

LIMEN

Journal of the International Network for Immigration Research

7–8 (2023/1–2)



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for Immigration Research
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P. O. Box 155, H-1518 Budapest, Hungary
info@migraciokutato.hu

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Frontispiece:

Warning sign near the US-Mexico border, Arizona. Photo: shutterstock.com

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Lectori Salutem!

When we launched Limen as the journal of the Migration Research Institute (MRI) in 2020, our main goal was to increase the number of our English-language publications to support the internationalization of the institute. In the past four years, we met and collaborated with numerous leading scholars of immigration studies and its related disciplines. Their contributions not only increased the relevance and academic merit of Limen, but also helped us to build a network which can give a new impetus to our activities.

In November 2023, MRI and four other research centers established the International Network for Immigration Research (INIR). The members of INIR consider immigration a topic that should be assessed with a multifaceted approach that takes into account both the benefits and the challenges. The members of the network share the principle that host countries are sovereign nation states with the right to pursue and enforce their chosen immigration policies that reflect the perspectives of their societies. Instead of merely making normative declarations based on an ideologically driven approach dominated by a strong humanitarian agenda, member organizations address the political, social, economic, and security considerations of immigration in order to develop realistic, long-lasting and responsible policy on this crucial issue.

To further their aims, the members of INIR decided to form an international advisory board for Limen that will serve as a publishing platform for multidisciplinary research and scholarship on migration and its related phenomena. In this double issue, the experts of INIR are elaborating on topics that were raised at the first joint workshop held by the network in Budapest in 2023. The timely issues covered include a rethinking of the international asylum system, the instrumentalization of migration, the shifts in the political preferences of the Hispanic population of the United States, and the challenges posed by immigration and integration in France.

Budapest, 28. 06. 2024

Viktor MARSAI PhD
Executive Director
Migration Research Institute

Integration and demographic challenges in France: an overview

Nicolas Pouvreau-Monti

Abstract

As one of the first countries in Europe to have experienced substantial non-European immigration, France can be considered as a relevant study case to comprehend issues related to economic and cultural integration of immigrants and their descendants, as well as the demographic challenges at stake. Indeed, the demographics of France are being rapidly transformed by immigration, due to the combined effect of two factors: the acceleration in migratory flows on the one hand, and the different birth rates among immigrants on the other. This paper assesses the impacts of those measurable trends on several aspects of French society: public finances, housing, wages, crime and delinquency, as well as broader social cohesion.

Keywords: demographic change, integration, birthrate, social cohesion, housing, wages, crime

Introduction

Early in the summer of 2023, European media were hit with footage of violent riots in France following the death of a young French-Algerian shot by a policeman after a hit-and-run offence. French public opinion widely understood these events as a striking sign of the failures of integration and immigration policies over the last decades. According to opinion polls, up to 74% of the French now say they agree with the idea that there are “too many immigrants” in France.¹

How did the country get to this point? Ultimately, the news footage of Paris burning offered a condensed picture of lingering social strife and tensions rooted in the (recent) past. Immigration is an undercurrent to much in public life in France today, and the 2023 incident was a flashpoint to forcibly bring the issues to the surface. Understanding the events is possible only through their contextualization in the current dynamics of immigration. Summarizing and analyzing the trends regarding both “first-generation” influxes and “second-generation” births on

¹ COHEN 2023.

French soil help appraise the impacts of immigration on several major fields of French social life, including crime and social cohesion.

Demographic winter

Along with the UK, France was among the first European countries to experience massive non-European immigration, beginning in the 1960s with mostly temporary labor migration. By the late 1970s, however, family reunification policies changed drastically both the scale and nature of non-European immigration. Coming mostly from North Africa, Sub-Saharan Africa and Turkey, the new arrivals settled down in the country. The dynamic thus established continues to this day.

To understand the full demographic impact of immigration, we have to look at it from a broader perspective: that of *demographic winter*.² This concept covers the stark reality of many developed countries in Europe: since the end of the post-WWII demographic revival (known as the baby boom), fertility levels have persistently stayed below the threshold for generational replacement, or 2.1 children per woman in countries with good health profiles.

This long-term decline in fertility in Europe has coincided with a strong population growth on the neighboring continent of Africa. The average fertility rate in Africa was 4.18 children per woman in 2023, double the level of population renewal. Twice as many children are born every year in Nigeria alone than in all the countries of the European Union combined.³ Having already doubled since 1990, the population of the African continent is expected to grow by another billion by 2050, from 1.4 to 2.4 billion,⁴ about half of whom will be under the age of 25.⁵

The result is a symmetrically reversed situation on the two sides of the Mediterranean Sea: the world's oldest continent (Europe) is face to face with the world's youngest continent (Africa). Today, 40% of the African population is under 15, compared to 16% in the European population. At the same time, almost 20% of the European population is aged 65 or over, compared to just 3.6% in the African population.⁶

² We owe this concept to Professor Gérard-François Dumont, geographer, economist, demographer and member of the Steering Committee of the *Observatoire de l'immigration et de la démographie*. OBSERVATOIRE DE L'IMMIGRATION ET DE LA DÉMOGRAPHIE 2021a.

³ For births in Nigeria, see INED 2022a. For births in the EU, see INSEE 2024a.

⁴ INED 2022b.

⁵ AGENCE FRANÇAISE DE DÉVELOPPEMENT 2019.

⁶ INSEE 2023a.

For a long time, France seemed to represent a relative exception among European nations, with a fertility level often close to the population replacement threshold. Unfortunately, the Western European nation no longer has this reassurance: the total fertility rate in France fell from 2.03 children per woman in 2010 to 1.68 last year. 2023's natural balance, i.e. the difference between live births and deaths, reached the lowest level since 1946 (+47,000, i.e. virtually zero), a rate that is a sixth of that recorded in 2006.⁷

However, it is important to emphasize that *demographic winter* as an umbrella term for France conceals very different realities, contrasting trends even, depending on the population segment. This is particularly true when we look at the breakdown of births by the parents' place of birth. If we take the year 2000 as our chronological reference point:

Between 2000 and 2022, the annual number of births to couples where both parents were born in France fell by 22% – almost by a quarter; during the same period, births to couples where at least one parent was born outside the EU rose by 40%, and those to both parents born outside the EU rose by 72%.⁸

This means that we are observing contradictory fertility dynamics: the native birth rate is contracting sharply, while the birth rate from non-EU immigrants is increasing very significantly. This is reflected in the distribution of births in 2022: almost a third (29%) of all children born in France that year had at least one parent born outside the European Union.⁹

To make sense of these facts, it is important to understand the combined effect of two explanatory factors: the acceleration in migratory flows on the one hand, and the different birth rates among immigrants on the other.

Explanatory factor: migratory flow acceleration

Let us start with the acceleration in migratory flows which can be seen in a number of indicators¹⁰. Between 1997 and 2023, the annual number of first residence permits issued by France increased by 172%. The year 2023 marked a new record in this respect, with 323,000 first residence permits granted. By definition, these

⁷ INSEE 2024b.

⁸ INSEE 2023b.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ OBSERVATOIRE DE L'IMMIGRATION ET DE LA DÉMOGRAPHIE 2024.

residence permits concern people from countries outside the European Economic Area. It should be pointed out that this total does not include the British (who had to regularize their situation after Brexit) or Ukrainians in 2022 (who have temporary European protection status). Neither does it include immigrants below the age of 18 who are not required to hold a residence permit.

In total, under Emmanuel Macron's presidency almost 2 million first residence permits have been granted since 2017 to immigrants from outside Europe (EU/Switzerland/UK). This is also a record. Admittedly, not all immigrants with such permits will settle permanently in France. However, INSEE tells us that, on average, for each immigrant leaving France, more than 4 have settled in the country over the last fifteen years. Also on average, the annual number of first residence permits granted under Emmanuel Macron has been 26% higher than under François Hollande and 45% higher than under Nicolas Sarkozy, his two predecessors in the presidency.

The breakdown of new residence permits according to nationality has remained unchanged in recent years: most applicants are from Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia, with a number of Sub-Saharan countries also featuring prominently.

There are additional instruments that allow us to approach the amplification of migratory flows in France. One of these is of course the dynamics of asylum: between 2009 and 2023, the annual number of first-time asylum applications lodged in France rose by 245%. The country received 42,000 in 2009 and 145,000 in 2023.¹¹ The five main countries of origin represented in the applications registered in 2023 were Afghanistan, Guinea, Turkey, Ivory Coast and Bangladesh.

According to Eurostat, a total of 825,000 first asylum applications have been registered in France under Emmanuel Macron's presidency since 2017.¹² This is a record number. The acceptance rate for asylum applications is now a little over 40%. However, even if the majority of applicants have their asylum request denied, 96% of the people rejected end up staying on French territory undocumented, according to the *Cour des Comptes*, the highest public audit institution in France.¹³

We could also talk about illegal immigration which by its nature is difficult to explore with precision, but whose upward trend can be observed through proxy indicators such as the recipients of *Aide médicale d'État* (AME), a state medical aid reserved specifically for illegal immigrants. Over the 18 years between 2004 and

¹¹ EUROSTAT 2024.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ COUR DES COMPTES 2015, 8.

2022, the number of AME beneficiaries increased by 165%,¹⁴ which attests to the more global trend in illegal immigration. The majority of registered beneficiaries come from Africa. The overall number of immigrants residing on French soil illegally is estimated between 700,000 and 900,000 by the French Ministry of the Interior. In their 2018 parliamentary report, MPs Kokouendo and Cornut-Gentile estimated that the number of illegal immigrants residing in the district of Seine-Saint-Denis (located in the northeast of Greater Paris) alone was between 150,000 and 400,000¹⁵ – which is the equivalent of a quarter of the “official” population of the area.

The acceleration in migratory flows has thus been clearly established.

Explanatory factor: birth rates in immigrant populations

According to a 2019 study that was based on birth rate data for 2014,¹⁶ Algerian immigrant women in France had an average of 3.69 children. This was not only double of the figures for non-immigrant women, but also significantly more than the fertility rate (3 children) of Algerian women residing in Algeria. The same differential applied to Tunisian, Moroccan and Turkish immigrant women: their fertility rate was between 3.12 and 3.5 children in France, whereas in their countries of origin it stayed between 2.1 and 2.4 children per woman.

Demographic studies indicate that the fertility rates of immigrants tend to fall in the next generation and gradually converge towards the average for native-born people. However, this convergence is slow, and its effects are greatly mitigated by the continuation and acceleration of new inflows. An INSEE study published at the beginning of 2023¹⁷ focused on the distribution of births among immigrant women according to the time passed since their first arrival in France. The findings were clear: the peak in the number of births occurs in the first year after the immigrant women’s arrival. It remains at a particularly high level for the next five years, then gradually declines. We might postulate that some women delay pregnancy until their immigration plans have succeeded, after which the support services offered in France encourage them to continue along this fertility path.

¹⁴ MINISTÈRE DE L’ÉCONOMIE ET DES FINANCES 2024.

¹⁵ CORNUT – GENTILE – KOKOUENDO 2018, 22.

¹⁶ HERAN – VOLANT – PISON 2019.

¹⁷ REYNAUD 2023.

The impact of these births could be seen in the demographic upheaval in the country's towns and cities, as illustrated by the data mapped by France Stratégie, a public agency related to the Prime Minister's office.¹⁸ Let us take the examples of two medium-size cities far from Paris.

In the city of Rennes and its metropolitan area, the proportion of the 0-18 population born to non-European immigrant parents multiplied by three between 1990 and 2017, increasing from 7.7% to 22.8%. By 2017, this group represented the majority in some of the city's neighborhoods – for example, in Le Blosne 51% of the 0-18 years old were children of non-European immigrants.

In Limoges, which is the main city of the very rural area of Limousin, the share of children born to non-European immigrants (one or both parents) in the 0-18 age group rose from 10.2% to 27.5% between 1990 and 2017 – a nearly threefold increase. By 2017, this group became the majority in some neighborhoods – for example, in Les Portes Ferrées 61% of the 0-18 years old were children of non-European immigrants.

Whither integration?

In light of the fast and unprecedented demographic shift that France is currently experiencing as a result of mass immigration, questions about the difficulties of integration generated by such flows undoubtedly arise. Let us mention only five areas where the challenges are most pressing: finance, housing, wages, crime, and cohesion.

1. The impact on public finances

Recent studies by the OECD¹⁹ and a French government agency²⁰ estimate the net cost (costs minus contributions) of immigration, including the impact of the first generation of immigrants' children as well as the immigrants themselves, to stand between 1.41 and 1.64 GDP points, or 35 and 40 billion euros per year.

¹⁸ OBSERVATOIRE DE L'IMMIGRATION ET DE LA DÉMOGRAPHIE 2021b.

¹⁹ OECD 2021, Chapter 4.

²⁰ CHOJNICKI – RAGOT – SOKHNA 2018.

This is due to several factors, including very high levels of unemployment and inactivity. More specifically, based on the most recent data available:²¹

41.6% of Algerians aged over 15 living in France were unemployed or inactive in 2017, a rate three times higher than that of the French;

42.7% of Moroccans were unemployed or inactive, a rate three times higher than that of the French;

47.6% of Turks were unemployed or inactive.

Nor does the issue get resolved with the next generation: the 2022 unemployment rate for people born to parents coming from Africa or Turkey was 2.5–3 times higher than among those of native French descent.²²

2. The impact on housing

In 2019–2020,²³ 57% of Sahelian African (Mali, Niger, etc.) immigrants in France lived in social housing, as did 63% of their descendants – a rate 6 times higher than for French people with no migratory ancestry. This was also the case for half of the immigrants from Algeria, Guinea and Central Africa, and 44% of Moroccan and Tunisian immigrants, compared to just 8% of Chinese immigrants.

3. The impact on native wages

Reporting findings from France, a recent academic study²⁴ demonstrates that a 1% increase in the number of workers due to immigration reduces the wages of unskilled native labor by almost 1% on average. It also reduces the wages of technicians and white-collar workers by 0.42%, and those of skilled workers by 0.33%. There is a slight positive salary effect, but it benefits only managers for whose jobs there tends to be little competition from immigrants in France because their skill levels are lower than in other Western countries.

Indeed, 34.9% of immigrants living in France in 2022 had no qualifications beyond elementary education. This rate of unqualified individuals was 2.5 times higher than the 14.2% observed among people with no migratory ancestry.²⁵

²¹ Data were supplied by INSEE. MINISTÈRE DE L'INTÉRIEUR 2020.

²² INSEE 2023c.

²³ INSEE 2023d.

²⁴ ORTEGA – VERDUGO 2021.

²⁵ INSEE 2022.

There are significant cross-group differences depending on migratory origin. In 2022, the proportion of people with no qualifications was 37.9% among immigrants from Africa in general, 54.1% among people from Sahelian Africa, and 38.4% among immigrants from the Maghreb. The figure was 54.4% for Turkey.

4. *The impact on crime and delinquency*

While foreigners (excluding dual citizens) made up 7.8% of France's population in 2022,²⁶ they accounted for 25% of prison inmates²⁷ – a representation 3 times over their demographic weight, and a 4-point increase in six years.

Algerians are the most heavily represented among foreign nationals incarcerated in France: with 20.6% in January 2022, they outnumbered the imprisoned citizens from all EU countries combined. Algerians were followed by nationals of African countries outside the Maghreb (17.2%), Moroccans (12.5%), and Tunisians (6.9%).²⁸

On January 31, 2024, the *Service statistique ministériel de la sécurité intérieure* (data department of the Ministry of the Interior) published a document titled “Unsafety and delinquency in 2023: a first snapshot”²⁹ based on delinquency incidents recorded by the national police and gendarmerie forces. The ministry's statistical service emphasizes in its summary that the implicated profiles are “younger on average than the French population, and more often of foreign nationality”. In fact, for all offenses combined, 17% of the perpetrators are foreign nationals – excluding those with dual nationality. This proportion is more than twice as high as the group's share of the general population as measured by INSEE (7.8%).³⁰ The over-representation can be as much as four to five times higher for certain categories of offense, with strong growth in recent years: foreigners account for 40% of suspects for theft from vehicles (up 22 points on 2016), 38% for burglary (up 12 points), 31% for violent theft without weapons (up 10 points).³¹ Even more enlightening, the database available for offenses committed on public transport enables us to distinguish between foreign defendants according to the nationality group to which they belong. Foreign nationals from African countries – including

²⁶ INSEE 2023d.

²⁷ MINISTÈRE DE LA JUSTICE 2023, 24.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ SSMSI 2024.

³⁰ INSEE 2023f.

³¹ SSMSI 2024.

the Maghreb and excluding those with dual nationality – represent 3.5% of France’s population, according to INSEE. In 2023, they accounted for 39% of suspects in transport offenses (13 points more than in 2016), i.e. eleven times more than their “normal” demographic weight.³²

5. *The impact on cultural cohesion*

According to opinion polls, 67% of French people are worried about the prospect of a “great replacement”,³³ a notion referring to a potential demographic overwhelming of native French and European people by non-European immigrants and their descendants. Considering how widely shunned the concept is in mainstream public spheres, this result shows how deep-seated the public’s concerns are about the scale and pace of demographic change in the country. Such unease tends to focus on Islam, as France now has the largest Muslim population in Europe due to immigration. The community keeps growing, and on average it is significantly younger than the Christian population.

Around 1 in 5 newborn boys in France are now given a Muslim first name. Islamic veil is a particularly visible marker of the trend. Between 2008-2009 and 2019-2020, the share of Muslim women who veil rose by half.³⁴ Muslim women who do not wear veils now feel more and more social pressure in some Islamic neighborhoods to start wearing it.

Today’s migratory acceleration keeps transforming France’s religious landscape. In 2021, nationals of Muslim-majority countries accounted for 72% of people benefiting from a first residence permit.³⁵ In 2022, nationals of Muslim-majority countries accounted for 61% of first-time asylum seekers in France.³⁶ The continuing growth of migratory flows thus contributes to reinforcing the demographics of Muslim populations in France.

³² Ibid.

³³ The question was part of a survey conducted by the polling agency Harris Interactive for *Challenges* magazine. Aware of the sensitivity of the issue, the magazine’s editorial team and the pollster published the question in its entirety. Its precise wording was, “Some people talk about the great replacement: “European, white and Christian populations being threatened with extinction following Muslim immigration from the Maghreb and black Africa.” Do you think that such a phenomenon will occur in France?” DE MENTHON 2021.

³⁴ INSEE 2023g.

³⁵ The Observatoire de l’immigration et de la démographie (OID) calculated the share of Muslim-majority countries from INED 2024 data.

³⁶ Ofpra 2023. Calculating the share of Muslim-majority countries was done by the OID.

Conclusions

This analysis gave readers an overview of the major migratory and demographic trends at work in France, along with the reasons why these trends are undermining public trust in democracy. If their “natural” evolution proceeds unchecked, they are bound to continue growing in the same directions. On the other hand, if political choices are made to redirect some of these trends, the scenario will obviously be much more open.

To make strong political choices in the field of immigration has become difficult, due to the heavy constraints put on policymakers both by national case law and various international treaties – especially those that form today’s EU and ECHR law. Particularly important for this discussion are the major immigration channels that have been largely removed from the field of standard democratic deliberation. The first one is family-based immigration, which has been on average the most frequent motive for first-issued residence permits in France over the last 10 years.³⁷ It is heavily protected by Article 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) sanctuarizing the “right to private and family life.” The other is asylum-claiming immigration, whose dynamic is currently the most striking. It derives from the 1951 Geneva convention on the status of refugees, and French judges have been growing ever laxer in their interpretation of the convention.

Should the need arise to recover room for maneuvering on immigration policies, those two legal fields should certainly be prime subject matters for political decision-making. As evidence covered in this paper suggests, there is such a need indeed.

³⁷ INED 2024.

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