On belonging

SOCIAL COHESION INSIGHTS SERIES

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Many day-to-day experiences are thought to create a **sense of belonging**: practising religion, joining a sporting club, or simply having positive interactions with people in the neighbourhood. Being a citizen can also help people feel like they belong to a national community. But the evidence from the Scanlon Foundation's Mapping Social Cohesion surveys shows that identifying with Australia may not be the strong source of 'belongingness' it once was — and some groups could be feeling particularly isolated. How might we derive greater meaning from our social interactions?

Mapping Social Cohesion

Starting in 2007 and administered each year since 2009, 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. The **Social Cohesion Insights** series digs deeper into the findings, and provides added context, explanation, and commentary.

What is belonging?

'Belonging' is used in various contexts to describe people's sense of *being a part of something*: social groups, physical places, or collective experiences.

While there are multiple definitions of belonging, most are based on some form of **social connection**; that is, the extent to which people feel personally accepted, respected, included, and supported by others.[1] This feeling often relates to some form of community 'membership' wherein people feel safe in their shared identity and have a stake in the future of that group.[2]

Group membership and the opportunities to interact with and be recognised by others brings a sense of physical and emotional security that is critical to human functioning.[3] Indeed, belonging is considered a fundamental biological requirement that shapes individual wellbeing, physical and mental health, as well as a range of social and economic outcomes.[4] Maslow's famous Hierarchy of Needs even places 'belongingness' (affiliating and being part of a group) above physiological requirements like nourishment and safety.

While belonging can lead to positive outcomes, it is not without challenges. Belonging can also be aggressively asserted in political projects of nationalism, racism. or the defence of territory from 'real or imagined intruders.'[5] The possibility of people living alongside one another without an accompanying sense of belonging also raises the spectres of social discord, disharmony and the exclusion or marginalisation of minority groups. The Victorian Government has defined 'sense of belonging' as comprising 'shared values, identification with Australia, and trust' — the absence of which, it is argued, can lead to rejection, isolation, crime, substance abuse, and vulnerability to extremist ideologies.[6]

Creating a 'sense of belonging'

Scholars at the US-based Othering & Belonging Institute have argued that 'if members of a social group feel as if they belong, then belonging exists'.[7] However, they also highlight that belonging requires agency: it is not a spontaneous phenomenon. Actions must be taken to build and sustain belonging amongst members of social groups.

It is little wonder, then, that many policies, programs, and initiatives aim or claim to 'create a sense of belonging' for groups that feel socially isolated. For example, Neighbourhood Houses, Community Hubs, and community gardens can foster belonging amongst local residents by providing spaces, activities and opportunities for social connection.[8] Sporting clubs are also recognised as important mechanisms for people to build social networks and develop secure self-identities.[9] Volunteers and community 'sponsors' in Australia are also working to create a sense of belonging for refugees from the very beginning of their settlement journeys:

> "What's different about [the Community Refugee Integration and Settlement Pilot] is that the refugees arriving will have something resembling almost a family network or a group of extended friends who are personally very invested in their success."[10]

Though belonging remains a somewhat ambiguous concept, a better understanding of who belongs (and why) is needed to build resilient social structures and institutions.[11] The Scanlon Foundation's Mapping Social Cohesion study offers useful data to explore these issues.

Measuring belonging in Australia

While there is broad agreement that belonging is important for social harmony and even cohesive nation-states,[12] there is less agreement about belonging as a construct, how it should be measured, and what it contributes to.[13] Measures of belonging may also shift over time according to individuals' changing social relationships, rights and entitlements, and material circumstances.[14]

The Scanlon Foundation surveys have been measuring belonging as one of five domains of the Scanlon-Monash Index of Social Cohesion. Having been initially designed to capture the 'national mood,' the surveys have primarily defined belonging as 'identification with

Australia'.[15] The original belonging index was constructed by measuring respondents' levels of agreement with three survey items:

- 'To what extent do you take pride in the Australian way of life and culture?'
- 'To what extent do you have a sense of belonging in Australia?'
- 'Do you agree or disagree with the following statement: In the modern world, maintaining the Australian way of life and culture is important.'
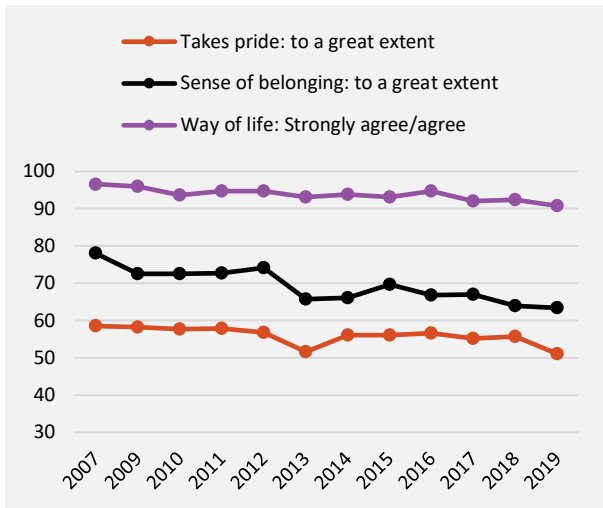
Figure 1 shows the relative decline in Australians' level of belonging against the index year of 2007. The direct dialling survey method used up to 2019 yielded an overall decline of approximately 11 index points. From 2018 onwards, an online survey methodology using the Life in Australia™ (LinA) panel shows that belonging was relatively stable, falling less than one index point between 2018–21.[16] An increase was observed during the pandemic.

Figure 1. SMI 1: Belonging, 2007–21
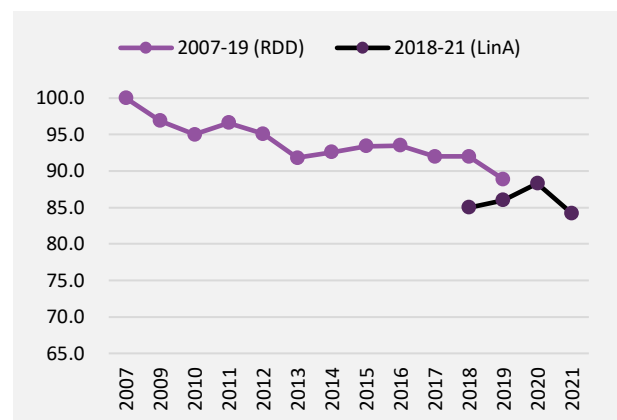
Each of the items used to construct the original belonging index contributed to the decline over time (see Figure 2). The steepest decline was recorded amongst survey respondents who felt that they had a sense of belonging in Australia 'to a great extent'. In 2007, this proportion was 78%; by 2019 it had fallen to 63%.
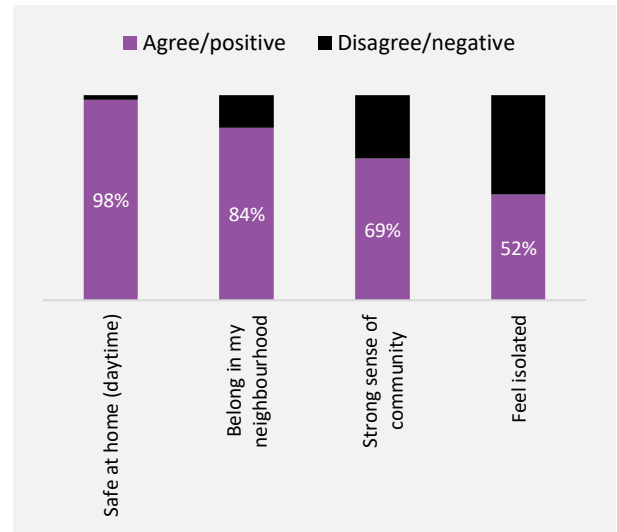
Figure 2. Belonging items, 2007–19 (RDD)

Legend:
- Takes pride: to a great extent
- Sense of belonging: to a great extent
- Way of life: Strongly agree/agree

Figure 3. Personal and place belonging, 2021

Legend:
- Agree/positive
- Disagree/negative

Bars:
- Safe at home (daytime): 98%
- Belong in my neighbourhood: 84%
- Strong sense of community: 69%
- Feel isolated: 52%

In 2021, the Scanlon-Monash Index was redeveloped to incorporate additional measures. The weighted average of participants' belonging scores using the new index in the 2021 survey was **60**.[17] It should be noted that this score uses a different methodology and scale and cannot be compared with the original index.

The redeveloped belonging index incorporated the following additional survey items:

- 'How safe do you feel at home by yourself during the day?'
- 'I feel like I belong in my neighbourhood.'
- 'My neighbourhood has a strong sense of community.'
- 'How often do you feel isolated from others?'

Figure 3 shows the proportions of survey participants who responded positively or negatively to these questions. The findings suggest that, in addition to identification with Australia, belonging can be derived from feelings of safety and identification with the neighbourhood.

Nearly half of the sample (48%) said that they felt isolated from others, either some of the time or often. Isolation is therefore a significant risk to belonging; research suggests that isolation may be driven by income poverty, cultural distance from the 'mainstream', or limited access to social networks.[18]

Who belongs?

Using all seven items that comprise the new belonging domain, when examining the responses of different demographic groups, **people who were above the retirement age in Australia had much higher levels of belonging than younger age groups** (see Figure 4). This confirms research from other contexts such as Canada, where it has been found that older age has a 'consistently strong and positive impact' on sense of belonging.[19] There were only minor differences between male and female respondents, regardless of age.

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Figure 4. Mean belonging score by age and sex, 2021
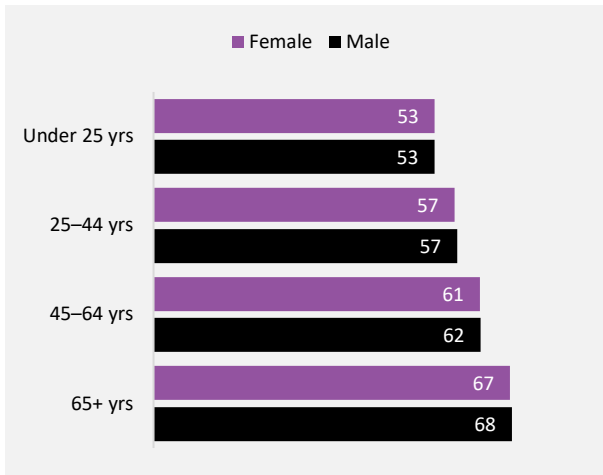
People born in Australia (particularly men) had the highest average belonging scores compared to those born overseas. People who were born in countries where English is not the primary language had the lowest levels of belonging in Australia (see Figure 5).

Figure 5. Mean belonging score by birthplace and sex, 2021
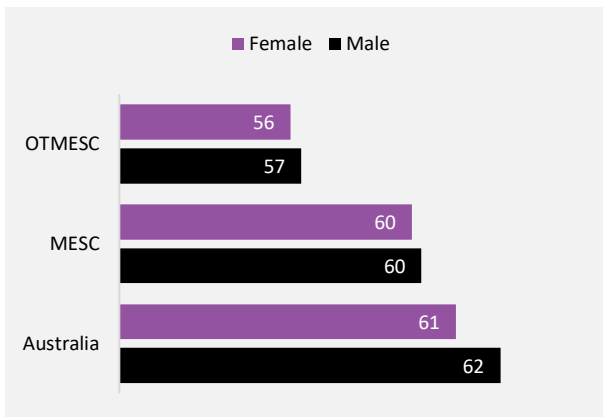
Note: MESC = Main-English speaking countries (UK, Republic of Ireland, South Africa, Canada, USA, and New Zealand). OTMESC = Other than main English-speaking countries.

Recently arrived migrants (those who had only been in Australia within five years of the 2021 survey) had the lowest average belonging scores of all overseas-born respondents, when compared with migrants who had been in Australia for longer (see Figure 6). Migrants who had been living in Australia for more than 20 years had relatively high levels of belonging, within one index point of the Australian-born population.

Figure 6. Mean belonging score by duration of residence in Australia, 2021
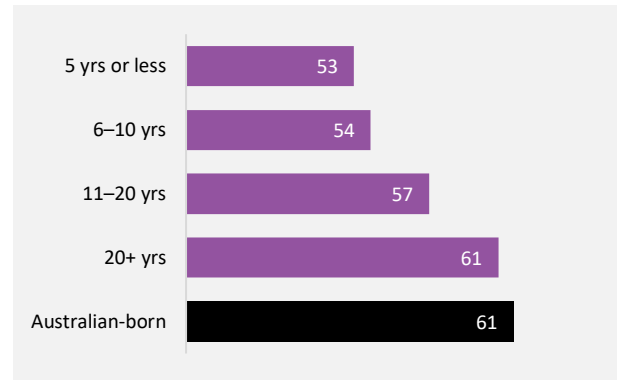
Migrants who reported experiencing discrimination due to their skin colour, ethnic origin, or religious background in the 12 months prior to the 2021 survey had low levels of belonging (see Figure 7). The gap (over nine index points) was particularly evident when comparing this group to Australian-born respondents who had not experienced discrimination.

Figure 7. Mean belonging by birthplace and experience of discrimination, 2021


Some of the most drastic differences in belonging observed in the 2021 survey were reflected in respondents' financial situation. The MSC survey asks participants to describe their financial circumstances on a scale from 'prosperous' to 'poor'; for the purposes of analysis, responses were grouped into four categories: struggling; getting by; comfortable; and very comfortable.

Survey respondents who were struggling financially had low average belonging scores — more than seven index points below the average for all survey respondents (see Figure 8). By contrast, people who were very comfortable

financially had a belonging score of five index points above the average for all respondents.

Figure 8. Mean belonging score by financial circumstances, 2021
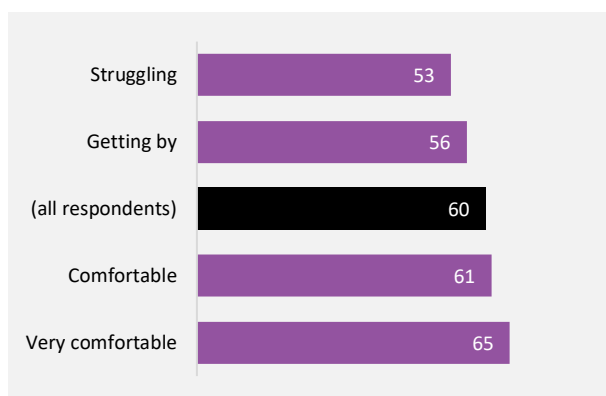
A similar relationship can be observed in respondents' occupational status. People who reported being unemployed, a student, or not in the labour force (NILF) had the lowest average belonging scores (see Figure 9). In comparison, people who were retired had very high relative belonging scores.

Figure 9. Mean belonging score by occupational status, 2021
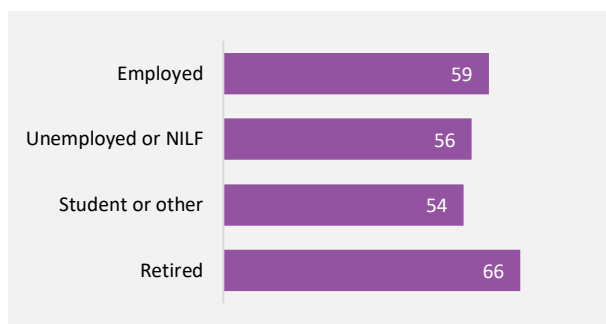
Discussion

Monash University psychologist Dr Kelly-Ann Allen argues that 'an absence of belonging has negative and devastating effects on people, both physically and psychologically'.[20] People who feel that they do not belong to an 'in-group' are likely to feel pain associated with isolation or being ostracised. In contrast, research shows that strong social bonds between people can improve individual happiness, create buffers against stress, and be a protective factor against depression. Indeed, having strong social

relationships can be crucial to finding meaning in life.[21]

The Mapping Social Cohesion data indicates that, overall, Australians' **sense of belonging to the nation** has declined over time. While the vast majority (over 90%) still agreed as of 2021 that maintaining the Australian way of life and culture was important, the steady decline in the original belonging index suggests that the nation may not be the prominent source of belonging that it once was. Instead, Australians are finding more meaning in the attachment they have to their neighbourhood, local community, and personal social networks.

The Scanlon Foundation surveys also point to groups who may not be deriving the benefits of a sense of belonging. Young people, those born in non-English speaking countries (particularly if they are recently arrived), people who have experienced some form of discrimination, and those who are struggling financially all show relatively low levels of belonging against the new index.

To combat the potential risks of a lack of belonging, Dr Allen argues that 'we should strive to create a culture of social inclusion so that acceptance, inclusion and empathy towards others become social norms.'[22] This may mean greater investment in targeted social programs. For example, minority groups receiving encouraging messages from other members of the community that acknowledge their hardships has been shown to improve health and wellbeing outcomes.[23]

The trends in the Mapping Social Cohesion survey suggest that, while the nation is still an important source of belonging for some, efforts to 'create a culture of social inclusion' at the local community and neighbourhood levels may help people derive greater meaning from their social interactions.

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16 Life in Australia™ (LinA) is Australia's first national probability-based online panel. For surveys like Mapping Social Cohesion that ask questions about socially sensitive or controversial issues, it is likely that an online mode will yield different (potentially more truthful) results to a situation where a respondent is asked a question directly by an interviewer. There is therefore an observable difference between components of the Scanlon-Monash Index as measured using the RDD and LinA modes. See Andrew Markus, 'Mapping Social Cohesion: The Scanlon Foundation Surveys, 2019' (Scanlon Foundation Research Institute, 2019).

17 The statistics discussed in this section use the weighted averages (or mean) of belonging scores calculated from the 2021 survey. Survey data are weighted to adjust for the chance of being sampled in the survey and to bring the respondent profile into line with ABS demographic indicators (see Andrew Markus, 'Mapping Social Cohesion 2021', Scanlon Foundation Research Institute, 2021).

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