Young People and Community Cohesion:
Analysis from the Longitudinal Study of Young People in England (LSYPE)

Sean Demack, Deborah Platts-Fowler, David Robinson, Anna Stevens, Ian Wilson
Sheffield Hallam University (Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research and the Centre for Educational and Inclusion Research)

Background

If policy is to promote a cohesive society it needs to know what factors explain variations in cohesion. There is therefore interest in the predictors of community cohesion. A series of questions about community cohesion have been inserted into national surveys and a number of studies have used these nationally representative data to explore the relationship between community cohesion and a range of variables. Important insights have been provided, but an important gap in understanding remains regarding the predictors of community cohesion among young people. This is despite young people and schools being a key concern within the community cohesion agenda since its emergence in 2001. This report helps fill this gap in understanding by presenting findings from analysis of data from the Longitudinal Study of Young People in England (LSYPE). Using multi-level statistical modelling, it examines the demographic, experiential and attitudinal predictors of community cohesion at the individual, school and district level.

Key Findings

- *Individual factors are the most important influence on cohesion* -A young person's perception of community cohesion is, first and foremost, a product of their individual characteristics and circumstance. The characteristics of the school they attend and the local authority district they live in are far less important.

- *Disadvantage consistently undermines cohesion* – Lower socio-economic groups are more likely to have low cohesion. Socio-economic status interacts with educational attainment so that higher attainment in more deprived areas is a negative influence on perceptions of local cohesion, pointing to the possibility of alienation in situations where limited opportunities thwart ambition and potential.

- *The school environment also affects cohesion-* Individual level factors are the most important influence on cohesion, but school characteristics also have a role. The school experience - the ethos, approach and perceived quality of teaching - impact on cohesion among young people.

- *Local and societal cohesion are closely linked but not the same* -There is a strong and consistent relationship between perceptions of cohesion in the local area (local cohesion) and perceptions of fairness, belonging and opportunity (societal cohesion). As perceptions of societal cohesion decline, the likelihood of low local cohesion increases, and vice versa.

- *Ethnicity and country of birth are important influences on cohesion* -Young people from minority ethnic backgrounds tend to have more positive views about community cohesion than White young people. People not born in the UK tend to have more positive views about cohesion than people born in the UK.

- *Migration is not a significant influence of cohesion* -The level of national and international migration into a local authority district is not a significant predictor of community cohesion among young people.

Methodology

The study used data from the Longitudinal Study of Young People in England (LSYPE). The LSYPE is a large-scale panel survey, managed by the Department for Education (DfE). It is following thousands of young people across England and its key role is to identify and improve understanding of the factors which affect young people's transition from the later years of compulsory education through to further and higher education, training, work, or other outcomes. It is a longitudinal study, in that it interviews the same cohort of young people (and their parents) annually and can track changes in their circumstances, attitudes and other factors. LSYPE began in Spring 2004 with an achieved initial sample of almost 16,000 young people drawn from Year 9 schools rolls (in both maintained and independent sectors) in England. Young people respondents were aged 13-14 years old at the time of first interview. Interviews have taken place annually (in the spring/summer), resulting in a total of six annual interviews or 'waves' up until 2009. For the first four years the young person's parents or guardians were also interviewed. There have also been sample boosts for the six major minority ethnic groups. One effect of this is to also boost sample numbers of members of non-Christian faiths, in particular Muslims.

Analysis focused on two measures of community cohesion. First, a local measure of community cohesion was generated. This focused on the headline question on community cohesion in the LSYPE, which asks young people whether "*people from different racial and ethnic and religious backgrounds mix well together*", which was supplemented by a second local measure based on responses to a question about whether young people agree or disagree that "*people round where I live usually respect each others' religious differences*". The second measure provided a national measure of cohesion among young people. This was generated in response to criticism of previous similar studies regarding the limitations of the headline measure of community cohesion in differentiating between different spatial scales to which a person might feel they belong. It also responded to the emphasis in official definitions of community cohesion on key dimensions of citizenship, including people having similar life opportunities, trusting one another and institutions to act fairly and having a sense of belonging to Britain. The societal measure was constructed from five variables within the LSYPE relating to citizenship rights, fairness and equality within British society.

Two types of analyses form the basis of this report. First, descriptive analyses were undertaken, which set the scene by examining the nature of the 75 explanatory variables, how they relate to the outcome variables (local and societal cohesion) and how they inter-relate to other explanatory variables. Second, statistical modelling was used to identify the key influences on (local and societal) cohesion whilst controlling for (or holding constant) other influences. This involved looking at how helpful the individual level variables are in predicting the likelihood of a young person having low cohesion and exploring if school and local authority district (LAD) level variables are also helpful in predicting low cohesion among young people.

It is important to note that, although we can infer from these analyses that certain individual, school and local authority district level factors are associated with low levels of community cohesion among young people, we are unable definitely to confirm direct causal links.

Findings

Local cohesion

A young person's perception of local cohesion was found to be a product of their individual characteristics (socio-demographic characteristics, attitudes and perceptions), the school they attend and the local authority district they live in. This finding appears to be consistent with the conclusion drawn by studies that have explored influences on cohesion among the adult population. However, multi-level modelling revealed that individual characteristics account for the vast majority of the variation in levels of cohesion amongst young people.

Socio-economic status and deprivation
A low socio-economic status and living in a deprived area were strongly and consistently associated with local cohesion. Lower socio-economic groups (measured by parental occupation) were more likely to have low cohesion; and local area deprivation was also significantly associated with low cohesion. This finding is consistent with evidence of the importance of socio-economic status and deprivation as influences on cohesion in the adult population. Socio-economic status interacts with educational attainment so that higher attainment in more deprived areas was seen to negatively influence perceptions of local cohesion, pointing to the possibility that high attainers in deprived areas are prone to be more dissatisfied or disillusioned with opportunities in the local area.

Crime
Crime was found to have a corrosive effect on community cohesion, a finding consistent with the results from studies of the adult population. Perceptions of local crime accounted for over half of the variation in young people's perceptions of low local cohesion. Perceptions of local cohesion were also seen to influence perceptions of (racial and religious) crime; accounting for over 70 per cent of the variation in peoples perceptions that racial/religious crime is a big problem in their local area.

Well-Being and Risk
Low levels of emotional well-being and high levels of involvement in personal risk behaviours (alcohol, cigarettes, cannabis) and anti-social behaviour (fighting, vandalism, graffiti, shoplifting) were all significant predictors of low cohesion. A strong and consistent relationship was also found to exist between perceptions of fairness, belonging and opportunity in the UK and levels of cohesion.

Ethnic Mix
The ethnic mix (range of different ethnic backgrounds in a school or local area and the proportion of people belonging to these different ethnic backgrounds) and the level of migration into the local authority district were not significant predictors of local cohesion among young people. However, ethnic mix at the school level did emerge as a significant predictor of local cohesion. In general, increased ethnic mix in the school increases the likelihood of low cohesion. This result appears to contradict evidence from other studies that diversity improves relationships between ethnic groups and, in most cases, is positively associated with community cohesion. However, additional analysis suggests that school ethnic mix may be positively associated with cohesion depending on the ethnic groups contributing to the mix and on the concentrations of these ethnic groups. Further research in this area is strongly recommended.

Socio-economic Mix
Findings point to the possibility that increased socio-economic mix (that is, a greater mix of pupils from different socio-economic backgrounds) at the school level might have a positive influence on cohesion, low cohesion being associated with a higher proportion of pupils being eligible for free school meals and with comprehensive schools (compared with secondary modern/community schools and selective/grammar schools).

Societal Cohesion

The measure of societal cohesion spotlights perceptions of social mobility, fairness, freedom, respect, discrimination and inclusion. It extends analysis beyond the reach of previous studies that have been limited to modelling the influences on the headline measure of cohesion and the question of whether people mix and get on together in the local area. The key finding is that whether a young person perceives themselves to be accepted as a worthy, valuable and responsible member of society is determined by individual level factors.

One of the most important explanatory variables in societal cohesion is perceptions of local cohesion (i.e. whether people in the local area from different ethnic or religious backgrounds get on well together and respect religious differences), suggesting that efforts to promote local cohesion will have a positive influence on societal cohesion.

Ethnicity
Ethnicity is an important influence on societal cohesion and findings conform to the general picture painted by other studies that people from minority ethnic backgrounds tend to have more positive views about cohesion than White British/Irish people, although the findings also suggest lower levels of cohesion among young Black-Caribbean people. Young people not born in the UK are also more likely to have positive views about cohesion than young people born in the UK, despite the fact that this group are likely to be poorer and may not be British citizens. Another important predictor of societal cohesion is economic activity, young people in full-time education being least likely to report low societal cohesion.

Fairness and Inclusion
Many of the other significant influences on societal cohesion relate, in one way or another, to issues of fairness and inclusion. Young people who perceive themselves to be excluded from opportunities because of the nature or accessibility of local provision and the attitudes and actions of others, are more likely to have lower levels of societal cohesion. The aim of removing barriers to access, participation, progression, attainment and achievement is therefore critical to promoting societal cohesion. It also suggests that the need to ensure that young people are supported to recognise their citizenship rights and to negotiate the processes that might prevent them from exercising these rights. A related finding is the strong and significant relationship between involvement in anti-social behaviour and low societal cohesion among young people, which reinforces the impression of a close association between (actual and perceived) exclusion from the mainstream opportunities and activities and low levels of societal cohesion.

Conclusions

By focusing on a section of society neglected by previous studies - young people - this study adds a new dimension to emerging understanding of the factors informing perceptions of community cohesion. Similarities, and some differences, have been revealed between the factors informing levels of cohesion among young people and the drivers of cohesion within the adult population. This study has also contributed to efforts to understand the complex and multi-dimensional concept that is community cohesion by moving beyond the traditional reliance on the headline indicator of community cohesion to explore notions of belonging and perceptions of cohesion at the local and national level.

The findings suggest that tackling deprivation and disadvantage is likely to have the most profound effect on levels of community cohesion among young people. The findings also point to other more immediately realisable priorities for action that would serve to promote community cohesion, including a continued emphasis on tackling bullying; reducing engagement in anti-social behaviour; supporting young people to recognise and realise their rights and opportunities of citizenship; enhancing the school

experience (life in the classroom; life in and around school; and enjoyment of being at school); and promoting social mix in schools. Particular groups of young people appear more prone to experience low levels of cohesion. In response, efforts aimed at promoting cohesion might be targeted at these groups (or the areas where concentrations of these groups are apparent). Groups more prone to low levels of cohesion were found to include: White British/Irish young people; young people living in deprivation; young people involved in personal risk behaviours; and young people with low emotional well-being.