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Recent demographic trends in France

Fewer births, marriages, and migrations; more deaths— COVID-19 has disrupted French population dynamics

In compliance with its official mission to inform the public on demographic issues and developments, INED publishes an annual assessment of the “demographic situation” in France that presents a detailed account of recent population trends. Within the limits of available data, the most recent of these texts focuses on the year 2020, when the world was hard hit by the start of the COVID epidemic. All components of France’s demographic dynamics were impacted: the country saw fewer births (down 17,000 from 2019) and abortions (down 10,000), fewer marriages (down 70,000), and provisional statistics suggest that fewer residence permits were issued to third-country immigrants. Conversely, the number of deaths was historically high (up 56,000). For countries throughout the world, 2020 was an exceptional year demographically. In France, the last time there were so few births was at the end of World War II.

Strong deceleration of population growth due to the health crisis

On January 1, 2021, France’s population stood at 67.4 million—120,000 more people than on January 1, 2020. But although the coronavirus did not trigger a decrease in population, it did sharply slow population growth as well as the components of that growth. Natural increase in 2020 (up 67,000) was barely greater than net migration (provisional statistics) and was actually negative in the last quarter of the year and the first quarter of 2021. Nonetheless, France’s population growth was greater than that of any other European Union country in 2020, a year in which the EU lost approximately 300,000 inhabitants. The health crisis disrupted France’s demographic dynamic but only really changed it at the margin of the age structure, causing a very slight rejuvenation.

Likely fall in number of residence permits for non-EU nationals

In 2019, the last year for which statistics are available, 257,137 persons obtained an initial residence permit valid for at least one year. This was the highest level since the year 2000. But it is only a partial indicator of immigration flows, as it does not include nationals who don’t require a residence permit: European Economic Area and Swiss nationals. Most new permit holders are young (75% are under 35, 12% under 18). In 2019, African nationals were the only group arriving from third countries to receive more permits than the previous year; they represented 61% of migration flows that year as against 59% in 2018. A highest proportion of residence permits were given for family reasons (41%), followed by education-related permits (25%), permits issued for humanitarian reasons (13%), and work-related permits (12%); however, from 2018 to 2019, permit numbers rose only in the were family, humanitarian, and occupational categories. Our counting method cannot be used to measure the effect of the health crisis on migration flows from third countries until 2022.

Still, Interior Ministry statistics suggest a sharp overall decrease in 2020 (down 21%), notably in work-related permits.

A sharp fall in births, especially 9 months after the first lockdown period

Seven hundred thirty-six thousand (736,000) children were born in France in 2020—the lowest number since 1945. The fall in birth numbers, which began over ten years ago, accelerated in 2020. The sole cause is lower fertility; number of women of childbearing age is not a factor. The number of children per woman (total fertility rate - TFR) in 2020 was 1.83, the same figure as for 1989 and 1999, though with later ages at childbirth. Despite the fall in births, France is still the most fertile country in Europe. The accelerated fall in 2020 is explained by the COVID crisis. It was concentrated in the months of November and December, i.e., 9 months after the start of lockdown: births fell 6% in November and 8% in December from the average for those months over the three previous years. The fall most strongly affected young women (under 25) and women near the end of their childbearing years (over 40).

Fewer abortions, particularly in the months following the first lockdown period

The number of induced abortions fell in 2020, to 220,000, down 4% from 2019. The decrease was particularly marked in the weeks following the first lockdown—a sign that the fall in November and December births was due above all to fewer conceptions. Abortions decreased primarily among women under 30 and for hospital procedures. The extension from 7 to 9 weeks of the legal limit for (non-hospital) medical abortions partially made up for difficulties accessing hospital abortion services during the peak of the crisis.

Weddings canceled or postponed due to health safety regulations

The number of marriages had already fallen in 2019, and published estimates for 2020 show a dramatic fall directly due to health constraints. The fall was particularly sharp from March to July 2020, and there was no real catch-up effect in the second half of year (with the exception of October, when weddings increased by 28%). Statistics for 2020 civil unions have not yet been published, but we do know that their number fell for the first time since 2011 (to 196,400) due to a fall in different-sex civil unions. Among same-sex couples, average age at marriage continued to fall for both sexes in 2019 while increasing slightly for other couples, the overall result being no change in average marrying age for either sex (37.9 years of age for men, 35.4 for women). Marriage has been declining over the generations in France: it is estimated that 49% of men and 52% of women born in the 1990s will get married at least once whereas the respective figures for the 1970 generation were 66% and 71%.

Life expectancy diminished by approximately 6 months

Six hundred sixty-eight thousand nine hundred (668,900) people died in France in 2020 (up 9.1% from 2019) and life expectancy fell by approximately 6 months (down 0.58 of a year for men, down 0.45 for women), thereby returning to 2014 levels. The excess mortality is directly due to the COVID epidemic, but the exact impact of the epidemic per se on number of deaths cannot be measured until by-cause mortality statistics for 2020 are available. Daily mortality trends that year show peaks in late March, early April, and early November, peaks much higher than those caused by seasonal flu in the preceding years. Excess mortality was higher among men and older persons, especially high among men in their 70s. It was also higher in the three French regions hardest hit by the epidemic: Grand Est, Île-de-France (including Paris), and Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes.

[Download the full article from Population 4, 2021](#)

Each year the INED journal *Population* publishes an article on the demographic situation in France that analyzes demographic trends over the course of the preceding decades. The data presented are usually not as recent as those published by INSEE in January of the given year but the longer-term perspective provides more detailed data on the

period under study and makes it possible to shed light on observed trends. Moreover, each year's article investigates a particular demographic theme or issue in still greater depth. This year the article authors drew on the most recent data available for their presentation of how the COVID pandemic has disrupted France's demographic dynamics.

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About INED:

The French Institute for Demographic Studies (Ined) is a public research institute specialized in population studies that works in partnership with the academic and research communities at national and international levels. Ined's approach to demography is resolutely open and interdisciplinary, implicating a wide range of disciplines including economics, history, geography, sociology, anthropology, biology and epidemiology. With its 10 research units and 2 research units in partnership, Ined promotes communication and exchange within the scientific community and the general public while conducting numerous European and international research projects.

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