



Population & Societies

The role of discrimination in immigrant unemployment

Version
française

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In France, immigrants and their descendants are more often unemployed than the majority population. Is this due to discrimination or are other factors, such as a lower level of education, at play? Using data from the Trajectories and Origins survey, Dominique Meurs examines the many factors influencing unemployment to assess the role of discrimination.

In France, the unemployment rate of non-European immigrants and their descendants is higher than that of the economically active population in general [1, 2, 3]. This observation, based on multiple data sources, is confirmed by the Trajectories and Origins Survey (TeO) conducted in 2008. The TeO survey (see Box) brought a new perspective to the question by asking about perceived discrimination, making it possible to explore the link between risk of unemployment and respondents' own perceptions of their treatment by prospective employers.

Immigrants and their descendants are more often unemployed

In 2008, among men aged 18-50 in the "majority population", i.e. born to French parents in metropolitan France, 10% were in education, 68% were in full-time employment, 8% were unemployed, 10% were self-employed, 2% were in part-time employment and 2% were inactive. Compared with this reference situation, a smaller proportion of non-European immigrants and their descendants were employed, a larger proportion were unemployed and, among descendants, in education (Figure 1, "raw" differences). Two types of non-European origin are shown in Figure 1: North Africa (Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia) and other world regions. The proportion in full-time employment is lower among descendants than among immigrants themselves

(a difference of almost 20 percentage points). This is because immigrants' descendants are more often unemployed (+11 points for the children of North African immigrants), but also more often in education, especially in the case of descendants from other regions (difference of +20 points).

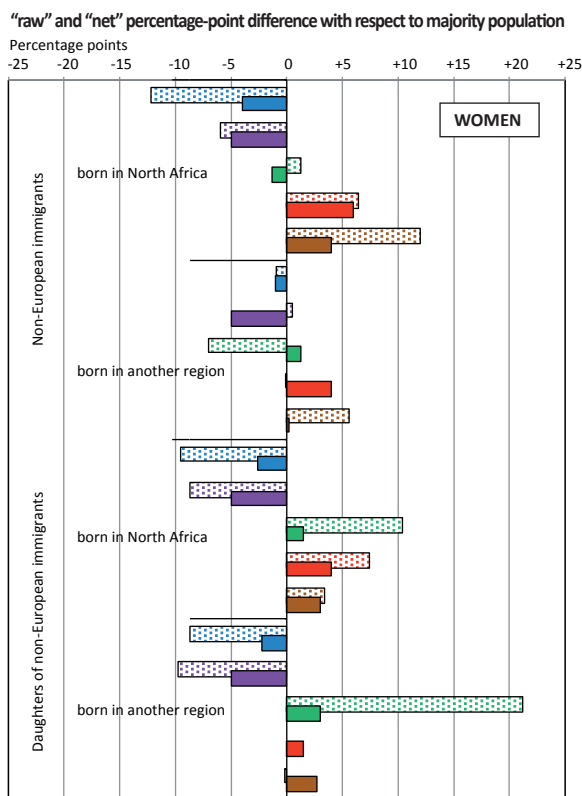
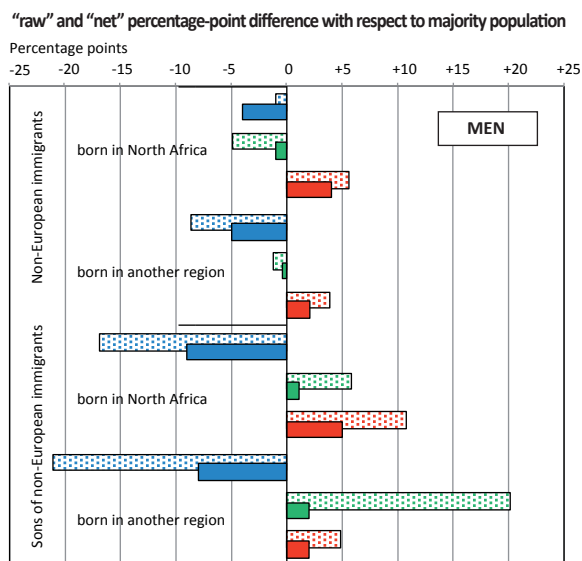
The excess unemployment of North African immigrants partly reflects their socioeconomic characteristics

Some of these differences are due to composition effects. The proportion of students in a group depends on its age distribution; as the descendants of immigrants are generally young, it is no surprise to observe a high proportion still in education. These composition effects must be taken into account when comparing differences in labour market status, all other things being equal.

The personal characteristics liable to directly affect an individual's chances of employment are age, educational level, command of French (for immigrants), possession of a driving licence and health status. We also added a set of contextual variables such as family situation (with a partner, with or without children) which may affect labour force participation, for women especially. Social origin – proxied here by the parents' social category when the respondent was 15 years old – and parents' origins (two foreign parents or one French parent) may also influence employment prospects, through the size of the parents' social networks, or through differing attitudes to education, so these variables are also included in the

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Figure 1. Variations in unemployment rate by origin



In full-time employment
 In non full-time employment
 In education
 Unemployed
 Inactive
 Raw difference
 Net difference

D. Meurs, *Population & Societies* n° 546, INED, July/August 2017.

Source: INED-INSEE, TeO survey, 2008.

Coverage: Men and women aged 18-50.

Interpretation: Among descendants of North African immigrants, the proportion of unemployed men is 11 percentage points higher (raw difference) than in the "majority group" (men born in metropolitan France to French parents); after controlling for socioeconomic characteristics (age, level of education, etc.) the difference narrows to 5 percentage points.

analysis. Nationality is also taken into account, given that access to some jobs is restricted to French citizens only [5]. Last, geographical location is also included as it is known to be an important variable in access to employment: living in a sensitive urban area (ZUS) has a negative effect [6], while living in the Paris region tends to play a positive role, given the vast size of its labour market. All these variables are entered into a regression model to estimate differences with respect to the majority group after controlling for all these structural differences. The "raw" and "net" differences are shown in Figure 1. Taking composition effects into account generally narrows the differences with respect to the majority population. For the descendants of non-European immigrants (North Africa or other regions), the positive difference in the proportion in education becomes much smaller. The very high "raw" proportion of students in this group is due mainly to an age effect. But the 4 to 5-point difference in unemployment rates remains. In other words, even after numerous variables are taken into account, the proportion of unemployed among immigrants and their descendants remains abnormally high.

North African women and their daughters are less often in employment, and more often unemployed or inactive

Women's labour market situation is more complex to describe than that of men, since part-time working and inactivity must be taken into account alongside the categories of full-time employment, unemployment, or being in education. Among women in the majority population, 46% work full-time, 20% work part-time, 7% are self-employed, 9% are unemployed, 10% are students and 8% are inactive. By comparison, immigrant women are more often inactive (+6 percentage points for non-North African and +12 points for North African immigrant women), less often students (-7 points), and less often in either full- or part-time employment (Figure 2). Female descendants of immigrants – like their male counterparts – are more often students or unemployed, and less often in wage employment than women in the majority population. Note that non-European daughters of immigrants from regions other than North Africa are not more frequently unemployed or inactive.

If the various factors of variation are taken into account, the differences narrow for all groups. However, part-time working is still less frequent among women of non-European origin, all other things being equal. If fewer of these women are employed, it is because more are unemployed (+7 points for North African women, +4 points for other non-European women) or, in the case of female North African immigrants, more are inactive (+4 points). The proportion of women in education

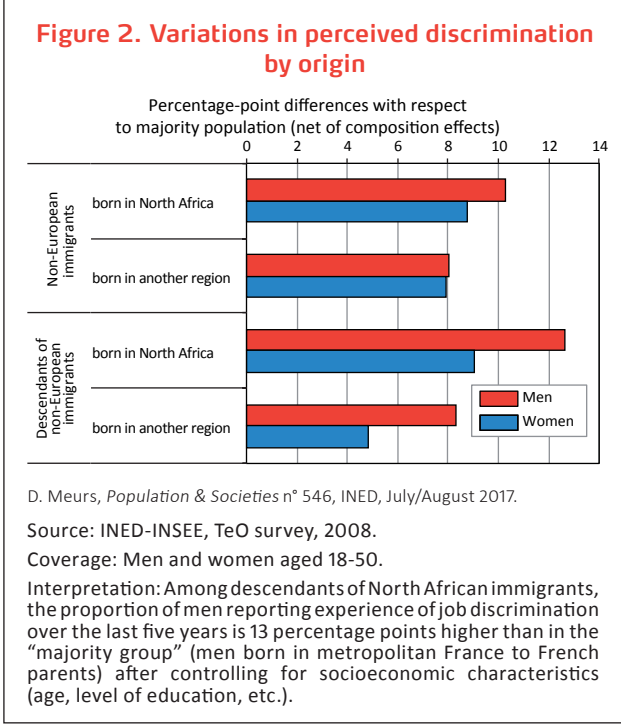
among daughters of non-European immigrants is still slightly higher than in the majority population after composition effects are taken into account. In sum, for men and women alike, and taking account of all possible labour market statuses, there is still unexplained excess unemployment among non-European immigrants and their descendants compared with the majority group. There is no clear tendency for children of immigrants to be more often in education.

Measuring perceived employment discrimination

The TeO survey is one of the rare data sources that can be used to compare measures of inequality against self-reported experience of unfair treatment linked to origin, skin colour, sex, etc. All respondents were asked to answer the following question: “During the past five years, were you ever unjustly refused employment?” and to give the perceived reasons for this refusal. Here, we consider that respondents experienced situational discrimination if they reported being unjustly refused employment for at least one of the following reasons: gender, health status or disability, skin colour, origin or nationality, way of dressing.

The proportion of respondents who reported unjust refusal of employment is higher among non-European immigrants and their descendants than in the majority population. As before, these raw findings may reflect composition effects. For example, younger people in general are more likely to be job-seekers than their elders and are more often exposed to the risk of unjust refusal, and this might explain, for example, the high percentage of North African descendants of immigrants who reported discrimination. The same variables as above were therefore taken into account to calculate the net effect of origin on self-reported discrimination, and the differences with respect to the majority population are shown in Figure 2.

The cross-group differences in individual characteristics do not explain the differences in perceived discrimination. The differences are largely positive and significant; they are highest for North African immigrants and their descendants, and more pronounced for men than for women. This reflects two combined effects. First, some groups of immigrant women and their daughters are less present on the labour market than women from the majority population and so, by construction, are less exposed to discrimination in employment. Second, women of all origins are more exposed to discrimination



than men; women in the majority population also report discrimination and differences by origin are less pronounced.

Consistency between self-reported and measured employment discrimination

It is always difficult to know whether self-reported situational discrimination reflects actual discrimination against respondents by employers. While there is a close correspondence between perceived discrimination and the groups affected by excess unemployment, all other things being equal, this does not prove that the people most exposed to unemployment are also those who most often report experience of situational discrimination. To analyse this relationship, we built a variable that reflects the extent to which each respondent’s personal characteristics match his or her position on the labour market. To this end, we estimated an individual indicator of the gap between the expected position based on personal characteristics and the position actually held. For example, in a group of economically active people, if a qualified man in good health and with a driving licence is unemployed while his counterparts practically all have a job, this signals an anomaly that might be linked to discrimination against this man. In this way, we can calculate a difference between the predicted probability based on observed characteristics (here, his probability of being active and in employment should be high) and his actual position (unemployed). The larger and more

Box. Trajectories and Origins survey (TeO), 2008

The Trajectories and Origins survey conducted by INED and INSEE in 2008, aims to describe and analyse the living conditions and social trajectories of individuals in relation to their social origins and migration history. It examines how the experience of discrimination affects the individual life course.

Around 21,000 individuals born between 1948 and 1990 living in an ordinary household in metropolitan France were interviewed. For descendants of immigrants or of persons born in an overseas département, the scope of the survey was limited to individuals born after 1958.

The TeO questionnaire explores the migration history of respondents or their parents, describes their educational and occupational trajectories, their residential history, their housing conditions, their family life and the transmission of languages and religion. On a cross-sectional basis, it examines individuals' access to goods and services (employment, housing, services, healthcare, etc.) and the discrimination they may experience in these areas. While often mentioning skin colour as a factor of discrimination, the survey did not record the respondents' own skin colour, in compliance with the recommendations of the Conseil Constitutionnel dated 15 November 2007.

To find out more: http://teo_english.site.ined.fr/

positive this difference, the greater the likelihood that the respondent is unemployed because of employment discrimination. This variable is entered into a logistic regression of perceived discrimination to estimate the correlation between the individual characteristic of being exposed to unemployment, all other things being equal, and the personal perception of situational discrimination. We find that the greater the expectation that someone "should" be in employment (and not unemployed) based on their "positive" characteristics, the more frequently they report experience of situational discrimination on the job market. We thus observe a correspondence between people's reported experience of job discrimination and the "objective" measure of injustice in their current situation. Clearly, it is useful to ask questions about perceived discrimination in surveys so that we can better understand the phenomenon and take steps to address this problem across society.

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Abstract

Analysis of data from the Trajectories and Origins survey reveals that compared to persons born in metropolitan France to French parents, North African immigrants and their descendants have higher levels of unemployment that are not explained by their socioeconomic situation (age, educational level, etc.). Discrimination in employment reported by respondents is consistent with the "objective" data: the more attractive, in theory, an unemployed respondent's profile for a prospective employer, the more likely they are to report experience of discrimination on the labour market. This finding shows that qualitative surveys on perceptions are complementary to "objective" measures of inequality, providing simple, reliable information for the study of discrimination in society.

Keywords

Immigrants, unemployment, discrimination, Trajectories and Origins survey.