



Family homelessness in France – an overview

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The number of homeless families in France has been steadily increasing for quite a few years. This has transformed the emergency accommodation sector and worsened its bottleneck. This type of household is defined by the presence of a parent and at least one child under 18. The reality for families in vulnerable social situations first came to light at the end of the 1990s when they were picked up by outreach teams or calls to the 115 emergency accommodation hotline.

Homeless Families, Emergence of a Phenomenon

In 1999, people who were part of families and were accommodated by the Paris 115 service made up less than 13% of the total number of people accommodated at least once during that year.¹ At that time, they were accommodated for an average of two weeks and only while they were waiting for more suitable accommodation. This household type was unusual, given its vulnerability, and was prioritised by social service providers because political decision-makers were keen to keep children away from the street.

When this – mainly Parisian – phenomenon was new, homeless families were systematically accommodated in hotels, in former “boarding houses” or in holiday lets low on business. Families were accommodated unconditionally, that was a fact, but it was often at the expense of the quality of the accommodation units provided to them. Obviously, given their primary intended use, hotel rooms do not meet their needs. Often, they lack cooking facilities, there is no separation between living spaces and there is no support available. Despite this, using this type of accommodation meant almost all accommodation requests could be met up until 2012.

France, 2012: Being a Family No Longer Kept Homelessness at Bay

The accumulation of situational and structural factors, in particular the housing crisis (insufficient availability, higher housing prices), and the economic crisis from 2008 onwards (increased insecurity) sped up the journey towards poverty for those who were closest to the brink. In addition, the nature of migratory flows had changed, and the number of single asylum seekers and asylum-seeking families had been increasing continuously for around ten years. In 2018:

- a million more people lived below the poverty line than in 2008,²
- 50% more people were homeless than in 2008,³
- more than 30,000 people were evicted from their homes,⁴
- the number of families on the street increased, a growth in numbers recorded every year since the end of the 1990s.⁵

As a result, since 2010, more families than single people have been staying in hotel accommodation and emergency accommodation. In 2014 in the Paris region, 70% of people in accommodation were parents and children.⁶ As well as the numbers, lengths of stay have significantly increased. This means that 44% of the families accommodated in 550 hotels in the Paris region have been there for more than two years.⁷ As a result, the available hotel units are saturated – units that, every night in 2019 in France, have hosted almost 50,000 people, half of whom are children. Here is a staggering figure: in 2016, five babies were born every day to families living in hotels in the Paris region.⁸

- 1 Eberhard Mireille, Guyavarch Emmanuelle, Le Méner Erwan. Structure familiale et hébergement d'urgence au 115 de Paris (Family Makeup and Emergency Accommodation Through the Paris 115 Service). In: *Revue des politiques sociales et familiales (Social and Family Policy Review)*, n°123, 2016. Joindre les deux bouts. Enquêtes d'ethnocomptabilité (Making Ends Meet. Ethnocompatibility Studies).
- 2 Fondation Abbé Pierre (Abbé Pierre Foundation), 24ème rapport sur l'état du mal-logement en France (24th Report on the State of Housing Deprivation in France), 2019, https://www.fondation-abbé-pierre.fr/documents/pdf/rapport_complet_etat_du_mal_logement_2019_def_web.pdf
- 3 Insee, L'hébergement des personnes sans-domicile en 2012 (How Homeless People Were Accommodated in 2012), <https://www.insee.fr/fr/statistiques/1281324>
- 4 Fondation Abbé Pierre (Abbé Pierre Foundation), Dossier de presse fin de la trêve des expulsions locatives, (Press Release at the End of the Moratorium on Rental Evictions) March 2019.
- 5 Enquête ENFAMS (enfants et famille sans logement) (ENFAMS Study (Homeless Children and Families)), carried out by the Observatoire du Samusocial de Paris (Paris Samusocial Research Observatory), October 2014.
- 6 Eberhard Mireille, Guyavarch Emmanuelle, Le Méner Erwan. Structure familiale et hébergement d'urgence au 115 de Paris. Family Makeup and Emergency Accommodation Through the Paris 115 Service. In: *Revue des politiques sociales et familiales (Social and Family Policy Review)*, n°123, 2016. Joindre les deux bouts. Enquêtes d'ethnocomptabilité (Making Ends Meet. Ethnocompatibility Studies).
- 7 Samusocial de Paris, service du 115 (Paris Samusocial 115 Service), 2014.
- 8 Pôle Hébergement et de Réservations Hôtelières (Accommodation and Hotel Booking Hub), Samusocial de Paris, 2016.



These families are mostly migrant families – 94% of the parents were born abroad – and they demonstrate close links between migration and homelessness. These homeless families are often single-parent families and they are mostly single mothers with very young children. Being accommodated in a hotel has huge consequences for them: their journeys to work can be extremely long, it can be difficult for them to access public services, they may not have support, they have no privacy, etc. As for children and teenagers, they are deprived of the life they should have. Marginalisation, instability and overcrowding can have a negative effect on their schooling and can have an impact on their mental health, their developing social life, their access to extracurricular activities or to a healthy diet (there are only very rarely cooking facilities in hotels).

Another consequence of this bottleneck is that there are more and more families without accommodation. The Paris 115 service, that manages the emergency number specifically for homelessness, counted on average 50 families per month for whom no accommodation was found in the 2000s, 500 per month in 2011, 2000 per month in 2014 and more than 12,000 per month in October 2019,⁹ which is a 600% increase in 5 years.

The efforts that have been made (the available accommodation has doubled in 10 years with 146,000 accommodation spaces in France in 2018) show that the State wants to improve the service available, but the funding allocated to emergency accommodation remains too low. Crisis management in a crisis means an over-reliance on temporary solutions that are costly and insufficient in number and quality. To respond to this, the State is trying to put in place longer-term housing solutions for families, like developing property management by non-profits and family hostels, but these efforts are still not sufficient. Moreover, these solutions are not appropriate for all families as some have complex social and health needs which mean they need significant support. Others are not eligible for social housing because of their immigration status. This is why the *Fédération des acteurs de la solidarité* (Federation of Organisations Working for Solidarity) campaigns for the granting of leave to remain for all families that have been in temporary accommodation for more than two years.

This situation will not change so long as the poverty rate curve among single-parent families is not inverted. According to the Abbé Pierre Foundation,¹⁰ the rate was 34.8% in 2016, in a constant upward arc since 2008, creating faster growth in the number of people being “pushed over the edge”, forcing them onto the street.

Another issue – in July 2018 in mainland France, 16,000 people lived in slums and squats. Of these people, who were often families, around 10,800 are European citizens (67% of the total population).¹¹ These figures do not include the shanty towns in Calais and France’s overseas territories. According to UNICEF, there were an estimated 9000 under-18s living in shanty towns in 2015.¹² Their living conditions are difficult and often violate their fundamental rights (limited access to water and electricity, blocked refuse collection in many local authorities). As well as the difficulties linked to their living conditions, these population groups are overwhelmingly the victims of discrimination linked to their actual or perceived origin in their access to education, employment or health services. What’s more, they are frequently driven out of where they live, often illegally and without a real accommodation or housing alternative. Some local projects allow these families to find long-term solutions but there still aren’t enough of them.

What Solutions are Out There for Homeless Families?

For years, NGOs and federations have been promoting the simple and realistic solutions that do exist to facilitate families’ access to decent accommodation or housing that also offer them support in line with their needs.

In France, the national strategy for preventing and combatting poverty¹³ gives extra funding for accommodation so that families may be accommodated in suitable structures and to stop them being accommodated in hotels or having to sleep on the street. The Housing First policy¹⁴ creates additional housing and support solutions for this group. But the State’s investment in these policies will have no effect if they are not accompanied by, at the very least, putting a stop to evictions without rehousing, the granting of leave to remain for families blocked in emergency accommodation for several years and a more general policy of access to housing for low-income households, through the construction of properties let at “social rent” and measures for ensuring the solvency of households (rent controls, higher welfare benefits and family allowances). But these are sorely lacking in today’s context.

Supporting families experiencing social exclusion is critical: it is essential that we assess and respond to these children’s basic needs. Access to physical and mental health care, access to education and access to the prevention of and protection from violence are just a few of the serious concerns that organisations fighting exclusion are trying to find a response to, in

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9 Ibidem.

10 Fondation Abbé Pierre (Abbé Pierre Foundation), 24^{ème} rapport sur l'état du mal-logement en France (24th Report on the State of Housing Deprivation in France), 2019, https://www.fondation-abbé-pierre.fr/documents/pdf/rapport_complet_etat_du_mal_logement_2019_def_web.pdf

11 [tp://www.romeurope.org/etat-des-lieux-des-bidonvilles-en-france-metropolitaine-dihal-juillet-2018/](http://www.romeurope.org/etat-des-lieux-des-bidonvilles-en-france-metropolitaine-dihal-juillet-2018/)

12 http://romeurope.org/wpcontent/uploads/2015/07/rapport_chaque_enfant_compte_rapport_unicef_france_202015.pdf

13 <https://solidarites-sante.gouv.fr/affaires-sociales/lutte-contre-l-exclusion/lutte-pauvrete-gouv-fr>

14 <https://www.gouvernement.fr/plan-quinquennal-pour-le-logement-d-abord-le-gouvernement-engage-pour-un-acces-rapide-et-perenne-au>



particular by trying to help the families they support access legal advice, and opening up access to essential financial help. This can take the form of child benefit for families with regular immigration status.

As they had been confronted with these systemic problems around access to accommodation and housing and increasing poverty for a long time, these organisations looked into what support could actually be offered to these families. One crucial factor is the relationship between parents and their child(ren). Clearly, even though poverty on its own is not synonymous with family dysfunction, some households need specific support, in particular around how they approach and experience the parent/child relationship. A few different, inspiring practices have come about through social workers and accommodation managers, more used to supporting single men in times gone by, challenging their ways of doing things. Though there are many techniques, we might mention, by way of example, appointing a designated parenting skills worker in a support work team, making an apartment available so a parent can have their children to stay when they are separated from their partner or signposting towards family mediation services if there are conflicts.

A key issue for support work with families, in particular single mothers with children, is that of access to childcare options. Being unable to find childcare solutions for their children, for financial or practical reasons such as nursery opening times, remains a major obstacle to social inclusion for many families. This is why the *Fédération des acteurs de la solidarité* (Federation of

Organisations Working for Solidarity) eagerly awaits the measures announced by the current government that aim to increase diversity in nursery schools and improve their accessibility for poorer families – measures that still need to be implemented.

What's more, it is impossible to support families if we don't listen to what children have to say. Within the accommodation and support services provided for families by organisations working to combat exclusion, particular attention must be paid to the development of listening spaces where the children receiving support have room to express themselves. The organisations and establishments providing services to vulnerable families also need to make sure they develop tools appropriate for supporting children and teenagers.

Lastly, we really need to understand this population group better. A comprehensive study on homeless people carried out by the *Insee* (National Institute of Statistics and Economic Studies), like the one carried out in 2012,¹⁵ would allow us to accurately measure the number of families with no accommodation or those who do not use the structures available, as well as document their daily experiences. This would allow public policy to match up with the reality of street life and invest appropriately in solutions that are tailored to these families' needs and are available long term. A gender-informed approach would also allow work to be done on the reasons why many women with children end up in such a vulnerable situation and to find solutions as a result.

¹⁵ L'hébergement des sans-domicile en 2012, des modes d'hébergement différents selon les situations familiales (How Homeless People Were Accommodated in 2012; Accommodation Types Differ By Family Situation), Françoise Yaouancq, Alexandre Lebrère, Maryse Marpsat, Virginie Régnier (Insee) Stéphane Legleye, Martine Quaglia (Ined), 2012.