

The impact of austerity on local service provision and social fabric. How the restructuring of the geography of public services affected service efficiency, community cohesion and well-being in England.

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This paper investigates whether and how the spatial reorganization of public services in England, driven by post-2010 austerity reforms, shaped community social cohesion and well-being. While prior studies have documented austerity's impact on crime (Bray, Braakmann and Wildman, 2022; Denti and Iammarino, 2022), inequality, voting preferences (Alabrese *et al.*, 2019; Fetzer, 2019), and local economic outcomes, causal evidence on its effects on community bonds, institutional trust, and intergroup relations remains scarcely addressed. Moreover, the spatial concentration of services could theoretically either enhance or diminish their effectiveness, potentially revealing a channel through which this spatial reorganization could have influenced people pro/antisocial behaviours (Veneri and Murtin, 2019; Denti and Di Cataldo, 2024).

We construct a novel panel dataset tracking the changing geography of essential public services (courts, pharmacies, schools, and childcare facilities) across English local authorities from the early 2000s to 2019. By combining georeferenced administrative data on service locations with service performance metrics and detailed survey responses from Understanding Society, we create a comprehensive database capturing three key dimensions: service accessibility (measured through changes in travel times and facility density), service quality (using standardized performance indicators), and social cohesion (through validated survey measures capturing community trust, belonging, intergroup attitudes, and forward-looking indicators of how residents view their local future).

Our identification strategy leverages two quasi-experimental sources of variation. First, the staggered timing of service reorganizations across local authorities. Second, the administrative rule that merged closing facilities with their spatially closest counterpart, which, being a distance-based consolidation criterion, creates plausibly exogenous variation in service accessibility between otherwise similar communities.

Our empirical analysis proceeds in three stages. First, we implement a staggered difference-in-differences design that exploits both the timing and intensity of facility closures, comparing social cohesion trajectories between communities that experienced service consolidation and those that maintained their pre-existing service network. Second, through staggered difference-in-differences estimation, we compare service quality between consolidated and unconsolidated services. Finally, we investigate whether observed changes in service quality mediate the observed changes in social cohesion.

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