



France

Tackling child poverty and promoting the social inclusion of children

A study on national policy

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This report does not necessarily reflect the views of either the European Commission or the Member States.

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NB

This report was written in April 2007, at the time of the presidential election campaign in France. The issue of child poverty only came up in those debates in an incidental manner. In the past and to varying degrees over time, policies to combat poverty have been subject to changes that have at times been significant following similar occasions. Consequently, the policies described in this note should not be taken as definitively adopted and it would be useful to review the contents of this report during the second half of 2007, once the priorities of the new President of the Republic and parliamentary majority produced by the June 2007 elections have been set out and the national action plan for inclusion (NAPI) 2006-08 has been confirmed or reoriented.

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SUMMARY

Poor children, children in poor households

1. Despite the efforts of public bodies and voluntary organisations, the issue of child poverty does not have a clear place on the French social policy agenda. Pro-family and redistributive public policies¹, which have become an integral part of social policy, have doubtless done much to contribute to this low profile. The reappearance of the subject of child poverty, albeit still in a marginal fashion, goes back about ten years and derives from a few reports and publications.
2. At the 60% income poverty threshold, the child poverty rate is approximately 15%, nearly 3 percentage points above the poverty rate of the general population. This higher poverty level is not common to all children but mainly affects children in single-parent families and large families.
3. Tools for measuring and analysing child poverty in terms of criteria other than income are less accurate. However, it seems that three of the problems for all groups affected by poverty have a strong impact on children and young people: housing, health and training. Information on these three areas demonstrates the extent of inequalities to the same extent as information on poverty.
4. In addition to generalised problems such as lack of money, schooling problems and health and housing inequalities, certain specific groups face greater difficulties. These are mainly young people without a fixed home, isolated young people in rural areas, young people in French overseas departments, children of travellers and children of illegal immigrants.
5. Apart from overview reports such as those by the United Nations Children Fund (Unicef), there is a general lack of studies and research on the well-being of children and young people, whether poor or not. France does not rank very highly in Unicef's reports. A large amount of information about suicide and dropping out of school reveals a presumption of malaise among some young people. The extent of the phenomenon and its severity, particularly among the poor, need to be better documented and compared with attitudes of the French population as a whole.

Policies to combat family and child poverty

6. Since the mid-20th century, France has followed a policy of supporting families by means of benefit payments, provision of childcare services and services to support the socialisation of young people, tax assistance and housing aid. Taken together, these policies account for approximately 3% of GDP.
7. This pro-family policy is combined with a policy of redistribution, in the form of a very high number of means-tested benefits.
8. Three particular areas prove the effectiveness of this policy: a reduction in the severity and incidence of poverty, a higher birth rate and parents' (more specifically mothers') continued presence in the work place.

¹ Pro-family policies are designed to offset the expenses associated with having children and/or to improve the circumstances of families, without taking income levels into account.

9. Provision for children who are recognised as vulnerable is made within the framework of specific systems: child welfare and juvenile protection. These policies are rarely deliberately linked with policies to combat poverty.
10. Despite being genuinely effective, the redistributive effect of these policies remains insufficient to bring about a significant reduction in the overall poverty level of families and children, and this is particularly true of very large families and single-parent families.

Evaluation and monitoring of policies to combat child poverty

11. In France, a large amount of statistical data and studies is produced on childhood, the family and poverty, by a variety of different public bodies — the National Institute for Statistics and Economic Studies (INSEE), the statistical departments of the ministries concerned with social affairs, especially the directorate of research, studies, assessment and statistics (DREES) or social welfare bodies such as the National Family Allowances Fund (CNAF) — as well as voluntary organisations — the National Union of Family Associations (UNAF) or the *Fondation de l'enfance* [Childhood Foundation].
12. Although these studies do not focus directly on child poverty, it would not be difficult to refocus work in such a way as to improve the quality and quantity of information available on the subject. Several observatories could be mobilised effectively if the social and political demand were to be expressed.
13. While policies to combat poverty are monitored, this monitoring takes very little account of the issue of poor children. Evaluations still need to be carried out both of public policies to combat poverty and the specific dimension of child poverty.
14. In addition to merely gathering the available information, it is necessary to start research work on subjects such as the inequalities suffered by children, the ways in which families function and the very concept of the well-being of children and young people, all from a multi-disciplinary point of view.

1. Poor children or children in poor households

1.1. Child poverty: an issue marginalised in French debate

Child poverty is not really a topic of debate in France, either in social policy, academic research or even in the main preoccupations of the voluntary organisations. This has not always been the case. The literature which accompanied the development of industrial society in the 19th century abounded in accounts of and writings on the suffering of children at work and child destitution². The large health and social enquiries of that period revealed that children were becoming more vulnerable and represented additional expenditure rather than extra resources.

This interest in poor children gradually faded between the two world wars, and then disappeared during the boom years until the late 1990s. When Abbé Pierre called the government of the time to account in the early 1950s, it was not to draw attention to the situation of children in the slums but to denounce the housing crisis. Similarly, the large-scale enquiries of the 1960s into the living conditions of working-class families³ only dealt with the situation of children incidentally.

Poor children are certainly still mentioned in humanitarian debate, but this consists mainly of striking images designed to appeal to potential donors when asking them to help the poor children of the developing world. 'Poor children' are always associated with a sordid 'elsewhere' and arouse our compassion. The French media made extensive use of images from Romanian orphanages at the time of the regime change in that country.

This marginalisation of the subject of poor children does not mean that there is an absence of social policy relating to children – quite the reverse. This policy has, however, been designed mainly around ways to protect a childhood which is seen as vulnerable, where the image is that of the victim: victims of their parents, neighbours, relations or prowlers. The children targeted by social policies are those who have been abandoned or have suffered abuse, violence or, particularly in recent years when this has become a recurrent theme, sexual abuse. Policies are therefore formulated to protect these child victims, particularly in the context of legislation known as child social welfare and juvenile protection legislation, which has just been revised⁴.

The voluntary organisations are not heavily involved in the sphere of child poverty either. A large number of voluntary organisations are concerned with children in difficulty, but these are usually either educational initiatives or initiatives to protect children who are the victim of violence or sexual abuse. Many of these associations have found a considerable degree of reinforcement in the theme of children's rights and have taken the approach of overall promotion of children's well-being. Paradoxically, this has not translated into a refocusing of the activities of these voluntary organisations on combating child poverty. The vast majority of voluntary sector activity concerned with childhood is in fact centred around the overall protection and promotion of the family.

Most of these voluntary organisations belong to the powerful federation UNAF.⁵

² Villeme, L.-R., *Tableau de l'état physique et moral des ouvriers*, Paris, 1840.

³ See, for example, the works by Chombart de Lauwe, P.-H. from the 1950s to 1970s, *Famille et Habitation* (jointly), 2nd vol., éditions du CNRS, Paris, 1960, and *Des hommes et des villes*, éditions Payot, Paris, 1965.

⁴ Law No 2007-293 of 5 March 2007 reforming child protection, published in *Journal officiel* No. 55, 6 March 2007.

⁵ Union nationale des associations familiales [National Union of Family Associations], 28 place saint Georges, Paris 75009.

The re-emergence of the theme of child poverty dates back to the mid-1990s. The focus on the social divide during the 1995 presidential election campaign was an opportunity for the voluntary sector to tackle this issue, but it was not included in the laws of 1996 or 1998. The subject returned to centre-stage following the publication of a study by INSEE in December 1996, and then the publication of an issue of the CNAF journal, *Informations sociales* in 1999⁶. The real turning point in interest in the subject was the publication of a report by the Council for Employment, Income and Social Cohesion (CERC) in 2004. The report had been preceded by a symposium in March 2003 on the subject of 'Poor children in France', jointly organised by CERC, the *Commissariat général du plan* [General Planning Agency], CNAF, and the Ministry of Social Affairs and Solidarity's directorate of research, assessment and statistics. Finally, in 2005, the CERC published a second report on the same subject, which used a more methodological approach⁷.

There has been no sign of this higher profile in the action or policy of the last few years. Neither the law to combat exclusion (LCE) of 1998, nor the law on social cohesion of 2005, nor the first two national plans for social inclusion gave any great priority to child poverty. When a survey carried out by INSEE on homeless people reported that there were nearly 16,000 young people living rough, this information went almost unreported in the media. Finally, while the report by the committee led by Emmaüs France chairman Martin Hirsch certainly emphasised the need to set targets for reducing and eradicating child poverty, its main focus was more traditional: the need to review family benefits and the search for a better way of structuring the relationship between benefits and income from work for poor families.⁸

Similarly, the voluntary organisations are not very proactive in dealing with the issue of child poverty. The 'Alerte' network certainly shows awareness of the issue, but it does not publicise the problem and, very recently, this subject has been tackled more by organisations which have to deal with the children in the poor families for which they are procuring services. This is true, for example, of the national federation of shelter and social reintegration organisations (FNARS)⁹.

Recent displays of support for children threatened with deportation from France because their parents are in France illegally is evidence of a feeling of solidarity and compassion rather than a wish to combat poverty. There are two probable reasons why the issue of child poverty is not fundamental to French policy and debate.

The first is linked to the history of the how the French welfare state was built. Poor children are a figure from the 19th century — they were poor because their work did not produce enough income and their working conditions ruined their health¹⁰. The removal of children from the world of production, together with universal compulsory schooling when school became free, secular and mandatory, marked the exit of children — essential working-class children — from the world of poverty and their entry into the world of the family and school. When, at the end of his schooling, at 12, then at 14, and finally at the age of 16, the child switches to the world of work, he is no longer seen as a child but as a young adult. From the moment children were removed from the world of production and therefore from earning, childhood was no longer thought of and described in terms of poverty.

⁶ *Enfants pauvres, pauvres enfants*, in: 'Informations sociales', No. 79, Paris, 1999.

⁷ Except for the first study by INSEE, which used data from the taxable income survey, the main source of data on the household poverty in France, it should be noted that much of the research presented at the March 2003 symposium uses European data. This is the case in particular for Jeandidier, B., Reinstadler, A., Ray, J.-C., Kop, J.-L., *Les enfants pauvres en France et en Europe*, which is based on data from the European Community Household Panel (ECHP).

⁸ Hirsch, M., *Au possible nous sommes tenus*, report by the Commission on Families, Vulnerability and Poverty, Ministry of Solidarity, Health and the Family, Paris, 2005.

⁹ FNARS, *Les enfants et leur famille en centre d'hébergement*, September 2006.

¹⁰ Murard, L., Zylberman, P., *Le petit travailleur infatigable. Villes-usines, habitat et intimités au XIXe siècle*, Recherches, 1976.

The second reason relates to with French demographic policy of the first half of the 20th century, which was obsessed by the falling birth rate, and in promoting large families, transformed children into desirable and universal assets. Whether born into a rich or poor environment, a child is a child and represents one voice in the demographic chorus. When family allowances were introduced before the Second World War, and then reaffirmed at the end of that period, they were not allocated on a means-tested basis, but across the board, regardless of the family's income: the only thing that mattered was the number of children. Children once more became a chance to receive income, especially when they were second or third children, since the family allowances system did not provide any allowance for the first child. From this point of view, what mattered was not child poverty or family poverty, but poverty in terms of lack of children.

Finally, we should not rule out the idea that the difficulty in thinking about child poverty may also be linked to the definitions of 'child' which have been proposed. The definition adopted by the EU, which takes up that of the World Health Organisation (WHO), encourages us to acknowledge someone as a child from birth to the end of his or her 17th year. While this definition makes it possible to establish a common frame of reference, it also poses some formidable problems in terms of demarcation. The image of the child, who is usually with the family and aged, very roughly, between 8 and 12, is gradually replaced by that of the young person, who is also the object of public policies, but who is most frequently described not in terms of the world of the victim but in terms of risk and deviance. The limit of 17 is not very satisfactory either, and a limit of 16, corresponding to the end of compulsory schooling, would be simpler in France's case. In addition, between 16 and 21, if we bring in the category of young adults, aged between 18 and 21, the boundaries become increasingly blurred. While 18 corresponds to an administrative cut-off point, it is not very useful in sociological terms. Finally, if we set the ceiling for the category under consideration at 17, we run the risk of ignoring the deep-seated transformation taking place in the young population, whose independence is getting further and further away, until we get back to an old INSEE definition which referred to children up to the age of 25.

This difficulty in thinking about child poverty is reflected in the information system which, apart from the hesitations over age boundary definitions, almost always adopts a universalist perspective by producing information on children which does not take into account whether or not they come from poor families. Thus, while we know from monographs on the subject that vulnerable children taken into care by child social services almost always come from low-income or poor families, there is no overall data on poverty in children in the care of child social services. The same arguments could be applied to the mother and child welfare system, social services or health services, and even education, for which inequalities are measured on the basis of parents' socio-professional category. This lack of information must not be viewed as the result of a failure in the statistical system, but rather as a product of the universalist structure of family policies.

1.2. Two million poor children in income poverty

An INSEE study published in 2003¹¹ using data from 1998 and 1999 and taking as a reference point the threshold of 50% of median income generally used by INSEE, reported an income poverty rate among children of 7.8% and pointed out that this rate was slightly higher than that observed for the population as a whole. The CERC report on child poverty reproduced the same data. Finally, the recent report by the Unicef research centre reported a rate of approximately 7.3% using the same threshold¹² of 50%. The latest information available from INSEE, published in September 2006 and using data from 2004, shows a poverty rate among children, again at the same 50% threshold of approximately 7.7%. This rate can be considered as having been more or less stable over the last seven or eight years. Using this threshold, the population of poor children is approximately 1 million out of an overall population of just over 60 million. This child poverty rate is 1.6% higher than the poverty rate among the population as a whole.

Information at the 60% threshold shows a child poverty rate of approximately 15%, which is double the number of poor children¹³. The difference between the child poverty rate and that of the population as a whole is almost exactly proportionate, at slightly over three percentage points. Here again, a certain degree of stability can be observed over the last few years. This observation was made in 2003 by Bruno Jeandidier and his colleagues¹⁴, using a more diverse range of income poverty indicators.

Based on this threshold, using an income poverty indicator of 60% of the average standard of living, 2 million children live in poor households.

Poverty rates are not identical for all family situations. As in the majority of EU countries, the poverty risk of a child living with a single parent is more than twice that of a child living with both parents or with two adults in the case of a blended family. The child poverty rate also increases with the number of siblings. There are therefore two groups of children at greater risk of poverty: firstly, children with a large number of siblings and secondly, children brought up in a single-parent family. This poverty rate increases with age, as pointed out by CERC. While the poverty rate at 50% for children from the age of 0 to 2 was 6.2% in 1999, it was 7.7% for those aged 6 to 10 and 10.5% for those aged 16 to 17.¹⁵

¹¹ Dell, F., Legendre, N., *La pauvreté chez les enfants*, INSEE Première, No 896, April 2003.

¹² Adamson, P., et al., *Le bien-être des enfants dans les pays riches*, 7th Innocenti report, 2007.

¹³ The rates provided by Eurostat and INSEE may differ by one or two percentage points, since they do not use the same information sources.

¹⁴ Op. cit.

¹⁵ CERC report, 2004, p. 41

Table 1
Poverty rate and degree of poverty for families with children

| | Poverty rate | Degree of poverty |
|----------------------------|--------------|-------------------|
| All couples with children: | 12 | 18 |
| with 1 child | 9 | 20 |
| with 2 children | 9 | 17 |
| with 3 children | 13 | 17 |
| with 4 children + | 34 | 19 |
| Single-parent families | 27 | 18 |
| with 1 child | 20 | 16 |
| with 2 children | 28 | 17 |
| with 3 children | 39 | 18 |

Sources: ERF, INSEE 2003, directorate of research, studies, assessment and statistics (DREES), No 555, February 2007.

The gap between the child poverty rate and the poverty rate in the population as a whole is not due to excess poverty among children as a whole or to the existence of poor children isolated from their families, but to the fact that two specific groups account for concentrations of child poverty. In these two groups, it is the imbalance in the ratio between the number of parents and the number of children which leads to an overall increase in the child poverty rate. Greater consideration should be given to this phenomenon, as it both explains the higher poverty levels in children and suggests possible avenues for remedying the situation.

While poverty rates vary quite significantly in line with the family structure, the degree of poverty on the other hand, remains quite stable whatever the family composition. This finding has already been reported by Bruno Jeandidier for all the EU countries: 'in the majority of European countries, households with children headed by a single parent are more often poor, but not poorer to a greater degree'¹⁶.

After family structure and number of siblings, parental employment is the third variable which determines how poor the children are. There is a close negative correlation between the employment rate of the parents and the poverty rate of the children. In the 2003 report, Bruno Jeandidier noted the special nature of the situation in France: 'as the employment rate goes down, the situation of the households worsens relatively more in France, than in the other European Union' countries¹⁷. Finally, among other determining factors for child poverty are the parents' level of qualification and belonging to a family of non-EU nationals, which applies to a quarter of children. The parents' age also has an influence. Children with parents aged between 30 and 45 have the lowest poverty rate¹⁸. On the other hand, poor children are more often found in households where the parents are either younger or older than this.

The number of children in households receiving basic welfare benefits is approximately 1.6 million: 750,000 for the basic guaranteed income (RMI), 175,000 for the disabled adults' allowance (AAH), nearly 300,000 children for the one-parent benefit (API) and 410,000 for the solidarity allowance (ASS). If 2 million children are living in poor households and 1.6 million of these are in households receiving basic welfare benefits, one can therefore conclude that 400,000 children live in poor households where the parents are in employment. This figure is probably quite a significant under-estimate, as some figures are included twice (one parent working and the other receiving a basic welfare benefit).

¹⁶ Jeandidier, B., op. cit., p. 24.

¹⁷ Idem. previous note.

¹⁸ Dell, F., Legendre, N., op. cit.

The international comparisons put forward by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and the WHO, also adopted by Unicef, showed that in terms of relative income poverty, France ranked 7th among the rich countries with regard to child poverty, after Denmark, Finland, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland and the Czech Republic.¹⁹ However, while France is ranked 5th among the initial 15 EU Member States for its relatively low poverty level, at 60% among families with children, it falls back to 7th place when the families have three or more children. It is in 4th place where there are only one or two children. These figures argue in favour of more account being taken of the order and number of children in comparisons between the EU Member States.

There are few studies on persistent child poverty. In 2002, the records of the National Family Allowances Fund (CNAF) showed that approximately half of families in receipt of RMI had been in this situation for at least three years.

1.3. From non-income poverty to children's well-being

There is very little research which deals directly with indicators relating to children's well-being. From this viewpoint, the data collected in the latest Innocenti report from Unicef represents useful progress, although the final findings would benefit from being significantly refined.²⁰ The concepts of less well-off families, children being materially deprived, use of the OECD's PISA programme, educational well-being, the importance given to peer relationships, the development of risk behaviours and subjective well-being indicators are tools that give us a better understanding of the perception that children can have of their own situation — even though objective indicators are more relevant to young children whereas subjective indicators apply more to young people. From this viewpoint, it seems that considerable improvements could be made to the situation in France. Whereas the various income poverty indicators put France in the first third of the countries involved, the well-being indicators push it down into the bottom third, or at best the second half of the table.²¹

With regard to non-income factors, the statistical sources available provide extremely full information in the areas of housing, education and health. In many cases, these sources do not allow the information obtained to be matched up with the poverty level of the families in which the children are living.

¹⁹ UNICEF, *La pauvreté des enfants dans les pays riches 2005*, Innocenti Report No 6.

²⁰ This progress makes the limitations of the report all the more regrettable. The methodological limitations relate to erroneous data being taken into account (on young people in work in the OECD database), the decision to give equal weight to factors that are too dissimilar (infant mortality rate and low-weight births), and also an almost moralistic reading of certain indicators (single-parent or blended families). While militant research can make it possible to progress with ideas, this demonstrates certain limitations which we hope will be taken into greater account in future reports.

²¹ UNICEF, *La pauvreté des enfants en perspectives: vue d'ensemble du bien-être dans les pays riches*, Innocenti report No .7, 2007.

1.3.1. *Housing of poor families with children*

Like the families in which they live, poor children are more likely to be living in disadvantaged geographical areas. They are more likely than other children to be, in poor housing with parents struggling to pay the housing costs. In urban districts, 36% of poor children live in housing estates, and this figure rises to 43% in urban districts with over 500,000 residents. A study carried out by the French National Institute of Demographic Studies (INED) and the French National Institute of Health and Medical Research (Inserm) in partnership with the National Observatory on Poverty, looked into inequalities and social divides in the sensitive urban areas of Île-de-France²². The findings of the study emphasise the extent of the breakdown in parent-child relationships among the people living in these sensitive areas. People in these areas 'have witnessed, serious arguments or conflict between their parents before the age of 18 more frequently than the population as a whole (13.7 compared with 9.7%), as well as the divorce or separation of their parents (14.1 compared with 8.5%). At the age of 10, more than one in 5 of the children surveyed no longer lived with both parents... the probability of experiencing a period of unemployment of at least six months increases with the number of breakdowns experienced before the age of 18.'

According to the *Pôle national de lutte contre l'habitat indigne* [French inter-ministerial taskforce to combat substandard housing], the number of housing units that are unfit for habitation in France is between 400,000 and 600,000. While nearly 90% of this housing is occupied by elderly households or single persons, nearly 10% is occupied by families, of which nearly 4% are large families. Little is known at present about the impact of poor housing on children and their development and future prospects. In 1999, Inserm estimated the number of children between the ages of 1 and 6 suffering from lead in the blood to be 84,000. The public health law of August 2004 set the target for reducing prevalence to approximately 1% by 2008.

Poor families with children are more likely than other families to be living in rented social housing and in housing with an atypical status (sub-letting, furnished, free housing). More than three-quarters of poor single-parent families and 58% of poor couples rent their homes, compared with 40% for families with children as a whole. Overcrowded housing is more frequent for families with children. The overcrowding rate is 10% of households with children but a quarter of poor families with children. Approximately one third of adolescents currently live in housing in which there is more than one person per room. Eric Maurin and Dominique Goux show that these adolescents are twice as likely to suffer from educational disadvantage as children living in housing where there is less than one person per room. 'Over one-third of children who did not have a room in which to do their homework when they were 11 years old left the educational system without any qualifications'. In the authors' view, it is not a case of establishing a mechanistic and determinist link between housing and school results, but rather of pointing out the convergence of the various spheres in which the effects of poor living conditions can be seen.²³

In 2002, approximately 7% of tenants had been in rent arrears during the two previous years. Couples with children and single-parent families are the households most likely to be in rent arrears.²⁴ The percentages are 14% for single-parent families, 13% for couples with three or more children, 10% for couples with two children and 7% for couples with one child. In financial situations that are already strained, a family event can push the household into an unpaid rent situation. The birth of a child leads

²² Parizot, I., Chauvin, P., Firdion, J.-M., Paugam, S., *Santé, inégalités et ruptures sociales dans les zones urbaines sensibles d'Île-de-France*, Les travaux de l'Observatoire, 2003-2004, La Documentation française, Paris.

²³ Idem note 8.

²⁴ Nivière, D., *Les ménages ayant des difficultés pour payer leur loyer*, in: 'Études et résultats', No 534, DREES, November 2006.

to rent arrears for 11% of households, as does the departure of a child from the home, which in the majority of cases will involve the loss of a social security benefit.

Recent research on housing costs shows that several categories of household are particularly vulnerable in the area of housing costs. These are mainly the poorest households, young people, single-parent families and people living in Paris²⁵. In the area of housing, families have been hit hard by rising rents. While for a single person receiving RMI, housing benefit covers 76% of the average rent in accommodation of approximately 14 m², for a couple with 4 children, in accommodation for which the minimum area would be 76 m², housing benefit only covers 44% of the average rent.

For many children of poor families, housing means a hostel. A recent survey by FNARS shows that nearly 14,000 children are living in establishments that provide shelter for families. The highest numbers of these children are in parent accommodation centres and reception centres for asylum-seekers (RCASs). Figures from a 2005 census show that half of these children were under 6 years old, and nearly a quarter of them were under 2. The average age of the mothers was 31.7 and that of the fathers 35. Approximately three children in five lived with only their mother, and over a third with both their parents. One family in six did not have any financial resources, two women in five were in receipt of API, and only one couple in five was earning two salaries.²⁶

1.3.2. Poor children and health

With an infant mortality rate of 3.8% in 2005, France is among the top third of EU countries, though it is still behind Finland and Sweden. In 2003, the main causes of death in children aged between 1 and 18 were, in descending order, external causes (accidents, poisoning, suicide, etc.) — which accounted for nearly half of all deaths — followed by cancer (15% of deaths), neurological diseases (6.4%) and congenital birth defects. It is also worth noting that violent deaths account for 64% of deaths among the 15-19 year old age group, two-thirds of which are caused by traffic accidents. The suicide rate is 11.7%, and three-quarters of suicides are boys. From the age of 15 to 19, suicide becomes the second most frequent cause of death, after traffic accidents. These figures apply to young people as a whole and are evidence of a malaise which applies not just to the poorest section of the young population, for which we do not have any epidemiological data.

As regards morbidity in children under 15, reported health problems relate to ophthalmological problems (20%), respiratory diseases (20%), dental problems (17%) and respiratory, endocrine and metabolic problems (15%). Overall, France is ranked 15th among the 52 countries in the WHO's Europe region in terms of the overall incidence of disease in children aged between 0 and 14, with a score of 23, and 14th within the EU. In comparison with Sweden, which has the EU's best result with a score of 17.1, the most significant differences relate to the prevalence of neonatal disease, and accidental injuries.

The studies carried out by the Education Ministry in the priority education zones (ZEPs) show a lower prevalence of health problems among people living in the worst poverty (which is actually due to a lack of screening and late diagnosis of sensory and cognitive problems) as well as higher rates of obesity linked to eating habits and a lower level of physical activity. In these zones, there is inadequate treatment of respiratory problems, asthma in particular. The proportion of children who are overweight is

²⁵ Centre d'analyse stratégique (Centre for Strategic Analysis), *Hétérogénéité des ménages face au coût du logement*, Note de veille, No 38, December 2006.

²⁶ FNARS, *Les enfants et leur famille en centre d'hébergement*, Paris, September 2006.

17.2% in the ZEPs, compared with 13.3% in other zones. Children attending school in ZEPs have twice as much tooth decay as children outside ZEPs.

The long list of health inequalities is becoming increasingly clear as research findings are published. As regards check-ups during pregnancy, the number of recommended visits is 7; the proportion of women not reaching this figure is 23.8% among women who have not completed their education whereas it is only 4.4% for women who hold at least a *baccalauréat* [diploma equivalent to A-levels]²⁷. We now know that children with one parent who drinks heavily are 7 times more at a risk of becoming alcohol-dependent than other children. In terms of nutrition, spending on food among people living in poverty is very limited (approximately 3.7 euros/day per person, whereas the minimum cost of meeting nutritional needs is approximately 4 to 5 euros/day). We know that eating school meals is beneficial for children from a nutritional point of view, but we also know that numbers of poor children eating school meals is lower when the price of meals is not adjusted. There have been many investigations into the issue of nutrition, and there is a consensus on the importance of socio-economic level. For example, the rate of obesity in children whose fathers are unqualified workmen is 10 times higher (7.4%) than among children whose fathers are managers (0.7%)²⁸.

Aside from poverty and health inequalities, many studies emphasise the suffering of young people for whom drinking alcohol seems to be as much a symptom as a remedy. In addition to looking at the quantity consumed, experts are investigating the significance of changing consumption habits, such as the desire to get drunk. These situations, which previously had only applied to young adults, are becoming more frequent in young people aged under 15²⁹.

1.3.3. Poverty in terms of education: social exclusion and educational exclusion

With the framework law of July 1989, France set itself the target of ensuring that all children in a given year group achieve at least a recognised qualification at the level of vocational aptitude certificate (CAP) or vocational studies certificate (BEP), and that 80% of young people are educated to *baccalauréat* level. However, the indicators show that each year 60,000 young people, representing approximately 8% of the year group, leave the school system without any qualifications. This figure has been constant since 1995.

The combined influences of social category and geographical factors result in a certain percentage of young people being unable to benefit in any useful way from the schooling provided. The 'carte scolaire' system confirms the idea of a sectoral divide, although there are many exceptions from which parents with the strongest cultural capital benefit. Persistent educational inequalities can be seen between the differing social groups. Little progress has been made in the levels attained by pupils from the most disadvantaged social groups over the last 15 years, in contrast with those from middle class families. Finally, while there is a percentage of the pupils classed as drop-outs or early school leavers in all social groups, these situations seem to have a more marked effect on groups in the greatest difficulties³⁰. Only 76% of the poorest young people are still in basic schooling six years after entering the first year of secondary school, compared with the national average of 90%. Of those who are still at school, pupils

²⁷ Scheidegger, S., Vilain, A., *Disparités sociales et surveillance de grossesse*, in: 'Études et résultats', No 552, January 2007.

²⁸ See the findings published in *Études et résultats*, No 573, May 2007.

²⁹ We do not have national epidemiological data to back up these statements, but the work by the regional health observatories and the data collected for the recent general reports on alcohol demonstrate the extent of these behaviours among young people in high poverty areas.

³⁰ This paragraph summarises a contribution to the work of the Observatory on poverty, 2003-04, by Kherroubi, M., Chanteau, J.-P., Larguèze, B., *Travaux de l'Observatoire*, La Documentation française, Paris, pp. 127-164.

are more frequently on vocational courses than general courses, and children of poor families are over-represented among students who repeat a year at secondary school.

Research by Eric Maurin has highlighted the segregative role played by geographical environment. There is a threefold difference between the proportion of children from middle class backgrounds attending the bottom 10% most popular schools and the top 10% most popular. On average, they account for 20% of pupils in the former and 70% in the latter. 54% of children whose father has no qualifications have already repeated a year at least once between starting school and the fourth year at secondary school, as opposed to 14% of those whose father has a higher education qualification. At the age of 18, 28% of children from working class families have stopped studying, compared with 5% of children from middle class families.

The educational disparity appears very early on. Educational disadvantage is 10 points higher than the national average from the third year of primary school onwards in vulnerable urban areas. Whereas 52% of mothers consider homework too difficult for them to help with, this percentage is 80% for mothers who only hold a primary education certificate and whose children are in the first stage of secondary school. 38% of young people from disadvantaged families repeat a year at primary school, which is twice as many as the average.

Among children from families on low incomes, those from families of foreign origin experience even greater difficulty than others because they are in a situation in which the factors of low cultural level and living in underprivileged areas come together. 10% of pupils in the equivalent of year 10 'insertion' (work experience) courses³¹ are foreigners, whereas they account for 4.3% of pupils, and the scores of foreigners are 10 points below the national average in the assessments in the first year of secondary school.

1.4. Groups of young people with specific problems

While housing, education and health are the most crucial areas in understanding the difficulties encountered by young people, which often lead to an outcome epitomised by the typical image of young people on the housing estates, this image should not be allowed to conceal other situations, which are perhaps given less space in the media but which all carry potential risks and the danger of poor social integration or exclusion:

- young people isolated in rural environments who live in areas with very low levels of cultural resources;
- young people from traveller families, who make little progress at school;
- young people in the overseas *départements*;
- the high number of young people without a fixed home, and their vulnerability within a particularly violent social context;
- violence among girls³²;
- the situation of children of illegal immigrants.

³¹ These classes are for pupils who are not on course to pass exams but are still obliged to attend school up to the age of 16. Their training is based on a teaching plan, drawn up in accordance with pupils' needs, which combines training at the establishment with practical training periods in a working environment. The aim is to prepare the pupils to enter training leading to qualifications (CAP, BEP).

³² Ruby, S., *Les 'crapuleuses', ces adolescentes déviantes*, PUF, Paris, 2005.

2. Public policies to combat family and child poverty

Public policy is formulated from a pronatalist viewpoint and is primarily pro-family. This aid to families takes the form of financial benefits designed to offset the expenses connected with children in the first instance, but also of the provision, which has increased over the last 20 years, of various childcare services offered above all to women with full-time jobs. This provision of benefits and services is the main reason why France is in a relatively favourable position compared with the rest of Europe, in terms of birth rate but also in terms of the female employment rate.

Alongside these universalist policies to support the birth rate, other benefits are designed to promote economic and financial redistribution between different social groups, from which the poorest families benefit significantly. Pro-family policies also provide protection against poverty, though clearly, not all families enjoy an equal level of protection.

Finally, alongside these pronatalist or social equalisation policies, there are other policies designed to protect children who are more vulnerable (due to disability or a high-risk environment).

As a whole, these policies have been relatively stable over time. The recent measures that appear in the latest national action plan for integration only make minor adjustments to these policies or intervene more directly in children's circumstances, as is the case for school and leisure activities for children.

The subject of children's rights has come up in the sphere of social policy over the last few years and is contributing to the emphasis on children as individuals in a world in which the family is still dominant. This new focus on children's rights has been accompanied by more talk about the obligations and duties of families towards their children.

2.1. Pronatalist policy and offsetting family expenses: benefits and services

2.1.1. Extensive, high-cost financial benefits

In 2005, the total amount of social security benefits paid to households amounted to EUR 505.5 billion, which was 29.6% of France's GDP. The proportion paid out in family and maternity benefits accounted for EUR 45.5 billion, or 9% of social security benefits and nearly 3% of GDP. This calculation is in fact an under-estimate. In order to obtain a more accurate overall picture of this assistance, we need to take into account tax assistance, supplementary retirement payments paid on the basis of family dependents, housing benefit for families as well as a large proportion of the benefits connected with poverty and exclusion. Nearly EUR 50 billion in indirect aid must be added to the direct aid and benefits of approximately EUR 45.5 billion, which equals EUR 95 billion in total, almost 6% of GDP.

There are as many as 17 different benefits which provide assistance for bringing up children and supporting families between the time of birth and the age of three. The major benefit is the family allowance, non means-tested payments made to families with two or more children. These are paid to 4.8 million families, 69% of which have two children. The number of families in receipt of this allowance is growing by approximately 0.5% per year. For a family with three children, the monthly allowance was EUR 267 as at 1 July 2006. A family income supplement is paid, on a means-tested basis, to families with three or more children. A schooling expenses allowance is paid, also on a mean-tested basis, to families with one or more children between the ages of 6 and 18 who are at school.

A new system applies to families with one or more children born or adopted after 1 January 2004. This system is made up of an early childhood benefit (PAJE), paid on a means-tested basis and including a basic benefit paid from birth until the child is three, as well as a one-off grant on birth or adoption. Families can also receive, without means-testing, a supplement for free choice of activity (CLCA) in the event of stopping work or reducing work, and a supplement for free choice of care (CMG). At the end of 2005, 1.3 million families were in receipt of the PAJE basic benefit.

As regards single-parent families, the family support allowance (ASF) of approximately EUR 85 per month, is allocated without means-testing to parents bringing up their children alone. At the end of 2005, this allowance was being paid to nearly 700,000 households. The one-parent benefit (API) is an incremental basic welfare benefit allocated on a means-tested basis. The maximum means ceiling for a woman with one child receiving API is currently EUR 748 per month, which goes up by EUR 187 per dependent child. 206,000 persons are in receipt of this allowance, and the number is increasing by approximately 5% each year.

In addition to these allowances, there are housing benefits, which are allocated on a means-tested basis and are designed to partially cover housing costs. The family housing allowance (ALF) is paid to young households for five years from the date of marriage and to families with dependants. The personalised housing aid (APL) is for tenants of social housing or for those who become property owners after receiving low-interest loans; finally, the social-housing allowance (ALS), paid on a means-tested basis, is applicable to any person regardless of age or employment status. The number of households in receipt of these allowances was 6.1 million in 2005. The average amount of housing allowances is EUR 190 per month.³³

2.1.2. Services for families: from offsetting costs to a life-work balance

According to INSEE's estimates of 1 January 2005, there were 13,547,680 children aged under 18 in mainland France. The figure was 14,108,818 young people for the whole of France. Based on a birth rate which has been stable at 800,000 per year since 2000, the population aged less than 3 years has risen to approximately 2.4 million children. Half the children are looked after at home by one of their parents. 'Since the Second World War, the history of childcare methods in France', to use Alain Norvez's expression³⁴, 'has, been one of inadequacy'. For a long time, the state did not plan ahead for the sea change of rising numbers of women in paid employment, and continued to promote care by stay-at-home mothers as being the best possible option. Since the 1980s, an effort has been made by the authorities both to increase the number of childcare places available and to diversify the types of childcare arrangements.

School also plays an important role in looking after young children. The education code stipulates that children may attend school from the age of two, subject to places being available.³⁵ In 2005, 24.5% of children aged two were at school, representing over 193,000 children attending nursery school.

The extent of childcare provision is crucial in terms of providing a satisfactory framework for women to access and stay in employment. The issue of balancing professional life and family life comes at this

³³ Berger, E., *Les prestations familiales et de logement en 2005*, Etudes et résultats, No 544, December 2006.

³⁴ Norvez, A., *De la naissance à l'école. Santé, modes de garde et pré-scolarité dans la France contemporaine*, INED/PUF, Paris, 1990.

³⁵ The annual reports of the French ombudsman for children state, however, that this extremely young entry into school may be detrimental to proper socialisation of these children.

price in French society, where masculine behaviour still remains strongly marked by a Mediterranean tradition.³⁶

The services provided include individual and collective childcare options. Among types of individual childcare, there are child-minders, who look after children in their homes for pay, provided that they have obtained approval from the departmental council, and nannies, who are domestic employees, paid directly by the parents or via agencies. In this case, parents receive an exemption from social security contributions out of their wages.

Community services chiefly consist of public crèches, which take children under 3 years old whose parents work — families contribute to the operating costs in line with their income — and family crèches, which bring together approved child-minders who look after between one and three children in their homes. Parents' contribution is identical to that for public crèches.

Other facilities also look after children: part-time childcare centres, toy libraries, holiday centres, leisure centres or parent and child centres.

In 2005, there were 254,000 childcare places in community bodies. If the places available in family crèches are added to this, the total number of places available is close to 317,000 places. This figure is expected to reach 350,000 places in 2008.

Table 2
Breakdown of crèche provision

| Type of crèche | Number of places |
|--------------------------------------|------------------|
| Community crèches | 143 761 |
| Local | 84 159 |
| Staff-run | 9 865 |
| Crèches run by parent associations | 2 282 |
| Flexible hours care | 47 455 |
| Part-time childcare centres | 59 223 |
| Traditional | 40 328 |
| Parent-run | 1 927 |
| Flexible hours care | 16 968 |
| Nursery schools | 8 573 |
| Fixed hours care | 7 815 |
| Flexible hours care | 758 |
| Multi-purpose care | 43 150 |
| Total for community childcare | 254 707 |
| Family crèche places | 61 857 |

Sources: DREES, Mother & child welfare survey.

Growth in the number of company crèches still remains low despite efforts to promote this service.

Provision is unevenly distributed. Small towns and rural areas have a marked lack of community childcare provision. In addition, childcare systems which give priority to children with both parents working keep women who are not working stuck in non-employment. Childcare options are also developing within a framework in which provision is increasingly governed by demand, and these

³⁶ Neyrand, G., Fraioli, N., *Vie et socialisation des jeunes enfants au regard des modalités de leur accueil*, Centre interdisciplinaire méditerranéen d'études et de recherches en sciences sociales, 175 rue Fernando Canobio, 13320 Bouc Bel Air, September 2006, cimerss@wanadoo.fr

options, while they support free choice by mothers, in fact encourage women to work part-time, or even give up work, in the case of the least well-qualified women³⁷.

Despite the strong pressure associated with gaps between supply and demand, studies into the satisfaction of households as regards childcare options show three-quarters of opinions expressed to be positive.

While the issue of services for families is usually discussed in terms of early childhood, we should not neglect the importance of out-of-school activities, which are usually organised by voluntary organisations and above all local authorities. These consist primarily of after-school care, as well as outdoor centres and other leisure centres, holiday centres and educational support centres. These services, provided by the local authorities, usually operate on the basis of funding through local taxation with a financial contribution from the families. This family is on a sliding scale based on family income and size. The policy is both pro-family and redistributive.

With a few exceptions, local authorities are wholly responsible for other services such as school transport. Every day nearly 4.5 million children are transported from home to school by the school transport services.

In the same way, services provided for families in the sphere of careers counselling and combating educational exclusion have multiplied since the early 1980s. They are mainly aimed at young people aged 16 and over, i.e. from the end of compulsory school attendance, and continue until the age of 25, or a little later. The 400 local agencies, the 150 PAIOs (career and social guidance centres for young people), as well as the youth centres, and the PAEJs (advice and counselling centres for young people, form part of this package of services, which is usually provided by the local authorities.

Alongside these older systems, an idea came to the fore in the late 1990s that while parents have not always abdicated their responsibilities, sometimes they need support in their role as parents. New family services have therefore been set up alongside the traditional services caring for young children: couple and family information and advice establishments (Decree of 23 March 1993), Parents' Listening and Support Networks (REAAPs, March 1999), and family information points (PIF), which have been developing since March 2004.

2.1.3. Assumption of effectiveness

If the main objective of this policy is to promote a higher birth rate while allowing those families who so wish not to cease employment, we have to agree that this objective has on the whole been more or less achieved.

Between 1975 and 2005, the employment rate for women aged between 25 and 49 rose from 58.6 to 81.1% - an increase of 22.5 percentage points. Over the same period, the employment rate for women aged between 15 and 24, most of them without children, fell by 15.6 percentage points.

The average employment rate for women who are part of a couple is 75.7%, and this rate rises to 80.2% for women with one child aged under three and to 83.9% for women with two children aged three years

³⁷ *idem* previous note.

or over³⁸. When women are not part of a couple, the average employment rate for those bringing up one or more children is 76.5%.

In France, this employment rate for women is due not to men taking a greater share of family responsibilities, nor to greater use of family childcare, even though the role played by grandparents has become more significant over recent years, but to the diversity and growth in childcare provision.

Alongside this high employment level, the short-term fertility indicator is nearly 2 children per woman³⁹. It should be noted that in 2004 this short-term fertility indicator was 1.5 children for the EU as a whole, whereas in France it was 1.9. In 2005, births rose at the same rate as in 2004 (+ 0.9%). The number of births was 807,400, which is close to the exceptional figure for 2000 (808,200). In 2006, the number rose to 830,900, a level which had not been seen for 24 years. The average age of mothers continues to rise: it was 29.7 in 2005, compared with 28.9 ten years earlier. Although the predominant model is a family with two children, in 2005 there were 1.7 million families living with three or more children⁴⁰. In fact, the proportion of families with three children has remained stable during the most recent censuses, whereas that of families with four or more children has been constantly falling.

The parents of very large families are less well qualified and are usually employed in manual work.

In terms of family structure, a regular increase has been observed in the number of single-parent families. At the end of December 2003, there were approximately 1.51 million single-parent families. In 92% of cases, the parent was the mother. Over 2.5 million children live in a single-parent family. They are by and large older than those living in a family with two parents, in so far as the majority of separations occur several years after the birth of children.

2.2. Poor families and vulnerable children

Apart from seeking to offset the financial burden of children with the aim of making it more desirable for families to have children, do social policies help to reduce poverty in families with children? Research into family social policies shows that this objective is being achieved in part, but in different ways for different types of family. To use an analysis by Pierre Strobel, there are a number of different objectives operating within French family policy. This is the case for the 'quotient familial' system (in which a proportion of the household income is exempt from direct taxation for each child), according to which family allowances are based on a strictly pro-family policy, the benefit being the same for all. Where aid decreases with rising income, as is the case for housing benefit, the pro-family philosophy is taking on board a social criterion, whereas we are in the realms of a welfare approach when allowances are directly targeted to the poorest people, which is the case, for example, for the one-parent benefit. It is difficult to make changes to the balance between these differing approaches, as was demonstrated by the 1998 episode of means-testing family allowances⁴¹.

These different approaches aside, if we look closely at these policies, it is clear that the issue of child poverty is not central in France, despite the fact that the child poverty rate is higher than the poverty rate of the population as a whole. CERC has drawn attention to the importance of this issue both for the

³⁸ Source: INSEE, *Enquête emploi 2005*, in: 'Regards sur la parité'.

³⁹ *Bilan démographique 2006: Un excédent naturel record*, INSEE Première No 1118, January 2007.

⁴⁰ Blanpain, N., *Les conditions de vie des familles nombreuses*, DREES, Études et résultats, No 555, February 2007.

⁴¹ Strobel, P., *La contribution des politiques familiales à la réduction et de la pauvreté et des inégalités: les paradoxes du cas français*, in: Daniel, C., Palier, B. (ed.), 'La protection sociale en Europe, le temps des réformes', pp. 195-204, La Documentation française, Paris, February 2001.

future and in terms of social justice, using a two-pronged argument of social justice, since children are in no way responsible⁴² for the poverty they are living in, and social efficiency. The world of politics and the voluntary sector, however, still do not pay much attention to the subject.

2.2.1. Redistribution protects poor families

In the case of France, mechanisms to redistribute income have a dual impact on poverty, since they reduce the number of poor people and reduce the severity of poverty experienced by these people. The dual effect of fewer poor people, and poor people who are less poor applies to all family situations. The effect is enhanced for single-parent families, and for very large families.

Table 3

Poverty rate and degree of poverty for families with children

| | Poverty rate | | Degree of Poverty | |
|--|-----------------|----------------|-------------------|----------------|
| | Before transfer | After transfer | Before transfer | After transfer |
| All couples with children | 22 | 12 | 22 | 12 |
| Couples with 1 child | 11 | 9 | 11 | 9 |
| Couples with 2 children | 15 | 9 | 15 | 9 |
| Couples with 3 children | 33 | 13 | 33 | 13 |
| Couples with 4 children + | 64 | 34 | 64 | 34 |
| Single-parent families | 46 | 27 | 46 | 27 |
| Single-parent families with 1 child | 35 | 20 | 35 | 20 |
| Single-parent families with 2 children | 46 | 28 | 46 | 28 |
| Single-parent families with 3 children | 71 | 39 | 71 | 39 |

Sources: ERF, Insee 2003, DREES, No. 555, February 2007.

Vertical redistribution of resources is particularly significant: 82% of families with three or more children receive the family income supplement, and 57% of families with children at school are in receipt of the schooling expenses allowance. Of course, family allowances are not formally designed to be redistributive, but due to the fact that they rise sharply in line with the number of children means, they become a de facto redistributive benefit. An analysis of the offsetting of the costs of children shows once again that the additional income generated by an additional child is higher for single-parent families (+ EUR 3,000 annually for the first child of a single-parent family, as opposed to EUR 1,800 for a couple).

Schooling expenses allowances, basic welfare benefits and housing benefits are highly concentrated among the poorest households. Housing benefits make a particularly significant contribution to reducing inequalities in living standards, as do all the basic welfare benefits.

Housing is the highest item of expenditure for French households and housing benefits make a significant contribution to making low-income households solvent. The highly complex calculation

⁴² The argument based on responsibility, which is found in the CERC report and also in other articles that emphasise child poverty, is worth looking at more carefully, because it implies that responsibility for poor households would fall firstly upon the poor persons themselves. It ought to be, at the least, a responsibility shared between individuals and states, or, more generally, the social systems within which these individuals live. Should we argue that the poor elderly persons of the 1960s were responsible for their own situation?

method takes into account many factors, including family size. The average affordability ratio for recipients buying homes varies significantly according to the family structure. It ranges from 32.9% for single persons to 22.3% for couples with three or more children, and is 25.9% for couples with two children⁴³. The same finding applies to rental housing benefit: whereas the average affordability ratio for recipients renting accommodation is 17.3%, it rises to 24.6% for single people and falls to 10.4% for couples with three or more children. For single-parent families, it is 13.9%.

2.2.2. Redistribution is sometimes reversed

While redistribution clearly protects poor families with children, the systems in place also result in an almost complete reverse transfer of resources back to families on a more comfortable income, which caused the authors of the report on the vulnerability of families to observe that 'regardless of the make-up of the family, it is the case that in French families with children under three years old, the higher their income, the more assistance they receive'. This situation is due to the existence of various mechanisms, including the 'quotient familial' system, which reduces income tax in line with the number of children and brings about both horizontal redistribution (from those with no children to those with children), and also inverse vertical redistribution (from the poorest families to the richest families).

It is mainly the most well-off families who have home-based childcare. Disparities are also considerable in terms of child-minders. The use of crèches seems to be determined to a lesser extent by income level. We know that restricted childcare options are a burden mainly for the poorest households. By contrast, tax reductions linked to children concern mainly the most well-off households. There is a dual mechanism which benefits the two extremes of income distribution: on the one hand benefits, particularly housing benefits, which help the poorest households with children, and on the other hand tax benefits, which benefit the most well-off.

2.2.3. Single-parent families and very large families: the limits of redistribution

Despite the size of the transfer of resources to their benefit, two groups of families with children have a significantly higher level of poverty. Families with an above average child/adult ratio account for almost all the excess child poverty in relation to the population as a whole. The number of children under 18 living in single-parent families is approximately 2.5 million, whereas the number of children living in families with four or more children is approximately 340,000.

Although there are fewer single-parent families than couples with children, 55% of them were in receipt of low income benefits, with less than 719 euros of disposable monthly income per unit of consumption at the end of 2003.⁴⁴ Only 18% of couples with children are in this situation. A proportion of these single-parent families receive basic welfare benefits. In December 2003, one-parent benefit was being paid to 185,000 families and RMI to 259,000 recipients. We can therefore deduce that nearly one third of single-parent families are dependent on a basic welfare benefit. As regards childcare, at present 31% of single mothers, because of their lower incomes, mainly use crèches as against 20% of couples where both parents work, while 19% of the former pay a child-minder as opposed to 41% of the latter. While we stated above that the employment rate for single mothers was particularly high because of this access to various forms of childcare, it is nonetheless true that this group has the highest rates of

⁴³ Sources: National Family Allowances Fund (CNAF), Directorate of statistics, studies and research (DSER), and the Ecole Nationale d'Administration (ENA) 2001.

⁴⁴ CNAF, *l'essentiel*, No 33, January 2005.

unemployment, while large families and single-parent families experience significant difficulties in achieving a life-work balance⁴⁵.

Of the 1.5 million single-parent families, less than a third are on basic welfare benefits. This means that the majority of the others are in employment. Because of their low level of qualifications, many of these women are likely to be in part-time jobs of just a few hours per week and are among the ranks of poor workers. Low wages, low basic welfare benefits and difficult working conditions are a heavy burden upon this category and result in higher numbers of poor children.

Overall, in Europe, the poverty rate increases with the number of children — and this is true in France, where the poverty rate is 13.1% for households with one child, 11.8% for households with two children and 32.9% for households with three or more children. Unlike single-parent families, poverty in families with four children is more often a problem of qualifications and access to the employment market. The poverty rate for children of families from outside the EU is significantly higher than others. The explanation most often put forward is that of the extent of discrimination in the employment market affecting these families. In a family with at least five children, the risk of poverty is four times higher than that of a family with an only child. Whether we look at reduced comfort levels, home ownership rate, spending on health, holidays taken or rates of repeating a year at school, for very large families all the indicators are in the red.⁴⁶

Over the years, although the number of benefits has increased, they have become less effective in making families solvent. From the mid-1990s onwards, the indexation of the ceilings for means-tested benefits on the basis not of salaries, as previously, but on the consumer price index, has had a detrimental effect on the recipient families. This has led to a gradual decrease in family income in relation to income from employment. While this strategy, designed to promote employment as opposed to social redistribution, has contributed to an overall stimulation of the employment market, it still creates difficulties for those families most exposed to poverty, which are single-parent families and very large families. This issue of welfare benefits being less able to ensure solvency is particularly marked in the case of housing, which is subject to a dual pressure. Since 1998, housing benefit has gone up more for each additional child, but this rise has been offset by the fall in the overall level of housing benefit. Finally, the high increase in renting or buying property, particularly in urban areas, reduces the disposable income of these large families who need large homes, and this also applies to single-parent families, who offset the burden of housing costs with a small number of consumption units.

2.2.4. *Proposals by research bodies and voluntary organisations*

Research reports and voluntary organisations set out various ways in which to tackle the issue of child poverty. In the first instance, the authors of the proposals confirm the need to prioritise the goal of reducing or eliminating child poverty. The proposal for a commitment to reduce the number of poor children by 50% within 3 years and to zero by 2015 is often quoted.

Several proposals involve increasing welfare benefits, and specifically basic welfare benefits for children. As a rule, many proposals mention the need to take greater account of children in the procedures for allocating various types of assistance, whether it be universal medical coverage (CMU) or the employment bonus. CERC suggests that a family allowance should be introduced (possibly on a

⁴⁵ *Conciliation et revenus*, in: 'Études et résultats', No 465, DREES, February 2006.

⁴⁶ Steck, P., *Les familles nombreuses: clé de la politique familiale française ou verrou?*, in: 'Informations sociales', No 115, pp.120-130.

means-tested basis) for families with one child only. As regards the relationship between basic welfare benefits and employment income, the most innovative proposal comes from the report by the Commission on the Vulnerability of Families, and aims to replace the various basic welfare benefits with an employment support income that would guarantee a real increase in income for recipients of basic welfare benefits when they take up employment. This proposal is currently being tested in various ways by the *département* councils.

Another set of proposals deals with creating a better balance between work and family life by increasing and improving access to early childhood services. Among families in receipt of a basic welfare benefit, only 1 school-age child in 10 attends after-school care, compared with 1 in 3 on average for children with both parents in employment. Similarly, one child in 20 from the first category attends a cultural and sports activities centre on Wednesdays, as opposed to 1 in 10 from the second category.

Reducing the inequality in assistance for the first, second or third child would be a step towards genuine children's rights as understood by the International Convention on the Rights of the Child.

2.2.5. *Poor children, vulnerable children*

Shortly after the Second World War, the issue of children at risk was tackled head on by the law-makers, settling a debate that had begun in the late 19th century with the introduction and then the opposition to child prisons. In 1945, law-makers viewed children who had been abused or young delinquents as victims to be protected and educated, and developed two systems, according to whether the child was the victim of attack or in a state of delinquency.

The youth welfare system takes on a child protection role wherever a child is in danger because of violent acts, threats to their physical or mental health, abandonment, neglect, abuse or exploitation. Since 1986, responsibility for these services has been entrusted to the county (*département*) councils. This includes educational activities, which may be carried out in the home or in a neutral environment, and placement measures. At the end of 2004, the number of children aged under 18 involved in at least one measure was approximately 255 000, which is 1.8% of those aged under 18.

At the time of the reform of the child protection system, it was proposed that the interests of the child should be defined as 'protecting the child's security and intellectual and emotional development', which would have been more in line with both the philosophy of children's rights and children's well-being. In the end, the law-makers decided not to opt for this change, but instead to stick to the choices made earlier by French law, 'namely the place of the child within a system of protection of which the family is the first guarantor, and not a system focused on the rights of the person, making the courts into arbiters between the rights of children and the rights of parents [...]. Nor does the new approach [...] provide an answer to the question of how far behavioural difficulties, running away and truancy are manifestations of problems which fall within the scope of child protection'⁴⁷.

The law of 5 March 2007 reforming child protection places the interests of the child, respect for his or her rights and consideration of his or her fundamental needs at the heart of the system. The law was based on various different reports. It was also the product of an extensive consultation which took place nationally, within the framework of days on different topics, and locally, the chairpersons of the *département* councils having been invited to organise debates with all the stakeholders. The law has three objectives: stepping up prevention, improving the warning and alert system, and diversifying

⁴⁷ See report by the National Observatory for Children at risk (ONED), p 7, op.cit.

methods of intervening with children and their families. The prevention of risk situations is explicitly listed as one of the tasks of child protection. The Mother and Child Welfare and school nurse systems have been given a greater role in this field. Key moments for prevention have been identified during the perinatal period and during childhood: the new law makes the interview in the fourth month of pregnancy compulsory and has introduced new medical visits at the ages of 9, 12 and 15.

The improvement in the warning and alert system is based on the creation in each *département* of a unit responsible for receiving, handling and assessing information of concern. The role of the chairs of the *département* councils as leading players in child protection has been confirmed, and in setting up these units, they will draw up protocols together with the legal authorities, state-run services and institutional partners involved. The units will also enable information to be shared between professionals, within a strictly managed framework and subject to professional confidentiality, for the purpose of evaluating a specific situation and establishing what protection measures need to be implemented. An observatory based in the *département*, working in conjunction with the ONED, will be a means of providing more information on child protection in the *département*. Finally, the law introduces new procedures for intervention in families, such as advice on home economics and handling finances. It also introduces new approaches to taking children into care, with flexible care formulas, geared to the needs of children, such as day care or periods of care.

Since February 1945, following a decree on childhood delinquency which created a special legal system for minors delivered by specialised judges and jurisdictions, based on rules and procedures separate from those in use for adults and gave priority to prevention and education, institutional rehabilitation has been used to deal with juvenile delinquents, children at risk and young adults aged under 21. In 2004, 193,000 children and young adults under 21 were dealt with in courts for minors (59% being children at risk and 41% delinquents). There is considerable debate regarding this legislation and it is possible that it may be reformed over the next few months and made tougher.

2.3. The PNAI [national action plan on inclusion], an investment in the margins

The issue of child poverty is only mentioned briefly in the first two French PNAIs, for 2001-03 and 2003-05. The third PNAI places greater emphasis on child poverty, not in financial terms, but in terms of living conditions. A major theme of the PNAI is improving employment opportunities for women who are mothers. The PNAI states that 'family responsibilities can also make it more difficult to return to the employment market, mainly for women. 81% of recipients of the API who are not looking for a job state problems with childcare as the reason. This is why the law on 'return to work for recipients of basic welfare benefits' introduces priority access to establishments and services providing care for young children aged under 6 for children of parents who receive RMI, API or ASS and are in work, when they are single parents or have a spouse who is also in employment'.

The PNAI places quite a strong emphasis on help for young people suffering from educational exclusion. The main initiative is the 'educational success' programme, which aims to help 200,000 children and adolescents experiencing serious difficulties at school over a five-year period, between reception class and the end of mandatory schooling. The actions, which are based on traditional educational support, have been set the ambitious target to produce a shift in professional practices, coordinate all those involved, set up genuine individual monitoring of the children identified, while setting aside a specific role for families. The PNAI states that 'prevention of social exclusion also requires the support of parents. This is why the law on equal opportunities of 31 March 2006 created a parental responsibility contract. The contract is the responsibility of the *département* councils, working in consultation with the educational services, and sets out objectives for the parents and describes the

social action system which will be implemented. If the contract is not adhered to, certain allowances may be suspended'. The proposed law on prevention of delinquency, currently being debated in the National Assembly, will complement this provision by rolling out, within the more local context of town councils, forums for dialogue between the councils and the families, and providing advice and support to parents in their role as educators.

Other measures have been introduced in the same vein of building up community initiatives for integration. For example, the number of town ombudsmen has been doubled and school and university guidance systems have been improved. On this point, a public guidance service was set up for the beginning of the 2006/07 academic year. 'Also with a view to promoting true equal opportunities, scholarship pupils in the final year of lower secondary school who obtain a mark of 'good' or 'very good' in the national lower secondary school certificate are awarded a scholarship for excellence and may choose which upper secondary school to attend'.

10,000 students from the top teacher training schools will be given the opportunity to work as tutors for 100,000 pupils in priority education, with priority for the technical schools. In order to promote access to work experience placements for young people from immigrant families, an operation called 'target work experience' will be set up in 2007. It will apply to pupils in ZEPs, whether they are in the last year of lower secondary school or in vocational training. The system will be based on a 'contract of trust' between the educational establishments and the local business partners.

The latest PNAI mentions the development of apprenticeships. It involves, specifically, 'the implementation of the junior apprenticeship, which is a new training path offered to 14 to 16 year-olds choosing to prepare directly for their entry into the world of work. These pupils, who are usually not comfortable within the secondary school educational structure, nonetheless have a specific personal and professional future in mind. Throughout their training, they will be closely monitored and the path upon which they embark will be specially chosen and tailored (individual educational plan), as well as being reversible (right to go back to education at secondary school at the request of the pupil) and accompanied by an individual tutor'.

Other measures relate to access to culture, sports and leisure, the introduction of the leisure and culture passport or the 'gates of time' operations. The PNAI also provides for support for voluntary organisations which promote access for children and young people from disadvantaged urban areas to regular organised participation in sporting, cultural and leisure activities in order to encourage social integration.

Little work has been done on the issue of young people's health, as demonstrated by the law of 9 August 2004 on health policy, which only deals marginally with the issue of young people's health, aside from the need to remove drinks vending machines in educational establishments and to provide information on the risks around consumption of tobacco, alcohol and drugs. The 2004 conference on families emphasised these approaches.

In fact, it is local planning policies which have made a significant effort, through various local youth projects or countryside projects, to make progress in the field of health policies, as well as in employment, leisure and community life.

2.4. Rights of the child and obligations

2.4.1. *Rights of the child or rights of the poor child*

Since France ratified the International Convention on the Rights of the Child, there has been no specific national action programme to promote and implement this commitment. A very large number of bodies and a very large number of texts, however, have restated this commitment, which goes back to 1990. The voluntary sector and non-governmental organisations were initially mobilised around the creation of the French Council of Voluntary Organisations for the Rights of the Child (Cofrade) in 1992. Following the creation of a committee to investigate the situation of children's rights by the National Assembly in 1997 and the Hermange report in 2002, the National Assembly took the step of setting up a 'children's parliament', closely linked with some 500 municipal children's councils throughout France. A 'children's ombudsman' was also introduced by the law of 6 March 2000. This is an independent person, initially appointed for 6 years, with the new appointment having taken place in 2006. The 'Child-Friendly Towns' initiative launched by Unicef France and the association of French town councils, brings together nearly 150 towns who have signed up to a charter designed to promote measures to support children and young people.

Since the early 2000s, public debate on childhood has sometimes been flavoured with a desire to 'bring childhood back into line', by encouraging pedagogical approaches and educational practices which place the emphasis on early forms of social integration, adapting to institutions and respect for the established order. The law adopted in 2006 on the prevention of delinquency, Inserm studies on the medical approach to early behavioural difficulties, and the way in which school and the justice system have come closer together – evidence of which is provided, for example, by the agreements between education inspectorates and the public prosecutor's office for minors – are all factors that create a climate of suspicion towards young people. The media spotlight that often tends to depict young people in terms of educational failure or problem districts is combined with political debate on the need to strengthen integration procedures, and this is often experienced as an inappropriate approach by young people who have, in many cases, lived in France all their lives.⁴⁸

The equal opportunities law of 31 March 2006 introduced a parental responsibility contract. This contract establishes a link between problems of school truancy, problems caused for the running of school or any other problem linked to an alleged lack of parental authority. 'The system seems to rest upon the premise that these difficulties are caused by the children and the failure of their families to educate them, without setting out the principle of an in-depth analysis of the problem identified.'⁴⁹

In the same vein, the bill on the prevention of delinquency introduces a council for the rights and duties of families, convened by the mayor. Its main task is to make recommendations to the family designed to prevent behaviour that is liable to place the child at risk or to cause problems for others.

⁴⁸ See Duru-Bellat, M., *Les effets de la ségrégation sociale de l'environnement scolaire: l'éclairage de la recherche*, Débat national sur l'avenir de l'école, <http://www.debatnational.education.fr/upload/static/lemiroir/pdf/apport2.pdf>

⁴⁹ ONED report, p. 17.

3. Evaluation and monitoring of policies to combat family and child poverty: a duplicated and fragmentary monitoring system

For nearly three years now, policies to combat poverty have been more regularly monitored as part of the work of parliament and assemblies. France's Economic and Social Council has carried out regular monitoring of the Lisbon process and has incorporated into its programme a regular examination of the social cohesion indicators and implementation of the PNAI. Several months ago, the Prime Minister entrusted the national committee for combating exclusion (CNLE) with ongoing monitoring of the PNAI. As regards the social cohesion plan that came into operation in 2005, a monitoring committee has been set up, which produces regular evaluation reports. The second public meeting set up with the help of the national conferences on poverty and exclusion was held in 2006. If we examine the system as a whole, we see that the issue of child poverty is still quite clearly marginal.

The conferences on the family, which were set up in 1996, deal fairly regularly with the subject of the impact of policies and family allowances. Here too, issues of child poverty do not appear to have a central role.

While the premises of the first report from the CERC on poor children, which alluded to the lack of studies, research and more general data on poor children, still hold true, this shortcoming is not due to a lack of tools for investigating the child population, but rather to an absence of direct attention to the problem. It would probably only take a slight redirection of attention to provide us with a large quantity of information. However, a body of specific research is probably needed and, from this viewpoint, the conclusions of the round table of the 'poor children in France' symposium also still hold true despite certain recent advances.

3.1. An effective system for monitoring childhood issues

The system relies mainly on certain major producers of public data, including INSEE, whose overview document entitled *Données sociales* [Social data], published every three years, is a major point of reference and contains many articles on the situation of children. Similarly, major national surveys can be used as a source of data on income poverty in children, via the *Enquête Revenus Fiscaux* [taxable income surveys] or indications concerning poverty in terms of living conditions.

In the social sector, DREES, which was developed about ten years ago out of a statistics service, now plays a dominant and recognised role in the production of health and social statistics. Between 3 and 5 times per month, DREES publishes the main summaries of data from the front line in issues of *Études et Résultats*. Since the beginning of 2007, 11 out of 24 issues of *Études et Résultats* dealt with subjects connected with children and young people.

Other statistical services, perhaps more specialised, also produce information in this sphere, the main service being the evaluation, forward planning and performance directorate (DEPP) within the Ministry of National Education, Higher Education and Research, whose yearly assessments carried out in the second year of primary school and the first year of secondary school we are familiar with. The Ministry of Youth, Sport and Social participation is also responsible for carrying out observational and statistical studies. We should also mention the justice and culture research services, which produce information on children and young people.

Alongside these services, CNAF plays a dominant role in the shape of the work carried out by its studies and research department on the basis of the administrative data on the various benefits. Every month, the 4-page leaflet *l'essentiel*, published on the internet, reports on the studies carried out and the main data available. *Recherches et Prévisions* (Research and Forecasts), a publication aimed at the research world, and *Informations sociales*, aimed more at professionals, are the body's two other journals, and a first issue on poor children was published in 1999.

In the voluntary sector, it is worth drawing attention to the role played by UNAF. Its studies and research section coordinates a huge network of family observatories in the *départements* and produces various overview documents based on this work. Associations such as the *Fondation pour l'enfance* [Childhood Foundation] also produce a wealth of material.

Finally, it is important to mention the many observatories which specialise in childhood issues. The findings produced regularly by the following organisations will be followed with interest:

- The European Observatory on Violence in Schools, a study centre for research into the phenomena of violence in schools and urban violence. It is attached to the department of educational science at Victor Segalen Bordeaux 2 university (France), and is headed by Dr Catherine Blaya. (E-mail: obsviolence@aol.com).
- The public interest group (PIG) *Enfance en danger* [Children at Risk], which covers two services: the national telephone helpline for children suffering abuse (Snatem), established by the law of 10 July 1989, and ONED (National observatory for children at risk), created by the law of 2 January 2004. The *Enfance en danger* PIG brings together the state, the *départements* and voluntary child protection organisations. The PIG's board of trustees, to which all decisions are referred, includes representatives from 10 ministries, 15 representatives from the *départements* and 5 child protection associations (<http://oned.gouv.fr/presentation-gipem.htm>).
- The childhood/family commission of the Observatory on Social Intervention for the *Départements* (ODAS) is made up in the first instance of representatives from 16 *départements*, as well as from the Ministries of Employment and Social Cohesion, Justice, National Education, and representatives from the voluntary sector. Every year since it was established, ODAS has collected data from the *départements* on reports of children at risk. The findings are published in the fourth quarter in a letter from ODAS. The various research carried out has led to the publication of a methodological guide to the observation of children at risk, a second edition of which was published in June 2001.

Finally, one could add to this already lengthy list the activities of various different study and research centres, which sometimes work on the area of poverty, but more often on the diversity of living conditions of families and children: many research groups at the National Centre for Scientific Research (CNRS), the teacher training institutions, Inserm's study centres and those of the educational sciences sector produce a large number of works every year.

3.2. Directions for future work

In its two most recent reports on the subject, and more specifically in the report entitled '*Estimer la pauvreté des enfants* (*Assessing child poverty*)'⁵⁰, CERC stresses the need for greater convergence between European, national and regional approaches to child poverty. CERC recommends that instead of creating a new body, practices should be harmonised on the basis of existing tools, which would seem to be the best alternative. The National Observatory on Poverty and Social Exclusion (ONPES), which already includes representatives of Insee, DREES and other research bodies and associations, ought to be able to develop this work further.

In early 2007, at the request of the Prime Minister, DREES and ONPES, in association with CNLE (National council for the fight against exclusion), devised a set of indicators which need to be monitored and published regularly. Of the main indicators chosen, several relate more specifically to children and young people in poverty:

- rate of income poverty at the 60% threshold for under 18s;
- rate of income poverty at the 60% threshold by type of household and number of children;
- rate of poor living conditions by type of household;
- percentage of obese children;
- percentage of overcrowded housing by family structure;
- percentage of young people leaving school without any qualifications;
- percentage of pupils with basic skills in French and maths at the end of primary school.

These indicators should appear in the poverty report published regularly by ONPES.

The project to monitor a cohort of children (approximately 20,000) born in 2008 is an exciting long-term project, which should provide genuinely new information about the socialisation and integration of children.

These developments are based on the assumption that work will be done at the same time on resolving several technical aspects, which would make it possible to get a better picture of the poverty of families with children. It is likely that the majority of scales used underestimate the cost of children, especially when the child is brought up in a single-parent family. In addition, the intervals in the scale do not take into account the order of birth of the child among the siblings, which means that the hypothesis of equal distribution among the children of the family remains to be validated.

The problem of age terminology has not been dealt with very well. Sometimes data is produced on the basis of a 0 to 16 age group; in other cases, childhood is seen as continuing until the age of 25; other sources produce data which includes the year in which the person turns 18. The intermediate categories are not very clearly defined either. These could be broken down into 3-year age groups: 0-2, 3-5, 6-8, 9-11, 12-14 and 15-17. Finally, the period from the child's conception to its birth could also be more clearly included.

A firmer intention to illuminate the issue of the poverty of children or families with children will probably be required, rather than plans to devise new tools for measuring the problem more accurately.

⁵⁰ CERC, *Estimer la pauvreté des enfants*, dossier No 2, June 2005.

Finally, there are two possible approaches to the decision to produce information which treats each member of the family or household individually. The first is to carry out very detailed investigative work on the ways in which families and households function, in order to reach a better understanding of how resources are allocated within the family group. This would allow us to engage in genuine discussion about child poverty. If the opposite approach is taken, the risk is that information about the family or household as will be taken as a whole and applied artificially to each of the members making up the unit on the basis of a mechanical scale. This option does not seem to us to be entirely satisfactory, particularly as it is likely to accentuate, at least in France, the simplified concept of the poor child that already exists. The second risk would be to analyse child poverty in a way that is disconnected from the family models within which these children live.

The first approach to child poverty seems to us to be useful in so far as it places the emphasis on the characteristics peculiar to individual children, such as their education, state of health and cultural consumption. Finally, it is worth mentioning that we have very few studies in which children are called upon to give an opinion on the measures that affect them most directly as they perceive them.

In terms of future research programmes, we can only endorse the conclusions reached by the 2003 CERC symposium round table⁵¹, to the effect that an integrated research approach on childhood and adolescence should be promoted and deploring the fact that the approaches of the different disciplines are not better coordinated.

⁵¹ Speech by Mireille Elbaum at the closing round table of the symposium.

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The most relevant of the main publications on this subject are:

Études et Résultats, a regular publication by DREES in which a high number of sections deal with issues relating to child poverty.

The CNAF publication *Informations sociales*, four issues in particular:

- *Enfants pauvres, pauvres enfants*, in: 'Informations sociales', No 79, Paris, 1999.
- *Les mesures du bien être*, in: 'Informations sociales', No 114, Paris, 2004.
- *Familles nombreuses et grandes familles*, in: 'Informations sociales', No 115, Paris, 2004.
- *Coût de l'enfant et budget des familles*, in: 'Informations sociales', No 137, Paris, 2007.