

## FRANCE Country Summary

### Introduction and Overview

France has an explicit family policy that was shaped as a system of public social protection at the end of the 1930s, re-affirmed following World War II, and involves a rich array of child-related cash benefits and services. The cash benefits are the most extensive and generous in the world and the services among the most extensive.

Five objectives have dominated French family policy over these years:

1. "Solidarity" - to compensate families for the economic costs of child rearing;
2. Pronatalism - to encourage a higher birth rate;
3. "Social justice" - to redistribute income to low-income families with children;
4. To protect the well being of children;
5. In more recent years, to protect parental choice among family types regardless of whether parents choose to work outside the home or to remain at home to rear children.

The priorities among these goals, especially between the second and third goals have varied over time. The political "right" has continued to stress pronatalism while the "left" has emphasized social justice. At present, the social justice (and anti-poverty and anti-social exclusion) goal has come to the forefront while the pronatalist concerns have become less visible.

Multiple categorical cash benefits have been the preferred device for providing family benefits. Although the single most important family benefit is a universal family allowance, the major stress over the last two decades has been on income-tested, categorical supplements. Special allowances for orphans, handicapped children, children under age three, single parents, children entering school, and so forth have been the pattern and continue to be so. All new allowances created since the 1970s have been income-tested, and in the late 1990s an abortive effort was even made to income test the basic universal family allowance.

French national plans in the 1980s and 1990s continued the same priorities: young families, large families, poor families and working families. Current goals emphasize: supporting the rearing of the very young child; promoting the birth of the third child; reducing child poverty; facilitating the reconciliation of work and family life. Targeted on the very young child are such policies as: paid and job-protected maternity leaves for working women, which were first enacted as part of sickness insurance benefits in 1946, the allowances provided pregnant women linked to obtaining prenatal and post-natal care (now income-tested), an income-tested child-rearing allowance for those with two or more children, subsidies for in and out-of-home care for children, and a family-unit-based income tax system. In January 2001, a new family benefit was introduced, the parental attendance allowance (APP). This cash benefit is aimed at covering income foregone if a parent must leave work to care for a seriously ill child. It may last up to 4 months, is renewable for two more times, and can be shared between two parents. (It cannot be taken in addition to other parental sickness leave.)

Since 1945 when the family allowances were first established, the benefits have increased in number, in selectivity (more income-tested), in coverage (children are now covered until they are

22 and regardless of the employment status of their parents), but do not yet provide coverage of first children under the basic family allowance. However, there is strong evidence that French family policy has been successful in achieving its primary goal of horizontal redistribution (from those with no children to those with children), if not its long-term goal of reversing the downward trend with regard to the birthrate. And there is continued debate as to the effectiveness of family benefits and related policies in easing women's burdens in balancing family and employment.

French family policy, however, also includes a significant emphasis on services, in particular a universal, voluntary, and free public preschool system that covers all 3-6 year olds and almost half the 2 year olds in a very popular program, relatively high coverage and extensive subsidies for infant and toddler care, and an outstanding maternal and child health system. Care, socialization, development, and school readiness are pervasive and recurrent themes, even among programs for the very young.

In 1996 some cuts were imposed on the family benefit system, as France prepared to reduce its budget deficit and qualify for the European Monetary Unit (EMU). Family benefits were frozen. The special 9-month allowance provided during pregnancy and the first four months after birth was means-tested. On the other hand, proposals to include family benefits in taxable income and to means test family allowances were rejected. Some changes were made in the income tax system, which favors high-income families, to make it less generous to such families. The 24 different family allowances, including both universal and income-tested cash benefits, remain. Preschool programs covering all children aged 3-5 and close to half the two-year olds in a full day program, and child care services for the under 3s were sustained, but not increased. Overall, the French family benefit system is still largely a universal system. Despite high unemployment rates, severe financial pressures, efforts to reduce the budget deficit, and efforts to move towards more targeting generally including child and family benefits, thus far France has continued to protect its child and family policies. (Excluding its pre-school program, *ecole maternelle*) French family benefits and services constituted 3.5% of GDP in 1998.

## **Government Agencies**

The relevant government agencies responsible for family allowances in France are the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs, the National Family Allowances Fund with its tripartite governing body composed of representatives of employers, employees, and family organizations, and responsible for financing family allowances, and local Family Allowances Funds with responsibility for the payment of benefits. The Ministry of Education is responsible for preschool education and the Ministry of Health, for child care for the under 3s and for maternal and child health care.

## **Demographic and Other Social Trends**

France had a population of about 59 million in 2000, a little larger than Italy and slightly smaller than the UK, part of the trio following Germany, the largest of the European Union countries by far. Nineteen percent of the population is under age 15, significantly higher than the EU average but similar to Britain (Martin, 1999). The average age at first birth is now 29, not unusual in

Europe. Its teen non-marital fertility rate is negligible. Its total fertility rate declined between the 1980s and mid 1990s from 1.8 in 1985 to 1.65 in the early and mid 1990s, where it leveled off and then rose again to 1.9 in 2000.

According to Claude Martin, the French member of the European Observatory on Family matters, "Since 1965, the likelihood of divorce has quadrupled (from 10 to 40 percent in 1997). While 30 years ago just 6 percent of children were born outside marriage, the rate had rocketed to 40 percent by 1997" (Martin, 1999). Cohabiting and married couples are treated the same for income tax purposes since 1996. A new legal agreement (the Civil Solidarity Pact) was established in 1999 as a device for 'semi-formalizing' cohabitation (without legal marriage).

In the early/mid-1990s, 69 percent of married mothers were in the labor force, 82 percent of lone mothers, and 57 percent of women with children under six. Most of these worked full time. From a different perspective, 85 percent of women with one child under six were in the labor force in 1997, 82 percent with two children, including one under six, and 56 percent with three or more (UNICEF, 2000).

## **Social Protection**

France was a late developer as a welfare state but a pioneer in its family policy. The peculiar complex structure of its social security system with extensive categorical pension schemes linked to different occupations, may have contributed, albeit indirectly, to the extensive development of its family allowance system.

Like all the European countries in the 1990s, France was faced with lower rates of economic growth, high rates of social expenditures, high and persistent rates of unemployment (about 10 percent in 2000 and higher earlier), a deficit in its social security system since 1991, and pressure to contain its budget deficit in order to qualify for the EMU. Social expenditures rose throughout the first half of the 1990s, from 27.7 percent of GDP in 1990 to 30 percent in 2000 (the latest data published) well above the EU average. Pensions and survivors' benefits accounted for almost half of social expenditures in 1998, health for almost 34 percent, and family and maternity benefits for 10 percent (and housing allowances for almost 4 percent). More than half the expenditures for family benefits are for universal benefits.

Poverty increased during the 1980s and 1990s, leading to the establishment of the first national social assistance program, the R.M. I. (Revenue Minimum de Insertion) in 1989 and the rising rate of take-up in the 1990s. RMI is a means-tested safety-net program, available to individuals aged 25 and older, and those under 25 who have a child they are caring for. This has been an influential program and has been replicated in a number of other European countries.

The French child poverty rate in the mid-1990s was 7.9 percent, using a relative definition of poverty (below 50 percent of median family income), ranking 8th out of 23 countries with regard to child poverty but 10th with regard to per capita GNP. Applying the U.S. poverty measure (the "absolute" measure), the child poverty rate was 10.7 percent in 1995, in contrast to the U.S. rate of 13.9 percent, ranking 8th among 19 countries, while the U.S. ranked 11th. (In contrast, the U.S. ranked 22nd in child poverty but second with regard to GNP) (Social Security

Administration, 1999). Children living in single parent families are especially vulnerable and their poverty rate was 26 percent, in contrast to the U.S. rate of 55.4 percent in the same year.

## **Child, Youth and Family Policy Regimes**

### Maternity, Paternity, Parental, and Family Leaves

*Maternity Leave* is a job-protected leave at the time of pregnancy and childbirth, payable for 6 weeks before and 10 weeks after childbirth at 80 percent of earnings (up to a maximum) for 1st and 2nd children, for 8 weeks before and 18 weeks after childbirth for a 3rd child, and for 12 weeks before and 22 weeks after confinement if three or more births, payable for two additional weeks in case of extended hospital care because of pathological conditions in connection with pregnancy. The first maternity leave law was enacted in 1928. Medical care is covered as well. Benefits are payable in case of adoption and correspond to those for the post-natal period (European Commission, 1998).

*Paternity Leave*, as of January 2002, was extended from three to 14 days of paid, job-protected leave and to 21 days in the case of multiple births. The cash benefit equals the maximum benefit covered under social security. Employers may top off these benefits for individuals with higher salaries.

*Parental Leave* sometimes referred to as a "child rearing leave, is a job-protected and benefit-protected (the standard social benefits including old age, survivors, disability, health, and maternity insurance) leave that follows maternity leave. Parental Leave was first introduced in legislation enacted in 1985, improved in 1994, and extended to include adoption in 1996. Workers qualify for the leave after working for the same employer for at least one year. Workers have the right to return to the same or similar job at the same pay. The leave is unpaid for the first child and paid for the second and subsequent child at a flat rate, pro-rated if taken only part-time. Since 1994 parents may choose to take the leave at the same time or sequentially. The duration of the leave is up to three years and it can be extended by one year in case of sickness, accident, or handicap of the child. The leave can be taken as a full-time leave from work or part time (between 16 and 32 hours per week). Workers must give their employer at least one month notice before taking the leave. Employers cannot refuse the leave (prior to 1994 it was limited to employees in firms with 100 or more workers). Almost all those with one child, return to their job; with two or more children the rate of return has to do with how many children and the parent's level of education and skill.

*Adoption Leave* (for either parent) is granted for 10 weeks from the date of the child's arrival and 22 weeks if more than one child is adopted. Like maternity leave, it is fully paid and job-protected. A three-day paid leave is provided to the parent who does not take the adoption leave. An adoption allowance is available.

*Sick Child Leave* is provided for all working parents for up to 5 days a year, to care for an ill child under age 16 and is fully paid. As indicated earlier, a new family benefit has been enacted, covering a four-month paid, job protected leave for working parents with a seriously ill child.

### Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC)

France has a single model of preschool education for its 2-6 year olds (Ecole Maternelle) and a diversity of policies and program types for children under age 3, with the two-three year olds participating in both types.

The Ecole Maternelle is an international exemplar of ECEC programs, a publicly funded preschool program, administered under the Ministry of Education and delivered under education auspices. Preschool facilities may be situated next to or even in a primary school, but often are free-standing. The programs are free for the standard school day, which usually covers 8 hours (8:30 am - 4:30 pm), and have supplementary ("wrap-around") services available before and after school hours, at lunchtime, and during school holidays for parents who have a longer workday and young children in need of care and supervision. Parents pay for the supplementary services at income-related fees. The programs are universal, and available to all children regardless of parents' income or employment status. There are also programs covering the half day on Wednesdays when French schools are closed (they are open a half day on Saturdays). Although initially established as educational programs, stress is increasingly placed on socialization and enhancing child development generally as well as cognitive stimulation and preparation for primary school. And meeting the needs of working parents is also being emphasized, despite serving children with at-home parents or caregivers as well as those with two—or sole—working parents.

The French école maternelle began as a charity program for deprived children in the 19th century and was transformed in the mid-twentieth century into a modern nursery school. All children aged two and older are eligible to participate, although there are not usually enough places for all 2-year olds whose parents want them enrolled. The program clearly provides childcare for the children of working parents, but participation is by no means limited to these children. All 3-4-5 year olds are now enrolled and close to half of the 2-year olds. The major priority now is to achieve full coverage for the two year olds, and to develop an appropriate, special "curriculum" for this age group.

Although the French regard these programs highly, the groups may seem large by some standards, with as many as 25-30 children in a group of 4 year olds with one teacher and an assistant (sometimes). However, reforms of recent years have made some of these facilities much more like ECEC programs in the best child development traditions, and these reforms are spreading. A French expert interprets the role of the maternelle as follows: It must "contribute to the child's development...in all its forms, physical, cognitive, and emotional. It trains the child in the use of different modes of expression and prepares the child for the formal education of primary school. It permits the early diagnosis and treatment of future learning problems and handicaps." French research finds that children who do not participate in these programs are likely to be disadvantaged when they enter primary school.

Crèches or child care services in France, target children from 3 months through age two, with employed mothers; charge income-related fees, and are administered under the Ministry of Health. Coverage is about 35 percent and includes 23 percent in centers or supervised family day care, about 11 percent in the école maternelle (the 2 year olds), and the remainder in other types of crèches. The infant/toddler group programs do not have consistent or uniform curricula and

the family day care programs have even less. Programs usually operate 10-12 hours a day and children attend a full day except when parents work part-time. In contrast to the maternelle, there are several different types of crèches including centers, family day care homes, parent cooperatives, and part-day, part-week, and drop in centers. On average, the cost of a place in a crèche (a center) is about \$50 a day. Half is paid by the government, one quarter by the Family Allowance Fund, and one quarter by the family. The cost for children in low-income families is borne fully by the Family Allowance Fund (Kammerman, 1998; Kamerman & Kahn, 1994; Cooper, 1999).

### Family Allowances

The basic family allowance is a cash benefit provided regardless of income for each child beginning with the second up to age 20 (and to 22 under certain circumstances) and varying in amount by the child's age. All French families with at least two children qualify for this benefit and receive it. These allowances are tax-free and the benefit levels, which are usually (but not always) adjusted annually, are linked to prices and related on a formula basis to a base amount equal to about one half the French minimum wage. In addition, there are other categorical allowances, including:

- An income-tested supplementary family allowance for large families (those with three or more children) with the youngest child under age 3;
- A young child allowance;
- An orphan allowance for children without one or both parents, for whatever the reason;
- A single -parent allowance that is means-tested and is available for one year or until the youngest child is age three; (About 95 percent of those who qualify, take it, and 95 percent of those are women.);
- Two allowances that subsidize the costs of in-home care for a child under age 3;
- A special allowance for children returning to school in the fall; a special allowance for handicapped children being reared at home;
- A housing allowance, income-tested, to offset some of the costs of housing, either rental or owned.

The base family allowance in 2001 was about \$110 a month for 2 children and \$260 for three. Benefits are higher for older children. Family benefits constitute an important part of family income: 14 percent for those with 2 children; 29 percent for families with 3 children; 45 percent for those with four or more children (Baudelot, unpublished). In addition, France provides a social assistance cash benefit, available on a means-tested basis to those aged 25 and older, or those who are younger and have a child in care (Richardson, 1994). Working women gain two years credit toward their pension for each child brought up for at least nine of his or her first 16 years.

The basic, universal family allowances constitute about 40 percent of all cash family benefits and 24.4 percent of all family benefits. Income tested family benefits account for 25 percent of total family benefits.

### Child and Family Tax Benefits

The French income tax system is based on a family unit concept, with income pooled for the family. There is also a childcare tax credit to offset some of the costs of childcare for working parents.

### Other Child Conditioned Income Transfers

Old Age Insurance beneficiaries are entitled to a supplement of 10 percent if they have reared at least three children, and a similar supplement to Survivors Benefits. They also are entitled to a child-care supplement when receiving Survivors Benefits and having a minor child. Women receive an entitlement to three years credit towards their pension if they have reared a child at home.

### Child and Adolescent Health

According to a special report of the French-American Foundation (1994), "Children in France begin life with excellent prospects for healthy growth and development. Ninety--six percent of French children are born to mothers who receive early prenatal care...All but a minuscule fraction of children live in families that receive universal health insurance ...By age two, more than 90 percent of children receive all required immunizations." The French maternal and child health system (Protection Maternelle et Infantile or PMI was founded after World War II to combat infant mortality and morbidity. It is viewed as marking the transition of French child and family policy from charity to universal protection. Over the years, the PMI has extended its scope to emphasize health promotion through preventive care, family education, and early assistance to women, children, and families at risk of impaired health or development. It involves a network of decentralized public health agencies under local control. It operates through both the public and private sectors and includes family planning and counseling services, regular prenatal care, home health services, preventive health examinations and vaccinations for children from birth through age 6. Services are reimbursed by the national health insurance system.

Ninety-nine and one half percent of the population has public health care coverage. Nonetheless, because of growing concern regarding the rising number of low-income families who were finding it difficult to pay doctors' and prescription fees or to afford hospital charges, and their children having delayed access to preventive screening programs and to treatment, from January 1, 2000 those with no other health care coverage will automatically be covered by the national general health insurance scheme (Boonstra, 2000; Richardson, 1994).

### Youth

Children up to age 19 (and up to age 22 under certain circumstances), are currently entitled to receive the basic family allowance. Youth are covered under the National Health Insurance program, just as young children are. Sex education is mandatory in French schools, both public and private. The French government announced in January 2000 a new policy enabling nurses to offer emergency contraception in the nation's public and private high schools, and established a national campaign to promote contraceptive use. Emergency contraception has been available over the counter in France since June 1999. Under recent government policy, school nurses must counsel students, screen them for health risks, inform them about sexually transmitted diseases and prevention, advise them about appropriate contraceptive services, and encourage parental involvement. This last policy was rejected in June, 2000 but re-established later that year.

Since July 2002, firms are entitled to a 3-year reduction in payroll taxes if they employ youth and unskilled workers on a long-term basis.

#### Reconciliation of Work and Family

Beginning in January 2002, the standard work week was reduced to 35 hours.

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