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## Social Cohesion. A Basis for the Primary Prevention of Radicalisation in Cities.

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### Abstract

Social cohesion has been widely used as a normative concept in European debate since the late 1990s. The contribution relates the concept to (primary prevention of) radicalisation and shows that a low degree of social cohesion enhances the danger of extremism. Our study in urban districts of Toulouse/France uses an adapted model of social cohesion that combines statistical data with qualitative data. The aim of the study is to describe the living circumstances in the districts in detail and to compare specific risks and protective factors in the territories. It can be shown that matching policies or social interventions may be developed—depending on the specific situation of each territory. Especially different perceptions of safety, the meaning of “feeling at home”, and the identification of inhabitants with “their” neighbourhood play an important role in terms of social cohesion and thus should be fostered in order to prevent violent, anti-democratic radicalisation. In socially marginalized neighbourhoods feelings of belonging may serve as a resource if municipality and the state executive manage to enter in a trustful relationship with the inhabitants.

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### 1. Introduction

The term social cohesion was forged in the realm of functionalist sociology at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in order to describe the bonds of individuals toward each other in the context of modern societies (Durkheim 1893). During the late 1990s, almost a century later, it became a major normative concept, that has been widely discussed in the European debate (e.g. OECD 1997). This later conceptualisation includes the key determinants well-being, social inclusion

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and social capital (Castel 1995, Jenson 2010, Council of Europe 2010). With these key words it combines individualistic approaches that address a successful life and individual freedom with the idea of living together and solidarity—be it among all of the members of a society or between different social groups. Social cohesion as a container of these positively connotated terms promises to enhance the living conditions in a society often conceived as threatened by a risk of disintegration inherent to globalised modernity (Tolila, 1995; Avenel, 2014). On the other hand, social cohesion is related to neoliberal politics since it seems to search solutions for social problems mainly in local initiatives instead of focusing on social inequalities and the reallocation of resources (Novy et al. 2012, Stigendal 2019).

In this contribution we aim at rethinking the concept of social cohesion and testing it in a specific context. We argue that social cohesion as an operational concept can help to better understand, thus to prevent, the upcoming of violent radicalisation in urban districts. In this regard it may serve as a background for the development of primary prevention measures (Koehler 2017: 67, Berner 2022: 25-26). At the same time, we try to elaborate a methodology that allows to come to relevant conclusions when applied to a given territory. We conclude that it is not feasible to rate social cohesion by numbers or by indexes only. Rather, it is necessary to describe social cohesion according to concrete historical situations in socio-spatial units. In this regard our approach belongs to the tradition of social space analysis continuously evolving since Parks' and Burgess' urban ecology to recent applications in social work and crime prevention (Park and Burgess 1921, Spatschek and Wolf-Ostermann 2009, Bannister et al. 2019). We thereby aim at contributing to the scientific debate about social cohesion while applying the notion to actual territories, fostering its operational advantages in the context of primary prevention of extremism. Primary prevention in this context means that not only territories with actual experiences of inhabitants getting radicalised are in the focus of interest. The aim of the approach is rather to find out more about risk and protective factors in very distinct neighbourhoods or urban districts because focusing on social cohesion in every district of a city helps to avoid radicalisation processes among inhabitants.

When it comes to applying the concept to real societal situations and to rating social cohesion it proves difficult to draw reliable conclusions. We may measure social cohesion by

using different factors and describe its development over a period of time. And we may compare data describing the situation in different societies. But besides this relative use: What can we say about living conditions in an absolute way? We can hardly argue that a certain degree of social cohesion—be it especially high or especially low—corresponds to “good” or “bad” living conditions.

In the following section we define social cohesion (chapter 2.1) and show how it is related to radicalisation and its prevention (chapter 2.2 and 2.3). In chapter 3 we discuss some difficulties when it comes to measuring social cohesion in general and especially with respect to small territorial units (chapter 3.1). We elaborate on a model that allows to describe social cohesion in urban districts (chapter 3.2). Then, we introduce two examples of a study that we conducted in 2021 and 2022 in the metropolitan region of Toulouse in France<sup>2</sup> (chapter 4). Finally, we provide some ideas that will help to adapt the findings to a more generalized model with the goal of creating matching preventative measures in cities or regions—be they in youth work, in social work, in community policing, or in municipal politics (chapter 5).

## **2. Social Cohesion and Prevention of Radicalisation**

### *2.1 Social Cohesion*

Despite the wide range of definitions of social cohesion in academic literature, the concept remains relatively vague. It is not one solid phenomenon, but is shaped through different factors that in sum build up its theoretical construct. According to the Council of Europe social cohesion is the “capacity of a society to ensure the well-being of all its members, minimising disparities and avoiding marginalization” (Council of Europe 2010: 2). As indicators it contains social and political attitudes, beliefs and values, rights and duties, social capital, and social networks within (‘bonding’) and between milieus and social groups (‘bridging’) (Güntner 2009: 380, our translation). In contrast, socio-demographic “tendencies of social disintegration and the consolidation of material poverty in the cities” threaten social cohesion (Güntner 2009: 391, Castel 1995: 14). Jenson (2010) presents social inclusion as one

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<sup>2</sup> The inquiry was part of the project “RAD2CITIZEN, Extremisms, Radicalisation and Citizenship”, led by Toulouse Métropole, funded by the Internal Security Fund–Police of the European Union. It follows all requirements of the funding institution. See the project website: <https://metropole.toulouse.fr/rad2citizen-en>.

of the original dimensions of the concept (e.g. OECD 1997, see Jenson 2010: 4). With other words: social cohesion was considered a measure to prevent social exclusion as well as its antonym (Jenson 2010: 5, Castel: 29). The dimensions of social inclusion combine factors like poverty, questions of distribution, or social rights. Another crucial element of social cohesion is social capital (Jenson 2010: 9). Social capital here is very much understood according to Robert Putnam (2000), who focuses on institutions, organisations or associations that support inhabitants of a district and connect them with each other or with important persons outside of their neighbourhoods.

Social relations, understood as ‘bonding’ resources (cf. Granovetter 1985) within a given social network, are key because they provide a first solidarity and identification pattern. They allow inhabitants to feel as members of a community. A related sociological model distinguishes a “mode of integration mediated through conflict” that is opposed to an “integration mode of urban indifference” (Sutterlüty 2010: 213-235, our translation). In short this means that communities that realise spaces of open (political) exchange and the occasion to struggle with each other, offer a higher chance for social cohesion than communities in which people live side by side, without knowing each other, and in which togetherness is only harmonious on the surface. We will come back later to these phenomena in the empirical part of the study.

This process, if not complemented by ‘bridging’ opportunities, may end up in different forms of polarisation. Therefore, ‘bridging’ opportunities can be understood as providing a basis for the emergence of a ‘greater good’ which means identifying beyond the communities to which we belong in the first place. Such a relation between groups, allowing for their coexistence and fostering their cooperation, provides resources for individuals to live together peacefully. Especially public institutions and regional or national associations may foster bridges towards “others”. Such organisations may also be considered as a third type of social capital, called ‘linking capital’ that may lead to a network of communities building up a more inclusive, thus cohesive society (Woolcock 2001).

In our understanding, bonding, bridging and linking capitals are thus social processes that allow individuals and groups to exist in a range of identification scales characterised by the degree of integration of diversity. Similar processes of identification scaling can exist

without integration of diversity such as in the case of nationalism or global community based on the fear of disorder and contamination (McDonald 2018, 185). We do not consider these social phenomena as participating to social cohesion as they lie on (sometimes violent) exclusion dynamics.

Thus, the understanding of social cohesion put forward in this paper is a capacity of different social or identity groups to compose a cohesive society; it is thus situated at a trans-community scale. The factors and indicators identified up to this point are considered to foster this capacity in modern democracies. In return, social cohesion is considered as a positive background for developing societies' goals.

## *2.2 Social Cohesion and Radicalisation*

While exploring the relations between social cohesion and radicalisation processes, we can observe how different forms of violence affect social cohesion or, the other way around, how social cohesion dynamics can foster or help preventing violence. In this paper, we focus on the second type of relations. We understand the term (violent, anti-democratic) radicalisation in a narrow sense as opposed to democratic values and with a tendency towards physical or mental violence. Not every form of radicalisation has to be prevented. Prevention becomes a public issue when it threatens democracy and/or when it leads to violent extremism or even just violent activities (discussion on the term, cf. Kaya 2020).

Considering current literature on how terrorism and radicalisation affect social cohesion can help us defining and describing both terms. Terrorist attacks tend to crackle social cohesion in different ways. The direct consequences of such attacks on those who experienced and survived it and their families in terms of psychological damages are no longer to be demonstrated (Galea et al. 2002, Prioux et al. 2023). But also, for those who are indirectly affected by terrorism (Truc 2016), it can have heavy consequences. Thus, terrorism can be understood as the use of violence as a means to provoke a social cohesion breakdown. Cumulative radicalisation (Eatwell 2006), that is, the fact that the actions of determined groups fuel escalation processes with those who label them as their antagonists poses the question of reciprocal effects of violence and identification processes. Despite its undeniable interest for understanding polarisation processes, cumulative radicalisation approaches share a

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strong focus on interactions of extremist groups in a binary fashion. In order to provide a larger understanding of the relation between violent radicalisation and social cohesion, we rather agree that “the theoretical field of cumulative radicalisation needs to go beyond the binary process involving two opposed groups, and examine a ‘broader process of coevolution involving multiple actors’” (Busher and Macklin 2015: 893). In fact, it has been showed that at a macro-social level, the occurrence of terrorist acts also tends to weaken social cohesion by reinforcing stigmatisation and hatred, and to push even prevention strategies into playing a social disintegration role (Ghosh et al. 2013, Ragazzi 2016, Conti 2020). In that sense, observing cumulative radicalisation processes in one district can help describing bonding, bridging and linking processes as one of the many dimensions of social cohesion.

Here, recognition and participation are especially important for the coping strategies individuals choose when they experience deficits like social exclusion and inequalities (Böhnisch 2017) which in contrast foster radicalisation processes (Poli and Arun 2019; Franc and Pavlović 2018) and “discriminatory, racist, nationalist, nativist and Islamophobic rhetoric towards ‘others’ poses a clear threat to democracy and social cohesion” (Kaya 2020: 20).

However, the very existence of such discourses is not sufficient to explain radicalisation and violence. As suggested by the 3N model (Kruglanski et al. 2019, Da Silva et al., 2023) these ideologies are only efficient while framed as “narratives” supported by groups (“networks”) and responding to one’s “needs”, that are often defined through a quest for significance. Although this model is mainly centred on individual psychological dimensions of radicalisation, its application offers many possibilities, including for prevention interventions (Moyano Pacheco 2019: 73-90). In our understanding, this model strengthens the idea that a society able to provide good living conditions, fosters groups’ bridging and common identity through linking processes. That means that a cohesive society limits thus prevents the possibilities for radicalisation processes to occur.

Most of the arguments exposed were built from radicalisation or even terrorist cases, but aren’t such conclusions too wide and couldn’t they apply to every type of violence or social disintegration? Research that tries to integrate terrorism and petty crime in a single framework may help to resolve these interrogations. So-called “crime-terror nexus” (Schmidt 2018) explores how terrorist and crime organisations can develop common interests and



cooperation. Such a vision however, is of little help for understanding the process of radicalisation as it focuses on already stabilised crime or terrorist organisations. Literature that explores paths of individuals from crime to terrorist groups may be more useful. It can be understood under two complementary assumptions: individuals engaged in criminal activities are more likely to be recruited in terrorist organizations because of disposition they built during their criminal activities (Ilan and Sandberg 2019); criminal and terrorist organisations recruit individuals with common backgrounds as “street culture” offers points of confluence between them (Linge et al. 2023). However, according to Wang “there is not the evidence to suggest that a great number of ‘ordinary’ street criminals are at risk of radicalisation, rather a growing awareness that individuals who have become jihadists were once street criminals” (Wang, 2010). In fact, a study of points of confluence in terms of bodily experiences, spaces and narratives will not lead to a predictive approach for countering violent acts but may help us to better grasp proper preventive aspects of interventions in terms of democratic culture.

In the present context the goal of social cohesion as a social political concept lies in its preventative effect against radicalisation processes (cf. Jesse and Mannewitz 2018) and more generally against social and political violence. A socially cohesive society is thought as being more resilient to the rise of extremism and exclusive community identification, whether it comes from outside in the form of recruitment or propaganda, or develops from within, out of feelings of powerlessness and social exclusion. In that way, fostering social cohesion is a way of primary prevention of extremism (Koehler 2017: 67, Berner 2022: 25-26).

### *2.3 Social Cohesion and Related Approaches as a Basis for Primary Prevention*

In recent years various approaches have been discussed that consider the social aspects of radicalisation processes and that try to expand security-based preventative approaches. Namely, the concept of (community) resilience and public health partly show similar characteristics as social cohesion. Depending on the concept, cohesion takes slightly different roles in these concepts. It may for example be understood as one element of resilience among others (Wimelius et al. 2023: 1117) or as “means of promoting resilience” (Wimelius et al. 2023: 1118). Also, public health includes social cohesion as part of its conceptualisation where it appears as protective factor that helps increasing public health (Bhui et al. 2012: 3).



Public Health is a programme that provides genuine research, systematic interventions, and—in the context discussed here—is understood as an approach that allows to find new ways of prevention of extremism. At the end of the twentieth century first experiences with community policing were made in the Anglo-American area. Still they couldn't avoid stigmatising effects and often even promoted “suspect communities” (Nguyen 2019: 324) instead of opposing stigmatisation. Public health was an answer to these early experiences. Its intention is to investigate risk and protective factors and to promote “community well-being” (Weine et al. 2016: 3). This means that it focuses not only on the threats but also on the positive resources that a territory offers.

Resilience may take place at different levels: at individual, community or societal level (Stephens and Sieckelinck 2021: 3). Here, community resp. societal level are relevant and there are obvious overlaps with social cohesion:

“The ‘resilient communities’ perspective focuses less on specific interventions, and more on the features and characteristics of communities that, it is suggested, prevent their members from being drawn into extremism.” (Stephens et al. 2021: 353)

A major feature of resilience is the notion that a community may have a positive or even healthy state, that shall be recovered in case it is damaged or that shall be gained if not yet fully reached. Our understanding of social cohesion as preventative factor is very close to community resilience but we classify our approach more open: there is not one specific mode of a healthy community but rather there are very different strengths and weaknesses a community can hold.

The differences between the concepts often concern the hierarchy of the use of the terms. Integrated into the debate about extremism, all of them are similar in the definition of the final end: they all serve as bases for preventive interventions. In our understanding social cohesion is the means that leads to this end. According to other notions, social cohesion is a means that leads to resilience that then leads to the prevention of extremism. Public health literature usually describes social cohesion as a protective factor (a means) that helps reaching

a healthy community that finally protects its members from getting radicalised (Bhui et al. 2012: 3).

An important difference between public health and social cohesion are their distinct ideas of prevention. Although literature on public health describes a dedicated primary prevention focus (Weine et al. 2016: 3), the concept defines “vulnerable” individuals or groups (Clemmow et al. 2023: 409). Public health approaches then try to support these groups and thus gets a secondary preventive twist. It may be considered early preventative, since it addresses certain parts of the population before they even become delinquent. Nevertheless, subject of the intervention are targeted groups of people. Social cohesion on the other hand focuses on the territory (the community, the neighbourhood, the district, and so on). It follows a spatial approach and intends to foster inclusion and participation. Subject of interventions are not individuals or selected groups but the territories, relationships between their inhabitants, and relationships between smaller territorial units (e.g. urban districts or communities) within a larger frame (e.g. the city or metropolitan area).

However, all of the three approaches highlight the necessity of preventing extremism before it comes up, meaning they all endorse early or primary preventive approaches. Furthermore, factors mentioned in resilience and public health literature are quite similar to the ones that frame social cohesion. As protective factors they include—among others—social networks, sense of belonging, trust in institutions, safety, or quality of life (Wimelius 2018: 1119); critical thinking and tolerance, opportunity to engage in dialogue, engaging in legal forms of protest, bonding, bridging, and linking capital (Stephens and Sieckelinck 2021: 4); social capital, integrated cultural identity, employment success (Bhui et al. 2012: 3). As risk factors they mention—again among many others—drug and alcohol abuse, chronic stress, financial problems, disrespect, interactions with extremists (Clemmow et al. 2023: 417); “lack of access to social and mental health services, mental health/psychosocial troubles” (Weine et al. 2016: 5); social isolation and exclusion, grievances about discrimination, or unemployment (Bhui 2012: 3).

In the following section we will provide a model of social cohesion that is adapted to questions of prevention of extremism. We will show, that most of the factors overlap with the risk and protective factors listed in the resilience and public health approaches.

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### 3. A Model for the Description of Social Cohesion

#### 3.1 *The Challenge of Rating Social Cohesion*

Most of the studies on social cohesion observe the development of indicators: When the value of an indicator improves the territory concerned becomes more cohesive. Absolute thresholds are rare: At what level of unemployment, for example, can a group be considered to be in danger of losing its cohesion? Which abstention rate indicates high or low social cohesion?

When setting absolute limits—at what value is an indicator considered to promote or endanger cohesion—the historical (temporal and spatial) context must be considered. An example illustrates this:

A well-known indicator for social cohesion is “risk of poverty”: people with less than 60% of the median income are considered to be at risk of poverty. With regard to extremism, there is evidence that poverty alone is not exacerbating radicalisation. Rather, the unequal distribution of income or economic wealth and its interpretation in cultural systems are relevant indicators (Vijaya et al. 2018; Poli and Arun, 2019). For this reason, the GINI-index (INSEE 2020), indicating the discrepancy of income within a large territory, might be a valuable instrument in order to explain the rising of extremist attitudes in a community. However, an example of our study in Toulouse Métropole (Toulouse Métropole 2022) illustrates that using the GINI-index can be problematic: In Reynerie the GINI-index is quite low, which means that the incomes are equally distributed—at first sight a criterion indicating a low risk of threats to social cohesion. However, living in Reynerie, a neighbourhood with a high poverty rate and a low GINI-index, means to be at relative equality vis à vis one’s neighbours, but to suffer from inequalities vis à vis the rest of the population of the metropolis or the wealthiest part (Toulouse Métropole 2022). The example shows that the application of the GINI-index alone leads to wrong conclusions with regard to the relation between income and emergence of radicalisation.

Another aspect concerns the distinct forms of capital, discussed above. When it comes to the question whether bridging or bonding capitals are “good” for a society and for social cohesion, we can state that “[...] the balance of bonding and bridging social capital [is

important]. Neither is negative *per se* but can be negative depending on the balance and context.” (Claridge 2018: 3). Too much bonding capital may even be a factor exacerbating extremism:

“Networks with excessive levels of bonding tend to breed bias and racism, creating outgroups and exclusion. The Ku Klux Klan is often cited as an example of a group with high levels of bonding social capital that has negative outcomes.” (Claridge 2018: 3)

A further constraint arises with the question about the homo-/heterogeneity of territories. Are they homogenous in themselves or do they show a certain degree of heterogeneity? Usually, modern urban societies show a relatively high degree of pluralism. That means that bridging capital may come up even within a territory. So, we cannot easily discern the nature of relationships between inhabitants of a territory or the value of associations in terms of their ability to foster bridging social capital without taking a deeper look at their work and at the specific characteristics of a territory.

### 3.2 The Model

For the study presented in this article it is necessary not to rate the different states of social cohesion by means of numeric estimations only. Instead, in-detail-descriptions of territories and their individual state of social cohesion are preferable. They should follow the question: What are their strengths and weaknesses? In order to be comparable, the descriptions of the territories in our study follow a set of main categories operationalised by several indicators that are similar to common surveys about social cohesion. They serve as deductive categories (Mayring 2023) that frame the study and at the same time allow a relatively open research approach and the openness for inductive findings (Kaufmann 2016):

1. Socio-economic factors: income average, risk of poverty, unemployment, GINI index, level of education
2. Housing: social housing, prices and rentals, ownership, public transport
3. Political factors: abstention, votes, (offers that foster) participation

4. Social capital and trust: bridging, bonding, linking capital, associations, social/youth work offers, trust in institutions
5. Security: criminality and violence, feelings of safety and insecurity, incidents/occurrences related to security issues, relationship police-inhabitants
6. Perspectives and identification: feelings of belonging, experiences of exclusion/discrimination

Some of the indicators can be rated by statistical data (mostly provided by local or national statistical institutes<sup>3</sup>). Sometimes, data is not available at the level of small territorial units. Statistical institutes usually provide data for socio-economic factors, sometimes for housing indicators, and for political factors. As shown above, in many cases numbers do not allow for a conclusion as to what they mean for social cohesion and the emergence of extremism. In both cases data has to be gathered either by conducting own quantitative surveys or by doing qualitative research. It was not possible in our inquiry to collect data for all of the categories (lack of availability, lack of comparability due to different forms of territories), so we decided to complete them by qualitative research (ethnographic fieldwork, including interviews, group discussions, observations). Hereby, we payed attention to different perspectives of stakeholders: A police officer may have a different perception than an elected official, or an inhabitant of a district. Since it is not possible to produce representative data by doing qualitative research, the choice of interviewees is important. They have to represent certain social roles that allow to reconstruct an understanding of the territory as comprehensive as possible. The interviews and focus groups of our research followed a relatively open mode (cf. Kaufmann 2016). We coded the corpus according to the categories and indicators mentioned above (mainly social capital, trust, feelings of safety, perspectives, identification).

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<sup>3</sup> For the project RAD2CITIZEN mainly: Institut national de la statistique et des études économiques (INSEE) and Mairie de Toulouse.

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#### 4. Social Cohesion in Toulouse Métropole: Two Field Studies

In this chapter we present two field studies of territories in Toulouse Métropole<sup>4</sup>. They serve as an illustration for the model presented in the previous chapters.

In the framework of the project RAD2CITIZEN, we implemented a qualitative approach based essentially on interviews and, when it was possible, direct observations.

Most of the interviews are individual semi-directive interviews with public actors, frontline practitioners or executives. Those actors were involved mainly in social and educational work services. The interviews and interviewees of each of the two districts are listed at the beginning of the descriptions of the territories in section 4.1 and 4.2. One interview was also realised with city level or urban area level policy makers and managers such as the head of local law enforcement, agents from the prefecture of Haute-Garonne (representing the national State in the department), and with both deputy mayors dedicated to each of the two neighbourhoods. Data collected within the project, consists of field notes, a research diary, and more than fifty interviews that were conducted with persons acting at different scales (region, urban area, city, neighbourhood). The interviews began with a presentation of the research dimension of the project, its aims and procedures. Anonymity was granted to inhabitants, associations and public agents. The use of the material as qualitative data to be published by the project was clarified. Due to widespread distrust among inhabitants and stakeholders towards authorities, informed consent was obtained only orally after these steps. Primary goal of the investigation was to build trustful interaction processes (Rat SWD 2017: 23). Analysis and interpretation of the data material followed the categories defined above and were conducted in an interactive way (Koller 2012: 147) throughout several research group meetings among the participants of the project, Toulouse Métropole and Salzburg University of Applied Sciences. The Salzburg team had the function of an external partner that provided an unbiased perspective. Finally, preliminary results were publicly presented and discussed with some of the interviewees during the final conference of the project in Toulouse in order to achieve “communicative validation” (Flick 1987).

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<sup>4</sup> We started the project with the intention to describe a larger number of territories. Due to the complex design with a lot of field research, we had to limit it to four territories in Toulouse Métropole (cf. Toulouse Métropole 2022). See also the deliverables of RAD2CITIZEN.

The first objective was to explore in which ways local actors linked social cohesion factors and violence in their neighbourhood. For that purpose, we did not impose a definition of radicalisation or social cohesion themselves. Although we built our six main categories as a preparatory work for framing the interviews, we consider our methodology being inductive (Martin 2010) in that we were not expecting specific correlations between its terms and processes of violence or radicalisation. We rather tried to make interviewees feel comfortable enough to expose their own representations of social cohesion and to express what kind of violence had the most impact on it. For that purpose, the first questions after a round of presentations were often: “how do you value the life in your neighbourhood” and “what kind of experience would you qualify as violence in your neighbourhood”. References to the categories and indicators were then explored on the basis of the answers to these questions.

Carrying the term “radicalisation” in the name of the project had major effects such as refusals and fears of stigmatisation of Muslim populations. We tried to compensate these side lexical effects by fostering open discussions as much as possible. Also, the fact that RAD2CITIZEN was carried by the local authority for the urban area and the interviewer was a public agent perceived as such had an important impact on the implementation of the methodology. This position was useful for two main reasons: usual partners of the local authority were probably more responsive as it was the case for Arnaud Bernard’s social centre; interviewees could address what they thought were possible solutions for social cohesion reinforcement. This position also had an important limit, especially while interviewing actors who define themselves as opposed to the local right-wing authorities.

Contrary to many studies on radicalisation, we chose not to prioritise interviews and data referring to terrorist attacks or explicitly extremist groups. This choice limits the application of our results in terms of actual radicalisation or terrorist pathways. However, it appears more coherent with our theoretical framework focused on local social cohesion as the capacity for a given environment to provide all necessary elements to foster identification process to a whole democratic society.

In fact, case studies based on radicalisation paths usually show what was relevant for these paths but fail to recall that most of the risk factors implied are widely spread but do not generate as much violence as a predictive bias would suggest. The important weight of



contingency observed in these paths does not allow direct generalisations from few paths' analysis to general protective or risk factors as many "factors" can actually be protective or risk generating depending on the social situations and individual experiences. Departing from social cohesion itself on the contrary allows to integrate such risk factors and to check the resources available on one given territory.

The first neighbourhood is called Reynerie, part of a so-called Urban Priority Neighbourhood (QPV)<sup>5</sup> in the southwest of the City of Toulouse, around ten kilometres away from the city centre. QPV are small urban units defined by a high risk of poverty compared to the metropolitan area's situation. They benefit from special public support and one political target is to enhance social cohesion as stated in the law 2014-173 which re-organises state intervention in poor urban areas<sup>6</sup>. Nevertheless, the conceptual and legal consolidation of this status brought stigmatisation issues to the inhabitants of these neighbourhoods who were viewed through the myth of "dangerous" or even "no-go zones" by the authorities.

The second field study—Arnaud Bernard—is a neighbourhood right in the centre of the city, at first sight characterised by small shops and a vivid gastronomic scene, but also with the varying presence of younger people illegally selling cigarettes and drugs in the streets.

We chose these neighbourhoods because they differ a lot. By contrasting them we hope that we may show how the description of specific forms of social cohesion can serve as a base for the (further) development of (existing or new) interventions against extremism. At the end of each description we discuss interventions that seem to be fruitful according to the specific spatial and historical situation.

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<sup>5</sup> In France they are called Quartier prioritaire de la politique de la ville (QPV). There are 1.296 QPV in France and 218 in the French Overseas Territories.

<sup>6</sup> There exist several analyses of QPV in France (e.g. for Paris: <https://www.apur.org/en/our-works/analysis-neighbourhoods-paris-city-urban-cohesion-policy-mid-way-assessment-2015-2020-city-paris-contract>), but usually they focus mainly on numbers and do not reflect different perspectives of different stakeholders. There also exist critical reflections (e.g. Helluin, 2000; [Epstein and Kirszbaum, 2019](#))

#### 4.1 Reynerie. Violence and Stigma

For the description of Reynerie the national statistical institute INSEE<sup>7</sup> provides statistical data. Qualitative data was produced in the years 2020 to 2022 on the basis of several interviews and observations<sup>8</sup>.

Reynerie is part of the QPV Grand Mirail and gathers around 7.900 inhabitants. It is located in the south-western part of Toulouse, on the left bank of the Garonne and to the west of the A620 motorway. The motorway is actually an important territorial mark as it separates central districts from marginalised areas.

The district is marked by a "New Town" architecture typical of the 1960s-70s and known as the "Project Candilis" named after the architect Georges Candilis<sup>9</sup>. The "New City" was originally thought to foster social diversity through variations in residential status (owners, rental, social housing), but it gradually lost most of its upper-class inhabitants. Meanwhile, the district suffers from a strong stigma, particularly around the problems of urban violence and drug trafficking.

#### Socio-economic factors

The median income in Reynerie of the year 2018 lies between 11.390 € and 17.900 € which is much lower than the median of Toulouse Métropole (23.090 €). Risk of poverty rates range from 37% to 60% depending on the sub-areas (INSEE's IRIS) of the district. In both cases, the most concerning data regard the IRIS of Auriacombe. The GINI index is actually

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<sup>7</sup> For the collection of quantitative data, we used the INSEE production at a level of so-called IRIS (Ilots Regroupés pour l'Information Statistique, units of around 2.000 inhabitants, cf. <https://www.insee.fr/en/metadonnees/definition/c1523>). In this case, we could use three IRIS that, together, almost correspond to the territory of Reynerie: Auriacombe, Poulenc and Edouard Bouillères. Additionally, some data are produced directly by Toulouse Métropole or Mairie de Toulouse services. The data concerns the year 2018.

<sup>8</sup> Two interviews with a local representative; multiple interviews with four professionals of the local social centre, including a guided walk in the area; an interview with the local coordination team from the municipality; an interview with educators from the so-called Rep+ program for national education; two interviews with a former municipal agent; an interview with a sociologist who participated in the project Mixite for secondary schools; a focus group gathering professionals from the social centre and two associations represented by seven inhabitants; participation to laicity initiatives gathering many local actors; direct observations; a restitution of the produced data during a workshop with metropolitan actors. It is worth noting that our position as a project on radicalisation led by Toulouse Métropole was not neutral and had a great influence on the type of testimony, claims and concerns raised.

<sup>9</sup> <https://patrimoine.laregion.fr/rechercher/catalogue-des-publications/les-itineraires-et-parcours-du-patrimoine/le-mirail-le-projet-candilis/index.html>

much lower in Auriacombe (0,191) than in the other parts of Reynerie. Although equalities are usually considered a positive indicator in terms of the prevention of extremism, here, the high rate of equality in Auriacombe means a high rate of equally shared poverty contrasted by better situations of neighbouring IRIS.

Unemployment rate is unevenly distributed across the district. Again, Auriacombe is the IRIS with the most precarious indicators with a rate of 50% of unemployment. The other parts show 23%, compared to 8,4% at metropolitan level.

The indicators raise concerns beyond economic considerations. Local actors, who manage social funds, told us that they perceived a decreasing use of social benefits in the district. They mentioned that digitalisation and the COVID-19 crisis made the access to rights increasingly difficult, in particular for the most precarious public. This is especially relevant as reliance on social institutions constitute a form of trust that effects social cohesion in a democratic context. In fact, for some actors, this kind of phenomena are reinforcing the dependency of the population to illegal contributions to households' incomes, which implies a reconfiguration of identification processes to parallel systems and tend to weaken trust in institutions and linking capital to democratic system.

## **Housing**

The rate of social housing is extremely high in Auriacombe (90%) and still high in the other parts of Reynerie (down to 30,9%). Social housing cooperatives—mostly Patrimoine SA and Toulouse Métropole Habitat—administrate most of the apartments and common areas at the ground floor of the buildings, which constitute private areas invested by common activities, but also drug dealing, inaccessible to the police forces. As a consequence, inhabitants do not have the capacity to act on fundamental aspects of their daily life and safety in situations where police forces need authorisation from the lessor to intervene. Thus, the lessors are the institutions which hold responsibility and capacity for the general safety of their clients.

One example was given by an inhabitant during a focus group. She was exposing important security issues caused by drug users occupying the hall of her building, and the fact that she and her eight years old son witnessed gunshots:

I have applied for a relocation, but they decided that we weren't high priority. Meanwhile in [another building], some people wanted to stay and they relocated them, from T5 to T3 [to smaller flats].

This testimony shows that the lessor's decision is not understood and means objective and subjective insecurity for this family. The boy was unable to go to school during a month after that happening. Finally, the occupation of almost entire buildings by criminal organisations is an issue. Most of these buildings are partly or totally emptied and destined to be teared down soon but represent opportunities for organised crime in the meantime.

### **Social Capital, access to services and rights**

As a QPV Reynerie benefits from many specific funds and services that boost an already dense local life. Many of these associations provide support to families, children and youngsters and have good relations with institutions, which make them interesting bridging actors.

At the same time, diverse religious groups are active: a Christian church, evangelists, several Muslim cult places, etc. However, the Muslim population largely exceeds the capacity of these places, which leads to open-air cult, especially at the Friday prayers. These prayers occasionally generate tensions, including debates about their legal status, guaranteed by the 1905 law on laicity.

Reynerie is very well connected to the city centre, through a metro line and a couple of buses which provide access to more leisure services and shops, and also guarantees a good access to employment or educational offers outside of the area.

### **Perspectives and identification**

Identification is highly impacted by a paradox highlighted both by inhabitants and professionals: the district is highly stigmatised and, at the same time, seems to generate strong attachments. Part of this paradox can be resolved by considering that a part of the heterogeneous population strongly identifies with the district, and another part using it as a transition area (according to INSEE, 34,46% of the population lives in Reynerie for less than

5 years). The stigma has multiple forms and impacts. It makes the district unattractive and reinforces its transition function. It penalises inhabitants when they seek resources outside (employment, housing...), especially for those who cumulate vulnerabilities (susceptible to be racialised, gender-based discrimination). These living conditions have an impact on self-construction and collective identification. It also generates defensive or negative positions toward the institutions. In a focus group, while talking about education of the youngsters and the parents' role, a mother expressed that she felt morally judged by the educational institution suggesting that families abandoned their children or did not take enough care of them.

The stigma-attachment paradox also affects individuals in their own relation to the district. Regarding violent experiences and the perspective of moving or not, two inhabitants in the focus group stated: "It is difficult [to take the decision to move] because it is great."

This means that the local solidarity networks, the quality of the flats, the access to many services make their lives great, which makes violence even more difficult to cope with.

Solidarity networks and communities (by country of origin, by religion, by common experience, ...) are strong and numerous, providing an important bonding system. However, the specific vulnerabilities and some negative experiences and representations of the institutions can be a limit to the identification with the broader society, if people perceive it as a threat. The high abstention rates, both at municipal and at presidential elections (municipals 2020: 81,25%, presidential: 53,06%), are an indicator that show low trust in state institutions.

## **Security**

Organised crime, especially drug trafficking has a high impact on the social life in Reynerie. Infractions linked to illegal drugs have been increasing for years. One of the common narratives spread by both, inhabitants and professionals, includes that these organisations have been going through two important changes during the last ten years. First, many actors pointed out that, formerly, drug dealers were recruited by criminal organisations on the territory and thus knew the social networks, were bonded to families and friends, which is supposed to provide some kind of soft regulation. Nowadays, actors report that part of the

dealers comes from other cities, sometimes in great numbers. This is pointed out as a loss of regulation.

The other change is what we could call “uberisation”: digital social and communication networks are being used to indicate the drugs’ location. This was the case of the witness quoted earlier: the hall of her building was being used as a consumption space because the drugs were hidden there, but the absence of the dealer also caused a lack of regulation of the users who began to consume there and caused permanent trouble.

Beyond objective security, these incidents generate subjective feelings of insecurity, which is summarised by one of the inhabitants, who claims: “I don’t feel home.” Linking objective violence to a generalised feeling of “not feeling home” in the district has to be considered a major vulnerability to social cohesion. In fact, some kind of activities, especially important interventions related to drug trafficking mobilising an important number of police officers are considered causing anxiety. Tensions between the police and the organised crime groups are thus directly affecting the life of inhabitants and their trust in law enforcement agencies.

Subjective insecurity is all the more pronounced for women in a public space eminently dominated by groups of men whose looks and remarks constitute violence in themselves and strongly affect the neighbourhood atmosphere.

### **Conclusion and recommendation**

To sum up, Reynerie is a very lively neighbourhood with numerous solidarity networks which have notably shown their resilience at the time of the health crisis.

It is a neighbourhood that is very much involved with the public authorities, both from the point of view of security and access to rights and social work. It is therefore a neighbourhood full of resources, some of which may appear ambiguous and compete with public institutions and the democratic system.

Social vulnerabilities are important, numerous and structural, which requires responses beyond the question of citizen projects. Social cohesion seems to manifest through multiple social and religious groups that coexist and sometimes intersect. It is rich but undermined by

the strong presence of criminal organisations that impact the territory, generating a feeling of "not being at home".

With regard to drug trafficking and its impact, our knowledge remains very limited. Therefore, a specific analysis is recommended, ideally in conjunction with the national police, with the families concerned, and the young people who are often caught up (or even harassed) by the organisations. The vicious circle between the necessity for police interventions and the increasing distrust towards the police should be interrupted, for example by introducing community policing (Dehbi 2019).

Finally, the issue of stigma needs to be addressed. That means that police as well as social work should focus on the resources of the neighbourhood and its inhabitants (Berner 2022)—especially the strong bonds between the latter.

#### *4.2 Arnaud Bernard: How to Build an Inclusive Democracy?*

The toponym Arnaud Bernard is related to different areas: On some of the maps of Toulouse Métropole and Toulouse City Council, it includes a large area from the banks of the Garonne to the Boulevard de Strasbourg. However, in the collective unconscious, the term refers to the Place Arnaud Bernard and the related alleys up to the neighbouring Saint-Sernin district which marks an architectural and socio-economic discontinuity<sup>10</sup>.

#### **Socio-historical description**

Arnaud Bernard lies in the very centre of Toulouse. It is a relatively low-income area. On the other hand, there live many students. Thus, it is very dynamic in terms of shops, bars, restaurants, associations and services.

According to various testimonies, Arnaud Bernard is a reception point for people arriving in Toulouse from abroad and retains a very cosmopolitan character in its

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<sup>10</sup> Most of the quantitative data correspond to the 2018 data for IRIS Saint-Sernin, which is smaller than the Arnaud Bernard district in the sense of the municipal maps, but larger than the Arnaud Bernard in the popular meaning of the neighbourhood. Only the election data are slightly more accurate due to their availability at the polling station level. The qualitative data are of several kinds: frequent discussions with the district mayor, but also with the teams dedicated to the city centre of the local security and delinquency prevention committee. In addition to this data, there were numerous direct observations and some testimonies from residents. Finally, a workshop organised during the final project conference allowed new actors to contribute important elements for the understanding of the neighbourhood.



neighbourhood identity. However, certain concerns crystallise around the Place Arnaud Bernard.

### **Socio-economic factors and narratives about diversity**

The median income of the residents of the IRIS Saint-Sernin is 21.950 € per year. This figure may seem high in view of the district's reputation as a mixing point of various social groups. However, the GINI-index is relatively low with 0.263. This signalizes a quite homogenous income situation of the population. Only 6% of housing is social housing. In relation to the relatively high poverty rate (13% of inhabitants at risk of poverty), this could mean that rentals in Arnaud Bernard are proportionally low. 21% of the housing is occupied by owners. This means that there exists an equilibrium between rental, owners, and social housing.

The unemployment rate is 11.54%. The large number of the students may explain this high figure: Pupils, students, unpaid trainees (15-64 years old) are 33%, while the percentage of the working population of the same age group is 21%.

At first, these data seem surprising because they contrast with the discourse from professional and associative actors. All of them, for various reasons, emphasise the reception function of this district, supported by specific networks of actors. This functional approach is not erroneous, but it needs to be completed: Arnaud Bernard also has a residential function for students, and an important function as a meeting point for part of Toulouse's left-wing activists.

The complementarity of these approaches allows us to remain attentive to points of vulnerability of different natures. Indeed, the recent work commissioned by Toulouse Métropole from the Toulouse Urban Planning and Development Agency points to the importance of students' vulnerabilities, particularly in terms of access to healthcare and food. At the same time, newcomers and unaccompanied minors are the subject of particular attention from the socio-educational services of the city, particularly with regard to slum landlords.

### **Social Capital, access to services and rights**

Schooling services are quite important, especially compared to the low proportion of families with children on the district. The neighbourhood has one kindergarten and one nursery school, two elementary schools, including one private school. It is to be noted that all inhabitants of Arnaud Bernard from 6 to 17 years attend school (from elementary to high school). Schooling rates between 18 and 24 years are very high, with 88%.

In addition to the many services and shops (a metropolitan service for young homeless people, solidarity centres and social service providers, etc.), citizen initiatives have emerged to take care of specific needs, particularly in terms of health.

During a workshop, discussions were held about the “diversity” of the shops. Some highlighted that most shops are fast food with a culturally Arab background (kebab), but this estimation has to be mitigated. First, there is, historically, a great diversity of restaurants and bars, including restaurants with Italian, French, Japanese, Senegal food, etc. Second, an effort is being made by the municipality to promote even more diversity, which includes support of new shops and restaurants.

### **Political factors, perspectives and identification**

During a process of revitalisation of the district supported by the municipality, residents expressed the feeling that they had been the “forgotten” district of the city centre. Discussions and forums, particularly among shopkeepers, have been set up to respond to some of these requests and a neat improvement seems to be in progress.

In another dimension Arnaud Bernard is a district strongly identified by its left-wing political activities. This has a double implication: a stronger implication in the democratic system, as shown by the comparatively low abstention (51% in 2020 in the first round of the municipal elections, compared to over 63% on average). The inhabitants of Arnaud Bernard are therefore more likely to participate in the democratic process. They have voted largely for what has become the opposition in the Toulouse City Council (the party Archipel Citoyen received around 60% of the votes). This fact is all the more important as the visibility of left-wing political activists is strong in this area, with several meeting places and regularly organised demonstrations.

## **Security and crime**

Direct testimonies and observations attest to the presence of significant drug and cigarette trafficking. Beyond the illegal aspect of these activities, it is appropriate to question the impact they may have on the experience of the area.

The trafficking in Arnaud Bernard is organised in a completely different way than in more peripheral neighbourhoods: more discreet and less violent. However, nuisance cannot be avoided and particularly affects women, for whom groups of men, whether or not selling illicit products, can be anxiety-provoking. A female resident testifies:

One evening I was going home and some young men started to make remarks to me. After a few seconds, one of them identified me as a resident of the neighbourhood and asked the others to stop: "we don't bother the inhabitants of the neighbourhood".

Despite nuisance and factors of insecurity, the cohabitation of heterogeneous activities and populations, in addition to the central position of the district and to the ostensible presence of law enforcement, a certain regulation exists, which limits the occurrence of violence and their impact on the social cohesion of this district.

## **Conclusion and recommendation**

Arnaud Bernard is characterised by the heterogeneity of its uses. It is characterised by its inhabitants and a significant number of temporary attendants, like guests of bars and restaurants but also young refugees who temporarily spend their time in the neighbourhood. There are also some dissonances between representations of the district due to some of these uses and the objective characteristics of the population living there.

The interconnection between different people living around the Arnaud Bernard square seems to go beyond simple tolerant cohabitation, suggesting possible bridges. Therefore, no strong rupture or phenomena of hostility or polarisation appear between networks strongly marked by their militant political identity, status (students) or functional identity (networks of reception or trafficking of various products). Anyway, it is not totally clear whether the relatively calm co-habitation of persons staying in Arnaud Bernard is

sustainable or if there are some tensions growing below the surface (cf. “integration mode of urban indifference”, Sutterlüty 2010). Therefore, it seems to be adequate to allow the persons involved to meet in public spaces, where they may express their needs, where they can discuss their interests and demands and where they can address local politics and officials.

In such a context, it seems important to consider the specific dynamics of the district, as Toulouse Métropole has done by setting up specific educational services there, but also to rely on all the networks present in order to avoid building one against the other. If law enforcement has to be mobilised in situations of violence or illegality, Arnaud Bernard is a particularly suitable neighbourhood for primary prevention and community policing.

## **5. Conclusions: The prevention of extremism in urban neighbourhoods**

In this paper we introduce a model that allows to describe social cohesion in small urban units in terms of primary prevention of radicalisation and extremism. Of particular importance according to our observations are the different forms of social capital—bridging, bonding and linking capital. In case one of them is threatened, it may have the effect of a vicious circle, having a negative influence on other factors of social cohesion. We applied the model to four territories of Toulouse Métropole, two of them presented here. A special demand of our approach is to develop (further) social interventions that match the specific historical situations of the territories concerned. If we wanted to know more about the development of social cohesion in the Toulouse territories, it would be important to repeat the research after some years, including the analysis of the effects of the (new or established) interventions that are based on the study.

The most important characteristic of our approach is the description of the territories in detail instead of measuring social cohesion by numbers alone. We follow common factors and indicators for the analysis of social cohesion and use them as a framework for a more detailed look. Since we intend to relate social cohesion to the prevention of extremism, we adapted the factors to this aim. As examples we state that poverty may be an issue, but income discrepancies within a territory or between the population of a territory and its neighbouring districts may be even more important. Especially the sense of belonging has impacts on social

cohesion, depending on the values that dominate a territory (pro-democratic vs. distrusting the executive of the state and its institutions).

The analysis of some of Toulouse's neighbourhoods allowed us to gather further knowledge related to prevention of extremism that might be used for future inquiries:

- safety—from indicators to sensibilities,
- feeling at home,
- meaning and identification processes.

Ad "Safety—from indicators to sensibilities". It is crucial to know peoples' perspectives and their individual (or collective) perceptions of safety. An approach that discusses this issue is so-called "situated security" (Bonacker 2021): a territory hosts individuals with very different needs and perceptions. Security depends on these perspectives and differs according to them. Finally, there exist various "situations" with various ideas of security. It is of special importance to find out, which security perceptions exist and which ones are expressed in the public. Bonacker proposes to make "strategies of *silencing*, i.e. exclusion of the possibility of articulating threat experiences" (Bonacker 2021: 17, emphasis in original, our translation) analytically visible. For the model this means that the perceptions of different stakeholders should be acknowledged.

Ad "Feeling at home". "Feeling at home" is much more than feeling safe in the hall of a building. It is about ensuring a coherent relationship between a supportive neighbourhood life with which one identifies and the material possibility of remaining in that environment. This comprehensive concept of safety was already present in the 1940s with Abraham H. Maslow's "hierarchy of needs" (Maslow 1943). He claims that physical needs (among them shelter), safety needs (like security, employment, health), or love and belonging are crucial needs of everybody. The model may use Maslow's approach that offers matching factors and indicators.

Ad "Meaning and identification processes". A recent study (ONPV 2022) about the representation of priority areas on twitter actually shows that Toulouse, and especially Le Mirail—in the neighbourhood of Reynerie—are over-represented, mainly through a negative image of violence on these districts. This has to make us think about how to focus our action on these territories and how it can generate negative valuations. In other districts, especially

new districts built up under the pressure of an increasing metropolitan population, the question of identification has to be asked pro-actively: How can new inhabitants identify with their new neighbourhood? What kind of social work offers or cultural actions may support such processes? Sometimes, municipalities or even older neighbourhoods feel unsafe when new populations arrive, especially if this population is marked by the stigma of a former territory (especially QPV), or the colour of its skin. In these cases, social cohesion is the result of public support in terms of positive images and ideally the access to full citizenship.

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