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**Research Report**

## Small town research in Germany - Status quo and recommendations

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**Position Paper of the ARL 114**

# SMALL TOWN RESEARCH IN GERMANY – STATUS QUO AND RECOMMENDATIONS



**A**KADEMIE FÜR  
**R**AUMFORSCHUNG UND  
**L**ANDESPLANUNG

**Position Paper of the ARL 114**

# SMALL TOWN RESEARCH IN GERMANY – STATUS QUO AND RECOMMENDATIONS

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# SMALL TOWN RESEARCH IN GERMANY – STATUS QUO AND RECOMMENDATIONS

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## Abstract

Urban studies in Germany are traditionally oriented towards large cities. The structures, meanings and functions of small towns are not sufficiently perceived and differentiated in scientific or political debates. Adequate research on small towns requires systematic, comparative, inter- and trans-disciplinary approaches. Traditional attributions should be questioned critically and small towns should be examined empirically in their diversity and differentiation. This involves paying attention to external influences and heterogeneous internal structures as well as to regional functions and interdependencies. The availability and generation of statistical data, which also make small-scale analyses possible, are just as necessary as more comprehensive studies, which go beyond limited case studies. Finally, also research funding and academic teaching should address small towns more systematically than it has been the case in the past. This position paper presents recommendations for research, university teaching, official statistics and research funding in the field of small town research. The Ad-hoc Working Group focused on small town research in Germany and German-language literature, respectively.

## Keywords

Small towns – Small town research – Urban development – Development of rural areas – Urban studies – Spatial research – Germany

## 1 Background and objectives

Urban studies in Germany are traditionally oriented towards large cities. If small towns (*Klein-städte*) attract attention, then they are often subsumed into rural areas or considered as part of an undifferentiated category of small and medium-sized towns. Small towns are also frequently presented as the counterpart to large cities, which are associated with either positive or negative characteristics. The stereotypical representations of small towns – e.g. as compact, comfortable or cramped – have remained surprisingly unchanged since the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. However, in economic, demographic and socio-structural terms the status quo of small towns has changed in the meantime just as much as the related challenges and arising possibilities. Like all types of settlement, small towns are subject to phases of shrinkage and growth, a lack of impulses for change or great dynamism. The few systematic studies that are available provide indications that this is a diverse type of settlement. However, a simple transfer of assumptions and concepts from the development of large cities or medium-sized towns is not conducive to meet the challenges of future development in small towns and to seizing the opportunities inherent to this type of settlement.



Indeed, spatial, planning and social sciences as well as politics have lately become more aware of the social significance and economic performance of small towns. At the same time, the challenges they face, especially in rural areas, are growing. However, a perspective continues to dominate which does not do justice to the complexity of small town structures and developments. The functions, services and potentials of small towns have not yet been systematically examined – neither from the perspective of the people living and working there, nor in relation to the regional context or the polycentric settlement system. This makes evidence-based research on small towns, appropriate university teaching and an informed planning and implementation culture even more necessary.

The central impetus for the establishment of the Ad-hoc Working Group Small Town Research by the Academy for Spatial Research and Planning (ARL) in 2018 was the assumption that there is a general lack of knowledge about this type of town, although it is relevant for the German settlement structure. Through a “Call for Membership”, nine scientists, a mayor and a representative of a state ministry were selected and appointed to the interdisciplinary working group. This position paper is the result of a one-year joint working process. It identifies research needs for selected topic areas, considers questions of methodology and data. It concludes with recommendations.

The participants from research and practice produced papers in which they shed more light on the state of research and knowledge deficits. These are published as abstracts in the 2019 ARL working report “Kleinstadtforschung in Deutschland – Stand, Perspektiven und Empfehlungen” (“Small town research in Germany – status quo, perspectives and recommendations”) (Porsche/Steinführer/Sondermann 2019). In addition, an extended spectrum of in-depth papers on topics of small town research is to be published in 2020 in a “Kompendium Kleinstadtforschung” (“Compendium on small town research”) (working title), as an ARL research report. All publications mainly focus on German and German-language literature, respectively.

## 2 Definitions and delimitations

There are various ideas about what a small town is. In Germany, there is no uniform or official definition of the different types of towns, cities and municipalities. To simplify matters, the number of inhabitants is often used to distinguish small towns from other types of settlement. The most common municipal size classes with their descriptions have been used in Germany since 1877: the results of the census of the German Reich for 1875 mention rural towns, small towns, medium-sized towns and large cities (*Land-, Klein-, Mittel- und Großstädte*) for the first time (anonymous 1877: mainly 36-40; cf. also Matzerath 1985: 246).

This orientation towards municipal size classes has rightly been repeatedly criticized – but in most papers and reports on small towns there is no clear distinction between “definition” and “delimitation”, neither in terms of language nor of content. A definition of a small town refers to its essence: What characterizes a small town? Such a definition inevitably includes features that cannot be quantified (yet), such as social and cultural significance or the specific organization of social cohabitation in small towns. The (statistical) delimitation, on the other hand, is only based on very few factors, sometimes only on the number of inhabitants, and defines corresponding limits within which a small town can be considered as such. However, such a delimitation does not reflect the nature of small towns. There is a widespread critique that a purely inhabitant-related distinction between urban and rural municipalities on the one hand and between small towns, medium-sized towns and large cities on the other is insufficient (e.g. Hannemann 2002; Flacke 2004; Schmidt-Lauber 2010). The problem is that the statistical classifications are often misinterpreted as definitions and thus as descriptions of essence. In the first statistical evaluations in 1871 and 1875 that used the common categories, the term “size categories” was employed “which are likely to correspond fairly well to the terms ‘large city’, ‘medium-sized town’, ‘small town’ and rural town” (anonymous 1877: 36, translated by authors). Even at that time it was pointed out that the boundary of 2,000 inhabitants – distinguishing between rural and urban or, more precisely, between rural municipali-

ties and rural towns – cannot be a definition of the “urban”. For “many settlements of 2,000 and more inhabitants the characteristics of a town: dense or close cohabitation and a distinct division of labour do not apply” (anonymous 1877: 30, translated by authors).

The aforementioned size classes still play a role in the most frequently used and widespread differentiation of types of settlements in Germany. The Federal Institute for Research on Building, Urban Affairs and Spatial Development (BBSR), which is responsible for the spatial monitoring program (*Laufende Raumbewachung*) of the Federal Republic of Germany, has elaborated a delimitation at the level of the approximately 4,540 municipalities (*Einheitsgemeinden*) and municipal associations (*Gemeindeverbände*) for its statistical analyses. This statistical category for comparison of municipalities is not associated with any normative or planning assignments. In addition to the number of inhabitants, the centrality function (*zentralörtliche Funktion*) of the (independent) municipality or the largest municipality within the municipal associations (BBSR n.d.), is used as a criterion. A small town is thus either part of a municipal association or is an independent municipality with between 5,000 and 20,000 inhabitants or with at least formal functions of a basic or lower-order centre (*Grundzentrum*) and partial functions of a middle-order centre (*Teilfunktionen eines Mittelzentrums*). This broad approach is intended to ensure that no towns or municipalities that are important for the development or supply of rural areas are neglected, e.g. in the states of Rhineland-Palatinate, Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania or Brandenburg (Gatzweiler/Adam/Milbert et al. 2012: 19-20).

According to this delimitation, there are 2,106 small towns in Germany (as of 2017). With a share of 46%, they form the largest category among all types of settlements in terms of numbers, and with 162,300 km<sup>2</sup> (45% of the total settlement area) they also cover more area in Germany than other type of settlement. With 24.2 million people, only 2.1 million fewer people live here than in the 79 large cities (Fig. 1).

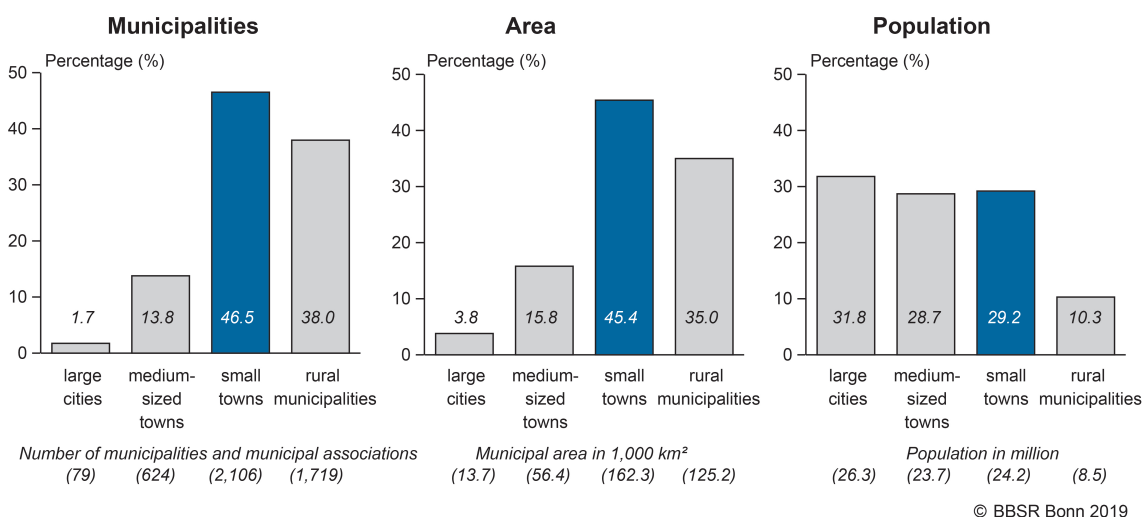


Fig. 1: Importance of small towns by number, area and population in Germany, 2017 / Source: *Laufende Raumbewachung* of the BBSR

Furthermore, the criterion of population size may be varied and/or combined with other criteria such as town privileges (*Stadtrecht*). For example, Bode and Hanewinkel (2018) limit themselves to municipalities with town privileges and with 10,000 to 20,000 inhabitants. There is also no consensus in the international context: sparsely populated states such as the Scandinavian countries or Canada operate with size classes of small towns of less than 5,000 inhabitants. In densely populated and heavily urbanized states small towns sometimes start at a size of 20,000 inhabitants (e.g. the Netherlands, cf. Steinführer/Vaishar/Zapletalová 2016: 324) or settlements with up to 100,000

inhabitants are considered small towns (e.g. China and India, cf. UCLG 2016: 280). In Poland, the same municipal size class applies to small towns as in Germany. In addition to population size, centrality, urban morphology, urban functions, economic or social structures and cultural aspects can be used to delimit small towns (Gorki 1974; Hannemann 2005: 108; Servillo/Atkinson/Hamdouch 2017; Popp 2018; Steinführer 2018). Some small towns cover very large administrative areas due to the incorporation of several municipalities and formerly independent villages. As they have a dispersed distribution of urban cores, districts and villages within one administrative area, there is a need for more differentiated demarcations than just the characteristic of municipal size class.

### 3 Small towns in the perception gap of spatial research

The discussions in spatial research and planning practice on the trends and challenges of spatial development in Germany in recent years have been and still are strongly influenced by references to global cities, megacities, agglomerations and “*Schwarmstädte*” (“swarm cities”) (Porsche 2015: 27). The situation of small towns and their characteristic structures, interdependencies and trends are overshadowed by the much-discussed growth of large cities and the new significance of the urban in the context of reurbanization (Brake/Herfert 2012). In German urban studies, small towns are mostly regarded as either belonging to rural areas or as miniature depictions of large cities, and are not considered as requiring independent attention. This neglect applies to urban geography (e.g. Niedermeyer 2000: 88), and even more so to urban sociology (Hannemann 2004: 31-44) and urban history (Zimmermann 2003: 18). However, also the sub-disciplines that are interested in rural areas from a sociological, geographical or planning perspective pay little or no systematic attention to small towns. Urban structures in rural areas are not granted greater interest or importance neither by rural studies from a sectoral (agricultural) nor from a territorial, life-world or social-constructivist perspective. Accordingly small towns are regarded as the “forgotten part” of rural areas (Herrenknecht/Wohlfahrt 2004). The older approach of *Siedlungssoziologie* (settlement sociology) (Atteslander/Hamm 1974), which encompasses all types of settlements, has failed to become broadly established, although a more recent publication speaks of *Siedlungsgeographie* (settlement geography) (Borsdorf/Bender 2010).

After the political and social changes at the beginning of the 1990s and again with the debates on urban shrinkage, interest in small town lifeworlds temporarily increased in Germany from about the year 2000 onwards. The research, however, was predominantly case-by-case and regionally limited (e.g. SBB 1995; Niedermeyer 2000; Hannemann 2004; Steinführer/Kabisch 2004; Schlegel-milch 2006). The focus was on small towns in peripheral locations with major structural problems, whereas small towns in central locations close to agglomerations were and are considered extremely rarely (as an exception, see Brombach/Jessen 2005). This also applies to the internal differentiations of the towns, such as those between the town centre(s) and other districts or villages within the administrative borders of the municipality, between individual residential districts or with regard to the social structure. The number of scientific studies and the circle of small town researchers have remained relatively limited. Even the regularly published special issues of renowned journals on the overall category of small and medium-sized towns are able to tackle the traditional knowledge deficits on non-metropolitan settlement types only to a limited extent. They either offer generalized statements on very different forms of urban life and socialization at local and regional levels or findings from individual case studies, which cannot easily be generalized.

Small towns thus fall into a systematic perception gap of the social and planning sciences as well as of geographical urban and spatial research. One consequence of this is that numerous stereotypical ideas about *the* small town or *the* small town people persist without a solid empirical basis. This is not only caused by a lack of research, but also by a lack of reception of existing small town studies, which have been falling into oblivion (cf. also Herrenknecht/Wohlfahrt 2005: 7).

## 4 Research desiderata in selected thematic areas

In order to assess the state of research in Germany, relevant aspects of small town developments and research gaps were identified from an interdisciplinary perspective and bundled into topic areas. The results are briefly summarized below (for more details see Porsche/Steinführer/Sondermann 2019).

### Urbanity and rurality

The small town as a settlement type “between” the village and the city has long been a central topos in the urban-rural debate. The urbanity of small towns is well analysed – conceptually and in part also empirically. The predominant focus of (German) urban studies, in particular urban sociology, on large cities and its normative understanding of urbanity make small towns appear either deficient or rural. The research on the rurality of small towns is ambiguous. Understandings range from a conceptualization of small towns as “better” urban places to tendencies towards a ruralization of small towns. An essential desideratum of research is empirical evidence on lifeworlds – beyond characteristics of settlement and building structures – regarding both the urban and the rural characteristics of small towns as well as their interdependencies.

### Demographic structures and developments

Although there is strong scientific interest in demographic developments in different types of territories, the small town is usually not examined as a distinct type of settlement. This is even more significant as small towns can be expected to have various demographic structures, patterns and trends. Qualitative and quantitative work should take greater account of the complexity and non-linearity of migration and the integration of migrants into social networks. The studies on the (re-)integration of new citizens in small towns have not been systematized. The social megatrend of ageing calls for more intensive research into this subject also with regard to small towns. All these topics require the development of new models and approaches, the utilization of new data sources and interdisciplinary work.

### Social structure and social relations

It is no exaggeration that today’s small towns – in central locations even more than those in peripheral regions – represent a *terra incognita* in terms of social structures. This applies not only to the data available from official statistics; indeed the topic (with the exception of ethnic structure) is almost never covered in recent case studies. More frequently, the literature inquires into social relationships in small towns – yet, not because there is specific scientific interest in this, but because small towns are regarded as hybrids ‘between’ the village and the city. Both topics are characterized more by assumptions (or stereotypes) than by empirical evidence.

### Housing and socio-spatial differentiation

The research field housing in small towns is characterized by the problem-oriented discourse of practitioners. They draw attention to selective problems, as well as to little examined myths about the features of small towns – such as historically evolved (idyllic) building structures and specific forms of housing and quality of life. In addition, the scientific terminology of housing and socio-spatial differentiation was constructed from a rather metropolitan perspective and can hardly portray the actual lifeworlds of small towns. Future small town research has to emancipate itself from these discourses. At the same time, knowledge about the differentiation of real estate and housing markets as well as about housing demand and trends is selective. The blind spots are particularly large with regard to socio-spatial development, social inequalities and social cohesion, as well as on neighbourhood development outside the centres of the small towns.

### Economic development and innovation dynamics

The economy of small towns has insufficiently and only recently been examined by economic geography. The renunciation of traditional explanatory patterns such as agglomeration advantages and the application of new approaches in innovation research are promising. Not only urban size

and thus agglomeration advantages are decisive, but also other factors such as economic structure, networking, innovation and local strategies. The economic structure of small towns is very diverse, but there are only a few systematic studies on this. Focusing on aspects of small town economic development that go beyond the size of the town opens up greater scope for economic actors and local planners to develop instruments and policies than is usually assumed.

### **Mobility**

Small towns are not explicitly addressed in transport and mobility research and empirical data are scarcely available. There is thus an evident need for specific research to enable the differentiated consideration of small towns according to their location in the settlement system and their development paths. Here it would be necessary to investigate more closely how small towns are integrated into larger spatial contexts in terms of transport and how they function as transport and supply hubs that both supply the surrounding region and are connected supra-regionally. Existing case studies and practical examples of alternative forms of mobility organization allow insights to be derived – more systematically than before – for the respective spatial categories and interdependencies between different types of spaces. Future research initiatives will have to deal with the question of which factors make effective use of specific small town potentials in the field of mobility.

### **Digital transformation**

Digital transformation is advancing in all areas of public and private life. In this context, small towns have not yet been the subject of discussion in spatial sciences. Due to their structures and functions, systematic research is indispensable. Developments and results from the fields of Smart City and Smart Country have to be included. Research should not be limited to digital infrastructures or hardware and software alone, but should also include urban society and the ability of all actors to use and adapt digital possibilities to local and regional needs for sustainable urban development. Thus, not only digital or smart, but also intelligent small towns and their transformation would be in the focus of research and urban development.

### **Urban planning and governance**

Research on urban planning and governance in small towns is rather limited at first glance. However, more thorough enquiry reveals that studies are diverse, and they are increasingly branching out into neighbouring disciplines such as regional development. Small and medium-sized towns are often considered as one common category, and research frequently refers to related debates in urban studies and rural development. Case studies on small town planning and policy as well as conceptual-normative statements on how to deal with crises are the predominant topics. The role of social capital, networks and new forms of cooperation between civil society, local politics and administration is emphasized. Small towns in central locations are rarely the subject of research. Weaknesses of practical urban planning and governance are seen in the lack of adaptability and integration of various funding programs, limited financial and human resources, a lack of competencies and established local political cultures. In particular, interdisciplinary case studies and impact analyses of planning and policy realities are necessary.

### **Centrality**

The importance of small towns as regional centres in rural areas is undisputed. Nonetheless, the effects of spatial development processes, the differentiation and alteration of functional areas and the requirements of new forms of control and the dynamics of economic innovation need to be considered. However, a focus exclusively directed towards small towns in rural areas is also insufficient in this matter. The predominantly normative use of the term centrality (mainly influenced by the concept of ‘central places’) requires stronger integration into theory formation in regional studies and the empirical grounding of centralities. Without feedback loops to spatial research, the question of centrality tends to operate in a conservative manner on structures and may not adequately address political, economic and lifeworld development dynamics – whether in central or peripheral locations.

## Methods and data in small town research

In addition to secondary analyses of official statistics, small town research in Germany is largely based on case studies. Often the focus is on individual small towns and sometimes comparisons are made. Most research is based on semi-structured interviews and occasionally on standardized population surveys.

The data situation is insufficient. Apart from the spatial monitoring program (*Laufende Raumbewachtung*) of the BBSR there are hardly any data sources that can be used to systematically investigate small towns in comparison with other types of settlements. Important indicators, such as social structure, housing or economic development, are lacking. Differentiation on a sub-municipal (e.g. neighbourhood) level is in most cases impossible. Offers by private providers are costly and in some cases methodologically inadequately documented. With new data sources such as user-generated data, there are open questions regarding their quality as well as technical challenges concerning their valorization.

## 5 Conclusions and key recommendations

Based on the discussions in the Ad-hoc Working Group and across the different topic areas, conclusions and recommendations for contemporary, systematic and well-founded small town research, research funding and official statistics were drawn (cf. the summary in Text Box 1).

**Fundamental to the following statements is the view of the members of the Ad-hoc Working Group Small Town Research that small towns are a distinct settlement type.**

Even if there is (and can be) no uniform definition or delimitation for small towns, the compact presentation of the state of research in Germany (Porsche/Steinführer/Sondermann 2019) shows the need for systematic studies of this settlement type. Neither from a quantitative nor from a qualitative point of view small towns should be analysed only as part of rural areas or within the frequently used overriding category of “small and medium-sized towns”. Small towns are not a homogeneous type of settlement – neither in terms of their size, history or inner structure, nor in terms of their current development trends. A universally valid small town typology is therefore not possible. However, small towns can and should be typified according to research questions and objectives in order to investigate them in a comparative and abstract way and to derive findings for the further development of spatial research and for policy advice.

The Working Group notes a systematic *perception gap* in social and planning sciences concerning urban and spatial research for small towns and their development processes. This involves:

- > a limited number of systematic and comparative studies,
- > the predominance of thematically and spatially limited or occasion-related individual case studies, some of which are based purely on a very small number of interviews, mostly with key persons from politics and administration, and some of which are even based on analyses of data from the district level upwards and often over-generalize (“this is how it is in a small town”),
- > very poor data availability, especially for small-scale analyses.

All this leads to certain narratives, stereotypical ideas and notions of deficits concerning “the” small town that persist also in an academic discourse. The reality of small towns is more complex, embracing a multitude of ways of life and socialization, local and regional structures, development patterns, functions and status quos.

### **Well-founded small town research should**

- > regard the small town as a distinct type of settlement with different external characteristics, diverse internal structures and specific regional functions and interdependencies as an object of research in its own right,
- > foster integration into newer theoretical discussions in spatial research,
- > take greater account of the complexity, multidimensional nature and non-linearity of development paths theoretically, methodologically and conceptually via qualitative and quantitative approaches,
- > use innovative data sources and further develop survey and analytical methods,
- > work with methodological approaches to compare individual cases and types of small towns in order to achieve generalizable findings,
- > use interdisciplinary and experimental approaches,
- > also apply transdisciplinary approaches, i.e. cooperation between science, practice and urban society, depending on the research interest,
- > critically question traditional small town stereotypes, which are constantly repeated and thus reproduced, and empirically differentiate small town realities,
- > communicate results in a target-group oriented fashion.

*Textbox 1: Small towns: research needs*

Some of these points will be specified in the following sections.

## **5.1 Recommendations for research and teaching**

### **a) Establish systematic, interdisciplinary and distinct small town research**

Small town research to date has mainly been characterized by individual case studies, particularly in the context of studies on rural areas, regional development and public and private service provision. Regarding urban studies, which focus primarily (and not surprisingly) on large cities, a deficit perspective on small towns predominates. In addition, the research focus has been on small towns in economically weak and peripheral areas since the 1990s. Small towns in central locations close to agglomerations, which according to the BBSR delimitation include 56% of all small towns in Germany and their development, receive little attention. In such centrally located small towns considerable urban and social restructuring is taking place, e.g. because of in-migration and economic investments.

There is a need for distinct small town research within the framework of interdisciplinary urban and spatial studies encompassing geography, social and cultural sciences, planning studies and economics. This includes a systematic communication of results and knowledge transfer, comparative empirical cross-sectional and longitudinal studies as well as research across all settlement types. Based on such research the specifics, but also generalizable structures and processes, chal-

allenges and potentials can be recognized and analysed in order to develop new explanatory models for small towns as part of social-scientific spatial research. This should be integrated into general theory formation in spatial research. Empirically validated scientific findings from systematic small town research would be at the same time a better basis for political and planning actions.

### **b) Critically review traditional attributions**

Distorted images of small towns are created through persistent, repeated and thus manifested stereotypes and narratives – for example, as integral parts of rural-agricultural spaces, as poorly equipped residential areas, as homely idylls or as homogeneous and hardly changeable social spaces. Such constructs must be questioned, tested and differentiated through empirical research. This includes the use of available data, but also the collection of new data that are both spatially differentiated and robust, using a mix of qualitative and quantitative methods as well as new and more differentiated perspectives. In other words, the small town as a “topos” should be replaced in research by an understanding of small towns as real social spaces and as forms of local socialization (Beetz 2017: 52).

### **c) Take into account and analyse the diversity and heterogeneity of small towns**

Small towns are extremely diverse regarding their historical developments, their locations, their spatial functions and interdependencies, and their socio-economic and demographic dynamics. They are also heterogeneous in their urban structures (e.g. old town centres, suburban expansion zones of different development phases and incorporated villages), in their social structures, migration patterns, and internal and external functions. They are subject to external influences (global, national, regional) and are functionally connected with other settlement types. This diversity, the regional functions and interdependencies should be further analysed, differentiated and typified.

### **d) Differentiate and typify small towns**

There are various established approaches for the delimitation, definition and typification of small towns. Small towns may be distinguished from other settlement types on the basis of population figures, historical town privileges, urban fabric, centrality functions and economic or social structures. These approaches must be expanded to include social, cultural, economic and political characteristics and to channel them in new typifications of small towns (cf. also Zimmermann 2003: 13). In keeping with the problem and research subject at hand, this should allow representation of the external and internal diversity of small towns as complex social spaces.

### **e) Enable transdisciplinarity and strengthen knowledge transfer**

Small town research is suitable for transdisciplinary approaches. Research and practice can work together cooperatively at all stages from problem definition and interactive research formats and methods (such as real-world laboratories and scenario development) to the preparation and dissemination of existing knowledge. This would allow applied research and lifeworld issues to be better addressed. The transfer of results and knowledge from small town research to municipal practice requires actor-oriented communication. Above all, knowledge transfer to local administrations and communities requires the development and promotion of user-friendly media channels as well as an appropriate visual and textual language.

### **f) Strengthen anchoring in higher education teaching**

The anchoring of small town research approaches and results in higher education should be strengthened in order to provide researchers and practitioners with sound training and to expand the field of research through student projects and theses. Important societal challenges, which are often studied and taught as ‘topics of large cities’ today, such as social inequality, migration or local governance, are relevant to but rarely studied in small towns. This should be tackled within the framework of a balanced treatment of all types of cities, towns and settlements in all spatial disciplines (especially geography and spatial planning) as well as in social and cultural sciences.



## 5.2 Recommendations for official statistics and research funding

### a) Provide small-scale statistical data

Systematic and evidence-based small town research requires the availability of suitable, small-scale, verified statistical data. Current data usually do not permit the recording of relevant structures and developments either at the level of small towns or at subordinate levels of neighbourhoods. In addition, a distinction between core towns and village-type settlements within a municipal area is not yet possible. Available small-scale data lack the necessary scope and quality. The Federal Statistical Office (Destatis) as well as the statistical offices of the *Länder* and the administrative districts should therefore collect, process and provide relevant data for research purposes in a non-bureaucratic manner at small-scale levels, in accordance with data protection legislation. Further, they should support respective enquiries by the municipalities, promote open data approaches and user-generated data, and not leave this field to private providers.

### b) Support small town research through science policy

So far, small towns have not been prioritized by national or European research funding or equated with medium-sized towns or rural areas. Thus, they are rarely explicitly addressed. The recognition of small towns as a genuine and distinct field of research and the provision of research funds for systematic work on issues relevant to small towns – whether restricted to small towns or via comparisons of different types of settlements – should be promoted by science policy within the framework of calls for project proposals and chair appointments. These tasks need to be performed by the Federal Government, the states and the universities (e.g. when developing educational curricula). At the same time, it is necessary to coordinate and systematically evaluate relevant funding programs, accompanying research on pilot projects and other research initiatives across the various government departments in order to facilitate knowledge progress.

### c) Strengthen research and the data base within the framework of funding programs

Funding programs, such as the *Städtebauförderungsprogramm* (urban development program) “Smaller Towns and Municipalities”, enable comparatively easy access to municipalities. Within the framework of such programs, current issues of research and practice should be developed and addressed jointly. In addition, the available data from the participating municipalities (e.g. data on social and economic structures or real estate and rental charges) should be generally available for research. In urban development funding in Germany, this can be handled by the *Bundestransferstellen* (federal transfer agencies), for example. In addition, municipalities should receive incentives (technical and monetary) to collect data in a structured manner and make it available free of charge for research.

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