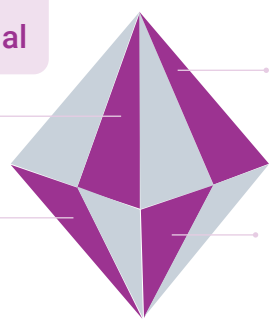
Summary of Trust Unpacked: A diagnostic assessment of institutional trust

Conceptual and methodological foundation

Trust is the 'willingness of a party to be vulnerable to the actions of another party based on the expectation that the other will perform a particular action important to the trustor, irrespective of the ability to monitor or control that other party' (Mayer et al. 1995). Trustworthiness refers to the qualities of institutions that make them deserving of this trust. There is sustained concern about declining trust in institutions and the implications of this for policy delivery and the legitimacy of public institutions. Our report argues that understanding institutional trust requires moving beyond measuring whether people trust institutions and towards understanding how they evaluate institutional trustworthiness.

Multidimensional, situated and dynamic trustworthiness

Multidimensional



Dynamic



- Institutional performance
- Controversies
- Social change
- Crises

Situated

- Individual personal experiences
- Historical
- Economic
- Political
- Shared social/ cultural norms

Existing assessment methods

Survey-based measures

Survey-based measures use consistent metric designs with repeated data collection to directly assess trust/mistrust/distrust.

Static snapshots of trust in time, no effective reflection of trust in practice via behaviour/ action and difficulty capturing nuance.

Behavioural and experimental approaches

Trust games examine action taken by trustors in situations of vulnerability, uncertainty and risk.

Behaviour may not be uniquely attributed to trust and a modelled environment at single time-point limits real-world reflection.

Qualitative and ethnographic methods

Interview, focus groups, or ethnography examines practical understanding of institutional trustworthiness and decisions to trust in specific contexts.

Limited generalisability and replicability and time-/labour-intensive fieldwork with potential researcher and participant bias

Administrative/operational data analysis

Uses administrative and operational data as proxy indicators of trust/trustworthiness to analyse behaviour change, compliance and engagement patterns.

Potential selection bias of data, reliance on availability/accessibility of data, concerns of privacy and limited use of this method in literature.

Computational approaches

Analysis of online data related to engagement, behaviour and sentiment used for near real-time analysis of response to events.

Limited to online user population, relies on indirect rather than stated indicators of trustworthiness and potential interpretation bias.

What is needed?

Problem: There is no single method that captures the multidimensional, situated and dynamic nature of institutional trustworthiness

Focus: Institutional trustworthiness in policing and health data sharing

Aim: Develop and test a diagnostic framework for institutional trustworthiness, to provide a richer understanding of how institutional trust is perceived and how this varies across time and different groups

Goal: Aid institutions to understand areas of emerging concern, identify institutional strengths and weaknesses, and support efforts to strengthen the qualities that make them worthy of public trust

This brief describes work done by RAND Europe in *Trust Unpacked: A diagnostic assessment of institutional trust* by Richard Milne, Manpreet Bhangal, Tara Zammit, Daniel Lee, Rebecca Mead, Hannah Behrendt, RR-A5389-1, 2026 (available at www.rand.org/t/RRA5389-1). To view this summary online, visit www.rand.org/t/RBA5389-1. RAND Europe is a not-for-profit research organisation that helps to improve policy and decision making through research and analysis. RAND Europe's publications do not necessarily reflect the opinions of its research clients and sponsors. RAND® is a registered trademark.

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