

Trust and social cohesion in Australia

SOCIAL COHESION INSIGHTS SERIES

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Australians are regularly being told that we are not big on trust. A majority of Australians appear to be ‘convinced we’re being lied to’ by journalists and business leaders.¹ Political appointments to the public service are also ‘damaging our trust in institutions’.² Former Prime Minister Scott Morrison also believes that we are right not to trust governments, political leaders, or the United Nations.³ But does this mean we have low levels of trust in each other as Australians? The Scanlon Foundation’s Mapping Social Cohesion surveys provide insights into the who, why and where of social trust in Australia.

Mapping Social Cohesion

Administered each year since 2007, the Scanlon Foundation surveys are a unique source of data about how Australians view social cohesion issues. The surveys use a systematic methodology with large samples that provide a strong basis for analysis of sub-groups. This **Social Cohesion Insights** series digs deeper on the findings, providing added context, explanation and commentary.

Understanding social trust

As the 2021 Mapping Social Cohesion (MSC) report notes, trust is a key variable for predicting social cohesion.⁴ Generalised social trust is measured in the MSC survey by the following question, which is the focus of this edition of Insights:

“Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted, or that you need to be very careful in dealing with people?”

The question is a validated measure from the European Social Survey and World Values Survey,⁵ and examines the ‘rule of thumb’ that people use when they interact with fellow citizens who are not known to them.⁶ Having the attitude that ‘most people can be trusted’ represents the inclination ‘to give the other person the benefit of the doubt’.⁷ This position is usually informed by a combination of people’s past experiences and their ‘evaluation of the moral standard of the society in which they live’, including their belief in overall fairness and the quality of social and economic institutions.⁸

Why is social trust important?

Social researchers consider trust to be a fundamental ingredient to sustaining community well-being in highly interdependent modern societies.⁹ There is strong evidence to suggest, for instance, that communities with high levels of generalised trust are much better at tackling poverty and disadvantage than those without.¹⁰

Since ‘we all need to interact with persons that we do not know’, trust in strangers is important for civic participation and democratic stability, and is also a ‘lubricant’ for economic activity and growth.¹¹

In contrast, people who are generally untrusting of others are more likely to exclude themselves from social and economic opportunities; perhaps even believing that they have been marginalised or discriminated against.¹² It has also been argued that in times of perceived social or economic upheaval – such as during the global COVID-19 pandemic, volatile market fluctuations or political crises – citizens may begin to believe that the norms and values of the wider community they are a part of are

changing. This, in turn, can erode generalised trust and overall social cohesion.¹³

Indeed, the authors of the Edelman Trust Barometer recently argued that the 28 countries included in the survey (including Australia) were now ‘locked in a cycle of distrust’ fuelled by problematic government decisions and media behaviour, which presented a real ‘threat to societal stability’.¹⁴

Could many Australians be described as being distrustful of persons they don’t know? And to what extent could this represent a threat to our overall social cohesion?

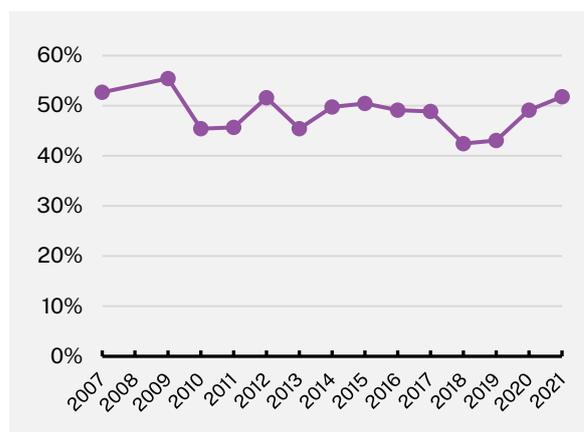
Trust in Australia

Australia remains a ‘high trust’ society, considered by social researchers to be a rare phenomenon.¹⁵ The World Values Survey ranked Australia just outside the top ten countries in the world in terms of generalised social trust between 2010–20, with positive opinion remaining in the narrow range of 49–51% over this period.¹⁶ Only the Nordic countries, the Netherlands, and New Zealand consistently ranked higher. A Pew Research study of 14 ‘advanced economies’ in 2020 also ranked Australia fifth in terms of overall social trust.¹⁷

In the Scanlon Foundation surveys, the proportion of Australians who believe that most people could be trusted has remained within the range of 43–55% since 2007, with **no clear downward trend** (see Figure 1). Amongst the nearly 34,000 responses to this question collected since 2007, there has been an almost even 50-50 split between people who believe most people can be trusted and those who believe they ‘can’t be too careful’.

While there have been criticisms of the general trust survey question that highlight its imprecision (for example, to whom does ‘most people’ refer – is it the nation in question, or the respondent’s local area?), even when more refined versions of the question have been applied, Australia ranks amongst the highest-trusting countries in the world.¹⁸

Figure 1. ‘Most people can be trusted’ (%), Mapping Social Cohesion surveys, 2007–21

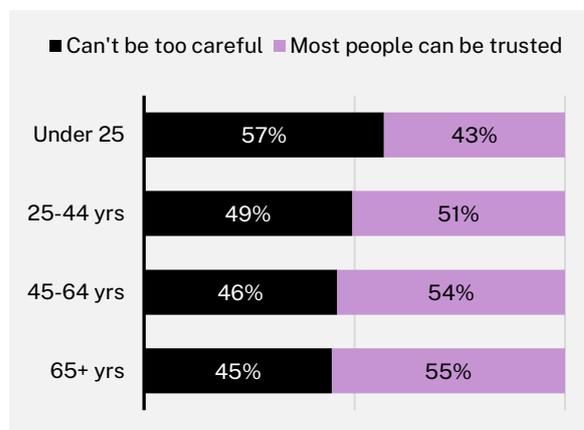


Who trusts?

Different groups of people have different levels of social trust. For example, the 2021 MSC report highlighted significant variations in trust attitudes according to respondents’ age.¹⁹

People under 25 years old demonstrated the lowest levels of trust, while those aged over 65 had the highest levels (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Social trust by age group (%), MSC, 2021

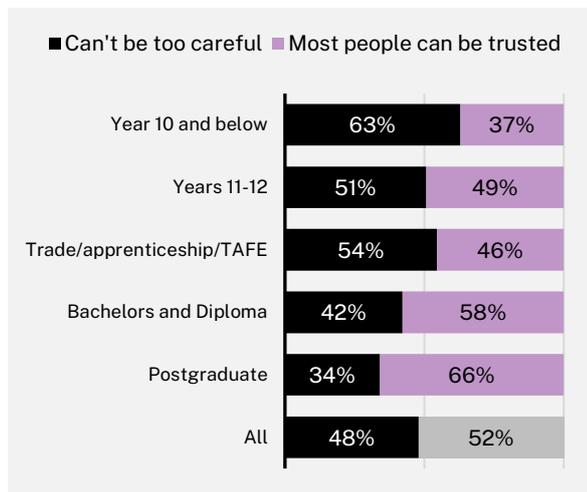


A new generation may be emerging in Australia with inherently lower social trust than their predecessors – a finding that was replicated in the Pew survey²⁰ – but it is also possible that young citizens in high trust environments turn into ‘trustees’ over time.²¹ Future releases of the Scanlon surveys may reveal a generational shift.

Education is another important factor. Investing in the education of the general population is thought to generate pro-social behaviour (such as volunteering and increased political

participation) and higher levels of interpersonal trust.²² The 2021 MSC survey showed that **people with university-level education had higher levels of social trust** (well above the overall rates) compared to those with secondary and certificate-level education (see Figure 3).

Figure 3. Social trust by education level (%), MSC, 2021



These demographic findings are consistent with studies of social trust in other countries such as the United States.²³

The Scanlon Foundation surveys do not, however, show a correlation between social trust and cultural or ethnic diversity indicators such as birthplace, language spoken at home, or year of arrival in Australia. **There is no evidence of a relationship between the high levels of immigration and ethnic diversity in Australia and an erosion of generalised social trust**, as predicted by some scholars.²⁴

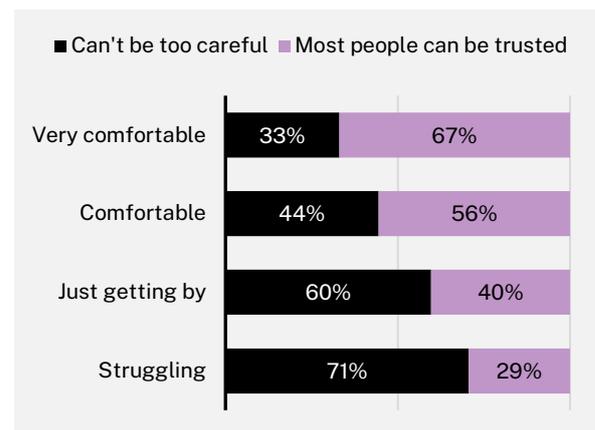
What shapes social trust?

One of the explanations offered for the 'stickiness' of social trust in countries like Australia is a long period of sustained economic growth, relatively 'modest' income inequality and, therefore, better objective living conditions.²⁵ In other words, **economic prosperity can drive higher generalised trust**.

However, aggregate data on social trust might obscure the perspectives of groups who feel socially or economically marginalised. For example, the MSC survey asks respondents to

describe their current financial circumstances. For the purposes of analysis, these are grouped into four categories, from 'struggling' to 'very comfortable.' The 2021 data reveals a clear relationship: **Australians who are struggling financially are more likely to have low levels of social trust** (see Figure 4).

Figure 4. Social trust by financial circumstances (%), MSC, 2021



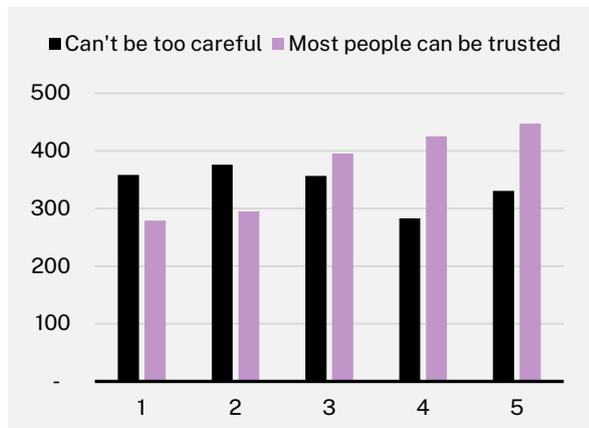
This finding echoes similar survey results from countries such as the US, where Pew Research has found that 'people who feel vulnerable or disadvantaged, for whatever reason, tend to find it riskier to trust because they're less well-fortified to deal with the consequences of misplaced trust'.²⁶ **Trusting people not known to them is a high-risk undertaking for people with low socioeconomic resources.**

Locational disadvantage also shapes social trust. The MSC survey uses respondents' postal codes to classify them against the Index of Relative Socio-economic Disadvantage (IRSD). The IRSD is a general index used by the ABS to summarise the economic and social conditions of households within an area, using variables such as household income, employment, education levels, housing costs and family status.²⁷

Figure 5 below groups MSC respondents into IRSD quintiles – the *lowest quintile* (1) indicates the *highest levels of locational disadvantage*, relative to other areas. Similar to the finding on financial circumstances, the chart below shows that **MSC respondents who were living in the**

most disadvantaged areas were those most likely to believe that ‘you can’t be too careful’ when trusting others.

Figure 5. Social trust by SEIFA IRSD quintile (1=Most disadvantaged, 5=Least disadvantaged) (#), MSC, 2021



There is much scholarly debate over aspects of society that can enhance or impede generalised trust. One proposition is that **having confidence in public institutions can enhance social trust**, as it reduces the perceived risks that people associate with trusting others.²⁸ Health science, for example, is a public institution that attracts a high level of trust in Australia. The 2018 Wellcome Global Monitor (conducted prior to the COVID-19 pandemic) showed that Australia and New Zealand had the largest proportion of people who trusted scientists in the world.²⁹

“We don’t trust in governments. We don’t trust in the United Nations, thank goodness. We don’t trust in all of these things, fine as they might be and as important as the role that they play... if you are putting your faith in those things... you are making a mistake. They are earthly, they are fallible.”

– Former Prime Minister Scott Morrison, 17 July, 2022

According to the World Bank, which has measured institutional quality for over 200 countries since 1996, Australia also currently ranks amongst the top 15 countries on indicators such as democratic ‘voice’ and accountability, the effectiveness and credibility

of government, and perceived levels of corruption amongst public officials.³⁰

The MSC data demonstrates a **clear relationship between Australians’ views of our public institutions and generalised levels of social trust**. For instance, in 2021, people who believed that the system of government in Australia ‘works fine as it is’ or needed only ‘minor changes’ had notably higher levels of social trust than those who thought the government needed major changes or should be replaced (see Figure 6). Similarly, people who believed that the courts in Australia mostly made fair and impartial decisions were also likely to demonstrate higher levels of social trust than those who did not see the courts as fair institutions (see Figure 7).

Figure 6. Social trust by: ‘Would you say the system of government we have in Australia...?’ (%), MSC, 2021

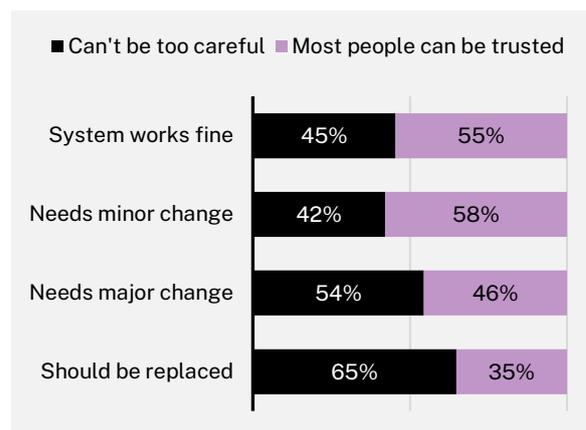
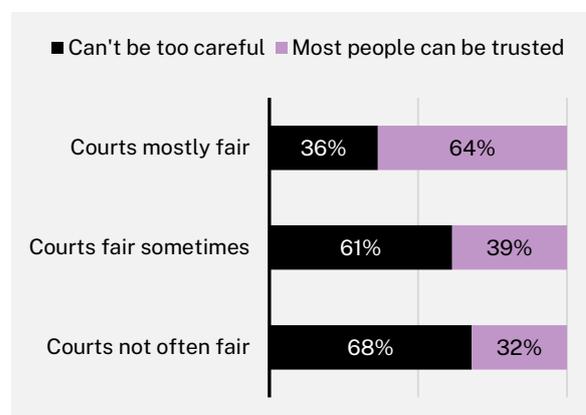


Figure 7. Social trust by: ‘In your opinion, how often do the courts make fair, impartial decisions based on the evidence made available to them?’ (%), MSC, 2021



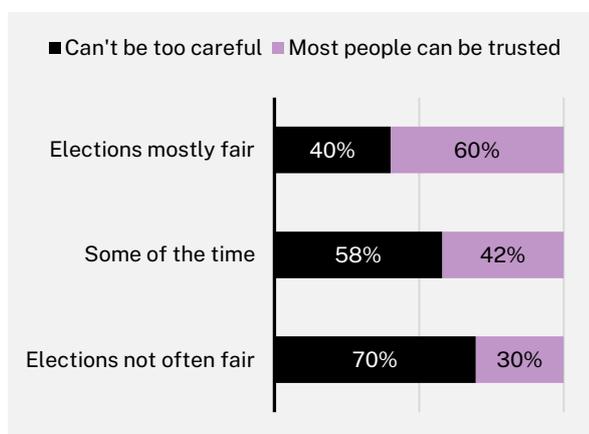
Some scholars have also argued that the relationship between social trust and

institutions is not purely a risk calculation that individuals make when engaging with strangers: it also reflects the extent to which people view society as ‘fair’ or ‘just.’ Psychological studies, for instance, have found that strong believers in the fairness of society — a ‘just world’ — are less cynical about politics and politicians, and are more trusting of other people in general.³¹

The MSC survey asks several questions which help us to understand views about ‘fairness’ in Australian society. For example, respondents are asked: ‘In your view, are Australian elections fair?’ This is a key measure of the ‘procedural’ aspects of fairness — or the views that people have about the fairness inherent in our democracy.³²

Consistent with other findings, **when MSC respondents believe that Australian elections are mostly *unfair*, they are also more likely to exhibit low levels of social trust** (see Figure 8).

Figure 8. Social trust by: ‘In your view, are Australian elections fair...?’ (%), MSC, 2021



Conclusions

Australians may be sceptical about political leaders and some national and international institutions, but they demonstrate consistent trust in each other. The MSC surveys show that, on balance, Australians have high levels of social trust — or the willingness to give others the benefit of the doubt. Levels of generalised trust in the Australia rank among the highest in the world.

Historically, levels of social trust in Australia are likely to have contributed to high levels of civic engagement and political participation,³³ as well as economic and social development. Australia’s relatively strong economic position and robust democracy are likely to have benefited from this social trust dividend.

However, there are reasons to pay close attention to any fluctuations in generalised trust, as well as to the groups who are already less trusting of others, such as young people and those who are struggling financially. With emerging global recession fears and cost of living crises hitting many countries, trust will likely be a critical resource to steer us through ‘a perfect storm of shocks which have left us in a period of great uncertainty’.³⁴

Future editions of the Social Cohesion Insights series will aim to adopt more rigorous multivariate analysis of MSC survey data to understand how factors such as age, education, and financial circumstances interact with each other to predict social trust and social cohesion.

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