEY CONTENT TO CAPTURE BETWEEN-GROUP TIES

1. [The Survey Series on People and their Communities](#) (SSPC) was launched in 2022. As part of Statistics Canada's Disaggregated Data Action Plan (DDAP), it aims to document detailed social and community characteristics, especially those of specific 'hard to reach' groups. Using the 2021 Census survey frame, the sample for the SSPC includes an oversampling of immigrants and those self-declaring as being part of a racialised group.

2. The SSPC is an excellent candidate for the new content on between-group ties. The survey already hosts numerous questions relating to the dimensions of social cohesion outlined in the prior in-depth review, such as confidence in institutions and media, trust in others, sense of belonging, and experiences of discrimination. The presence of these variables on prior waves of this survey provides an excellent opportunity to add between-group ties, with a specific focus on capturing the social distance between latent ideological groups.²⁵

3. **New survey content development procedures.** Data ethics and the qualitative testing²⁶ by Statistics Canada's Questionnaire Design Resource Centre (QDRC) are key steps in the development of new survey content. With advances in data gathering techniques and new questionnaire content come ethical challenges regarding access to and use of data. All new questions must ensure (six guiding principles to address ethical concerns): benefits to Canadians, privacy and security, transparency and accountability, trust and sustainability, data quality, and fairness and do no harm. Following these guiding principles, and having undergone QDRC qualitative testing, this annexe provides a list of lessons learnt developing the new SSPC Wave 5 content (**Boxes 5 and 6**).

4. **NSO apoliticality.** A central consideration within Statistics Canada was remaining apolitical as an NSO. This was deemed particularly relevant given the focus on opinion-based content typically reserved for national election surveys and polling data. To address this potential issue, all new survey content specifically focuses on measuring individuals' perceptions of cohesion and social distance between groups, but without revealing their personal views, beliefs, or ideological position. For example, in the case of the new thermometer questions, asking whether people were favourable towards those with specific political leanings would be immensely problematic. Instead, the new survey content frames it as "how do you feel towards people with political views that are [different from/similar to] your own?" which does not reveal respondent political views and instead focuses on inter-group affect. Moreover, this allows one to measure both within and between-group affect. This change also has the additional benefit of potentially mitigating social desirability biases that could result from asking respondents about their feelings "towards people with different views on gender identity" and other topics that could be seen as controversial or divisive.

5. **Survey content scope and phrasing.** A subject of debate was the choice between broader cohesion questions versus questions about specific facets of cohesion. This boils down to a

²⁵ Note that the survey goes back to the same original respondents – as would a panel survey – meaning the variables can be used in conjunction with the new between-group variables. While there may be methodological issues such as attrition that could potentially amplify existing self-selection issues, the SSPC offers an excellent opportunity to test new content that could potentially be included in future surveys.

²⁶ Qualitative testing with small samples of respondents is one form of cognitive testing that was used. Several alternative forms of cognitive testing could also include focus groups, structured and semi-structured interviews, or other methods to ascertain the validity of newly developed survey content.

balance between vaguer and often complex questions about abstract concepts (e.g., unity, broad-based political tensions) versus specificity at the risk of solely focusing on key themes of interest (e.g., feelings towards specific groups of people). One finding was that, while it was infeasible to ask questions about each relevant group,²⁷ broader questions about feelings towards ‘other’ groups were often insufficiently precise. For instance, when measuring racism, capturing social distance towards various ethnic and cultural identity groups may yield more nuanced results than asking respondents about distance from all other groups. Statistics Canada’s QDRC confirmed this during qualitative testing. In contrast, overly specific questions about certain groups could be perceived as divisive and potentially harmful. The proper balance between broad and specific questions may come down to data priorities, the analytical value and appropriateness of groups selected, comparability to existing content (either domestically or internationally), and the number of questions a specific survey can accommodate.

6. **Specificity of language.** The abstract (and often complex) nature of social cohesion concepts such as solidarity, unity, and/or divisions within society, warrants special attention to respondents’ understanding of survey questions. A failure to address the vagueness of relevant social concepts could not only increase the **response burden** (and possibly non-response rates) but could also increase the risk of **incomparability of responses** across respondents based on dissimilar interpretations of survey content. To address the issue of vague concepts, QDRC qualitative testing confirmed that test respondents found examples and definitions of complex concepts helpful. Moreover, these examples ensure vaguer concepts such as cohesion or unity are properly contextualised, and the comprehension of survey questions is similar across respondents.

7. **Ordering of questions.**²⁸ The choice between leading with broader questions to avoid ‘priming’ or ‘leading’ respondents and allowing respondents to respond to more specific questions first for a more informed response in a later broader question was the subject of debate. While the choice was made to limit potential bias by leading with broader questions about overall “unity” or feelings towards “Canadians in general,” there remain advantages to ‘leading’ with more specific questions to better contextualise broader and more complex (or abstract) concepts for respondents. Another crucial decision when designing the SSPC wave 5 questionnaire was the ordering of questions relating to discrimination. Statistics Canada chose to avoid leading with questions about experiences with discrimination, unfair treatment, and racism. Given these were assessed as potential sources of bias that could influence responses on cohesion measures, these questions were instead included after the future outlook and thermometer questions. In sum, questionnaire design, its overall theme, and the ordering of questions are key considerations for survey content development.

8. **Capturing extremes of the distribution or larger scale trends in cohesiveness.** When studying between-group ties, an emphasis on polarisation as a driver of social fragmentation lends itself to a focus on the ‘tails’ of the distribution (e.g., extreme positive/negative affect towards select groups). Conversely, other approaches to studying social cohesion tend to focus on broader trends and divisions involving a so-called ‘critical mass’ of individuals – often overlooking more extreme responses as outliers. For example, in the case of the thermometer questions, there was substantial debate about framing social distance as relative to people with

²⁷ Given limited survey length and the risk of increasing response burdens, questions relating to divisions across detailed numbers of groups can be challenging. Moreover, group formation is not static. If the objective is to study social cohesion across time, the formation or identification of new social and identity groups could complicate the comparability of responses across time.

²⁸ More on framing effects in Annexe 2.

‘very different views’ or ‘different views,’ with the former emphasising affect towards extremes and the latter affect towards differences in views more generally. During QDRC testing, some respondents expressed that their feelings towards people with ‘different’ or ‘very different’ largely depended on their “attitude” and the degree to which they would be open to conversation rather than confrontation. Ultimately, given the focus on a higher-level measure of social cohesion as opposed to the study of polarisation (i.e., concentrations in the extremes of the distribution) per se, Statistics Canada opted for the latter phrasing for the thermometer questions in wave 5 of the SSPC.

9. **Other thermometer questions considered.** Questions relating to affective distance based on socioeconomic status (e.g., “people doing better financially than you”) and other groups (e.g., “people with different/similar religious beliefs than you”) were considered but ultimately dropped due to space limitations on new content.

ANNEX 2: TECHNICAL APPENDIX ON POTENTIAL MEASUREMENT BIASES USING HOUSEHOLD SURVEY DATA

- 1. Measures of subjective evaluations of affective or social distance exclusively rely on self-reported measures from social surveys.** Consequently, the steady decline in survey response rates is of concern. The possibility of self-selection bias, whereby individuals prone to non-response could lead researchers to overestimate or underestimate social cohesion, compounds these concerns. For example, research by Cavari and Freedman (2018, 2023) shows that the growing non-response rate could overstate levels of polarisation within the United States due in part to the overrepresentation of more engaged individuals in politics. This is all the more important in the case of surveys fielded by NSOs, where confidence in government institutions (an important correlate of social cohesion) could be linked to differences in non-response if respondents' mistrust of governments carries over to NSOs. In such cases, weighting could reduce the effects of selection bias, but may not eliminate the bias entirely.
- 2. Self-reported evaluations in household surveys are subject to framing effects.** Framing effects refer to the situation whereby the theme or prior content of the questionnaire influences a respondent's answer to a question (Wavrock, Schellenberg and Boulet 2023). Within the context of subjective self-evaluations of between-group affect, mitigating risks of 'priming' or 'leading' respondents is particularly important. For instance, questions that emphasise societal cleavages and divisions preceding other questions about respondents' feelings of cohesion, belonging, well-being or other metrics, could constitute a significant source of bias. 'Priming' or 'leading' can also occur based on the choice of survey question (and response category) phrasing, which can in turn influence responses. Consequently, when designing survey content, particular attention to the ordering, phrasing and overall theme of the survey is paramount.
- 3. Mode effects are another consideration when measuring and comparing subjective between-group ties using household surveys.** Computer assisted telephone interviews (CATI) may be more subject to social desirability bias than electronic questionnaires (EQ) (Wavrock, Schellenberg and Boulet 2023). This is because respondents may be less willing to accurately report how they view or feel about a topic if they think their response could illicit a negative response from an interviewer (i.e., social desirability bias or the 'shy voter' effect). For instance, when asked about controversial topics dividing or perceived as dividing society, respondents may be inclined to temper some of their more 'extreme' or 'divisive' responses or conceal their views from the interviewer in CATI. Meanwhile, the same respondent may reveal more 'extreme' positions or provide more 'divisive' views via EQ. Canadian evidence shows that responses to life satisfaction vary significantly across survey modes and themes (Wavrock, Schellenberg and Boulet 2023). Accordingly, efforts should be made to ensure cohesion metrics truly reflect changes in social unity rather than being the artifice of survey modes.
4. Such mode effects were identified for questions on the Canadian 2020 GSS. More specifically, mode effects were identified for questions pertaining to trust in others, experiences of discrimination, the importance allotted to specific social values, and the perceived importance of the same social values to Canadians at large. These mode effects measure the difference in response tendencies for those responding by electronic questionnaire (EQ) relative to those responding via computer-assisted telephone interview (CATI). As trust in others and social values are latent concepts, GSS responses are recorded using ordered discrete scales with five and four responses for trust and social value questions, respectively. Experiences of unfair treatment or discrimination are binary yes or no responses. Due to the ordered categorical nature

of these data, binomial logit regressions were employed to examine mode effects for questions pertaining to experiences of discrimination, whereas ordered logit regressions were used for trust and values questions.

5. Results from these regressions are presented in **Tables A1-A3**. Dependent variables in each regression were harmonised with respect to their ordering so that low values correspond to outcomes deemed to be conducive to high between-group social cohesion.²⁹ Regressors include the mode variable in question (which equals 1 when a respondent completed the survey via EQ and 0 for CATI), and a spate of sociodemographic variables (age, gender, educational attainment, immigrant status, inclusion in a visible equity group, household income, region/province, and urbanity/rurality), which control for other potential cofactors that could impact responses.

6. In the binomial logit models (**Table A1**), regression coefficients represent the increase/decrease in the logit of the probability that a respondent reported experiencing discrimination, with a positive coefficient indicating a higher probability of reporting experiences of discrimination with EQ relative to CATI.

7. For ordered logit models (**Tables A2 and A3**), regression coefficients represent the increase/decrease in the log odds that a respondent reported one level higher on the respective scale, with positive coefficients indicating higher probability of reporting higher values with EQ relative to CATI. As these higher values correspond to answers indicative of lower between-group cohesion, a positive coefficient for the mode variable in the ordered logit results can be interpreted as an increased propensity to respond with answers that may be deemed less socially desirable for EQ relative to CATI, suggesting the presence of a desirability bias effect.

8. The marginal effect estimates on the right-hand side of each table represent the relative difference in probabilities of providing the responses in the corresponding column for EQ respondents relative to CATI, and exhibit oftentimes substantial differences in the probability distributions across responses between the modes, especially for questions pertaining to personal values and perceived values of Canadians. In these distributions, a negative marginal effect indicates online respondents were less likely to answer that value via EQ relative to CATI respondents.

9. Questions in each Table exhibit moderate mode effects with positive coefficients. This suggests that individuals are more likely to report a lack of trust in others, experiences of discrimination, lower agreement with select social values, and lower perceptions of those same social values when responding to the survey without interviewer assistance relative to those with interviewer assistance. As previously mentioned, results control for several sociodemographic correlates.

10. Mode/desirability effects are not demonstrable across all variables. For those reporting experiences of discrimination (**Table A1**) on the basis of ethnicity/culture, religion or language for instance, no survey mode effect can be established. In contrast, for experiences of discrimination on the basis of gender identity and expression, the coefficient is negative, which indicates that responding via EQ corresponds to a lower probability of reporting such

²⁹ For instance, a low value of ‘trust’ corresponds to the answer that the group in question “can be trusted completely”. For discrimination questions, a value of 0 indicates no experience of discrimination. For values questions, a value of 1 corresponds to the answer that the person has/perceives Canadians to care about the value in question “a great deal”. See MacIsaac, Wavrock and Schellenberg (2023).

experiences relative to CATI. This suggests that desirability bias may be a factor for this latter form of discrimination.

Table A1 - Binomial logit coefficient estimates for survey modes with corresponding marginal effects at the mean - Unfair treatment and discrimination

Variable	Logit regression results			Marginal effect (3) Yes, experienced discrimination
	Coefficient (1)	p-val (2)	Std. Error	
... on the basis of age	0.394 ***		0.103	0.053
... on the basis of eth/culture	0.202		0.121	0.006
... on the basis of race/colour	0.334 **		0.120	0.005
... on the basis of religion	0.264		0.161	0.004
... on the basis of language	0.249		0.132	0.004
... on the basis of physical appearance	0.584 ***		0.115	0.019
... on the basis of sex	0.566 ***		0.114	0.045
... on the basis of gender identity/expr.	-1.021 ***		0.214	-0.013
... on the basis of sexual orientation	0.494 *		0.231	0.002
... on the basis of phys/mental disability	-0.321 *		0.161	-0.004
Other	-0.484 *		0.216	-0.001

1) Coefficient for survey mode of collection; other regression covariates suppressed for brevity

2) * - signif. at 95% CI; ** - signif. at 99% CI; *** - signif. at 99.9% CI

3) Marginal effects at the mean for binomial response variable

Table A2 - Ordered logit coefficient estimates for survey modes with corresponding marginal effects at the mean - Trust

Variable	Logit regression results			Marginal effect (3) - Group can be trusted ...				
	Coefficient (1)	p-val (2)	Std. Error	... completely			... not at all	
Trust - Family	0.259 ***		0.067	-0.045	0.031	0.009	0.003	0.002
Trust - Neighbours	0.247 ***		0.064	-0.050	0.005	0.035	0.007	0.003
Trust - Different language	0.157 **		0.062	-0.029	-0.003	0.026	0.004	0.002
Trust - Different religion	0.294 ***		0.062	-0.060	0.004	0.046	0.007	0.002
Trust - Different eth/culture	0.316 ***		0.061	-0.062	0.000	0.051	0.008	0.003

1) Coefficient for survey mode of collection; other regression covariates suppressed for brevity

2) * - signif. at 95% CI; ** - signif. at 99% CI; *** - signif. at 99.9% CI

3) Marginal effects at the mean; one effect at each corresponding level of the dependent variable

Table A3 - Ordered logit coefficient estimates for survey modes with corresponding marginal effects at the mean - Values

Variable	Logit regression results			Marginal effect (3) - Extent to which you/Canadians agree with ...			
	Coefficient (1)	p-val (2)	Std. Error	... greatly			... Not at all
My values - Human rights	-0.154		0.070	0.014	-0.012	-0.001	0.000
My values - Respect for law	0.449 ***		0.079	-0.030	0.028	0.002	0.001
My values - Gender equality	0.293 ***		0.069	-0.028	0.022	0.004	0.002
My values - Official languages	0.445 ***		0.055	-0.110	0.060	0.032	0.017
My values - Eth/cultural diversity	0.420 ***		0.058	-0.085	0.065	0.015	0.005
My values - Respect for indig. culture	0.566 ***		0.060	-0.112	0.081	0.023	0.008
Most Canadians - Human rights	-0.192		0.055	0.048	-0.039	-0.007	-0.001
Most Canadians - Respect for law	0.141 **		0.058	-0.035	0.028	0.006	0.001
Most Canadians - Gender equality	0.397 ***		0.054	-0.084	0.037	0.042	0.005
Most Canadians - Official languages	0.483 ***		0.055	-0.083	-0.017	0.082	0.018
Most Canadians - Eth/cultural diversity	0.434 ***		0.054	-0.079	0.005	0.066	0.008
Most Canadians - Respect for indig. cult	0.478 ***		0.054	-0.070	-0.044	0.091	0.023

1) Coefficient for survey mode of collection; other regression covariates suppressed for brevity

2) * - signif. at 95% CI; ** - signif. at 99% CI; *** - signif. at 99.9% CI

3) Marginal effects at the mean; one effect at each corresponding level of the dependent variable

* * * * *