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Tom Chevalier, Michel Legros, Claude Martin

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EUROPEAN SOCIAL POLICY ANALYSIS NETWORK (ESPAN)

Access for children in need to the key services covered by the European Child Guarantee

France

Tom Chevalier, Michel Legros and Claude Martin

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Summary

On 14 June 2021, the Council of the European Union adopted a Recommendation establishing a “European Child Guarantee”, with a view to guaranteeing access to six key services for “children in need”:

- effective and free access to four services: high-quality early childhood education and care (ECEC); education and school-based activities; at least one healthy meal each school day; and healthcare; and
- effective access to two services: healthy nutrition and adequate housing.

The purpose of the present report is to assess the extent to which low-income children in France do indeed have effective (or effective and free) access to these services.

In France the starting age of compulsory schooling has been 3 since 2019: since public education is free, free access also effectively starts at that age. However, ECEC is neither universal nor free for children under 3. Despite many possibilities (collective daycare, childminder at the family’s place, childminder at their place, etc.), free and effective access is therefore not guaranteed, especially for low-income children, who are much less likely to attend childcare facilities than other children. Many barriers prevent them from accessing ECEC, ranging from financial barriers (for instance the cost of a childminder) to the unequal availability of collective daycare, such as crèches, depending on income, social origin or location.

As public education is free in France, mandatory activities related specifically to teaching are free for all, such as books or IT. However, other costs are supposed to be borne by families when mandatory, such as basic materials, clothing or transport. To compensate for these costs for low-income children, several cash benefits are made available to families by the government (such as the back-to-school allowance), local authorities or the school. Although free meals are not provided for low-income children, the 2018 national strategy on poverty launched two measures intended to promote free meals. First, a financial incentive for municipalities that offers social pricing to families whose children eat in the school canteen (€1 meals). Second, a breakfast fund aimed at municipalities that offer free breakfasts to schoolchildren in recognised priority areas.

The French health insurance system reinforced its universal character when it established universal health protection on 1 January 2016. This general access to the health insurance system does not discriminate between households according to income or age. As a result, healthcare is supposed to be free for all children. However, some additional costs are not well covered by basic healthcare and a complementary healthcare plan is needed, which is free for low-income households.

Many low-income children do not have effective access to healthy nutrition. Almost 7 million French people use food banks, almost one quarter of whom are single parents and heads of large families. Measures implemented by public authorities to promote healthy nutrition mainly relate to two areas: direct support for healthy food by supporting the main charity networks, and the instigation of plans and programmes aimed at improving food quality.

Finally, housing allowances as well as universal social housing (which represents 15.6% of main residences) are available to help low-income households afford adequate housing. In 2020, including children and other dependants, 13.3 million people lived in a household that received a housing benefit, which was about 20% of the population. Among these beneficiaries, 17% were couples with children, and 21.2% were single-parent families. On the other hand, almost a quarter (23%) of social housing is occupied by couples with children. Among households with children, large families are over-represented in rented accommodation, most of it social housing.

Introduction

On 14 June 2021, the EU Member States unanimously adopted the Council Recommendation (EU) 2021/1004 establishing a “European Child Guarantee” (ECG).¹

The objective of the ECG is to offset the impact of poverty on children and to prevent and combat their social exclusion. To this end, it is recommended that Member States guarantee for “children in need” (defined as people **under 18** who are at risk of poverty or social exclusion – AROPE):

- effective and free access to four services: high-quality early childhood education and care (ECEC); education and school-based activities;² at least one healthy meal each school day; and healthcare; and
- effective access to two services: healthy nutrition and adequate housing.

According to the ECG Recommendation, **effective access** means “*a situation in which services are readily available, affordable, accessible, of good quality, provided in a timely manner, and where the potential users are aware of their existence, as well as of entitlements to use them*” (Article 3d). **Effective and free access** means “effective access” to the services, as well as free-of-charge provision – either by organising and supplying such services or by providing “*adequate benefits to cover the costs or the charges of the services, or in such a way that financial circumstances will not pose an obstacle to equal access*” (Article 3e).

The Recommendation directs the Member States to prepare action plans, covering the period until 2030, to explain how they will implement the Recommendation.³ These plans are to be submitted to the European Commission.

The purpose of the present report is to assess the extent to which children AROPE have effective and free access to four of the six services covered by the ECG and effective access to the other two (see above). Given that the eligibility criterion (or criteria) for accessing those services in individual Member States (at national and/or sub-national level, depending on how the service is organised) is/are not based on the EU definition of the risk of poverty or social exclusion,⁴ the report focuses on access for **low-income children** to each of these services, using the national low-income criterion (or criteria) that apply (e.g. having a household income below a certain threshold or receiving the minimum income). Throughout this report, “low-income children” is to be understood as children living in low-income households.

In France, three of the six services covered by the ECG are primarily or solely regulated at sub-national level – ECEC, education and school-based activities, and healthy meals. For these services, the report seeks to provide a general picture of the (effective/free) access for low-income children in the country. In addition to this general picture, if access differs substantially across the country, it illustrates these geographical disparities by providing an

¹ The full text of the ECG Recommendation is available at: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=uriserv%3AOJ.L_.2021.223.01.0014.01.ENG&toc=OJ%3AL%3A2021%3A223%3ATOC.

² According to the Recommendation (Article 3f), “school-based activities” means “*learning by means of sport, leisure or cultural activities that take place within or outside of regular school hours or are organised by the school community*”.

³ Once they have been submitted to the European Commission, the plans are made publicly available online at: <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1428&langId=en>.

⁴ According to the EU definition, children are AROPE if they live in a household that is at risk of poverty (below 60% of median income; hereafter AROP) and/or severely materially and socially deprived, and/or (quasi-)jobless. For the detailed definition of this indicator and all other EU social indicators agreed to date, see: <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=756&langId=en>. In 2021, EU Member States agreed a target to be reached by 2030: a reduction in the number of people AROPE in the EU by at least 15 million, including at least **5 million children**.

example of both a sub-entity in the country that performs well and a sub-entity that performs poorly.

The report is structured by service:

- effective and free access to high-quality ECEC;
- effective and free access to education and school-based activities;
- effective and free access to at least one healthy meal each school day;
- effective and free access to healthcare (e.g. free regular health examinations and follow-up treatment, and access to medicines, treatments and support);
- effective access to healthy nutrition;⁵ and
- effective access to adequate housing.⁶

1. Early childhood education and care (ECEC)

This section describes the situation regarding effective and free access for low-income children to ECEC services.

1.1 Mapping accessibility and affordability of ECEC

The accessibility and affordability of ECEC in the French system centres on two main aspects: an absence of universality, which means no legal entitlement for any children, including children and households in poverty; and a principle of equity that takes into account household income in determining fees and charges (see Table 1.1).

However, another instrument to regulate social and economic inequalities is the application of priorities or quotas. In the application of articles L. 214-7 and D. 214-7 of the code on social action and families, 1 in every 20 crèche places must be reserved for children from low-income households. This article of the law also gives details concerning parents looking for a job: “*The establishment’s plan and internal rules stipulate that places shall be reserved for at least 20% of children whose parents are looking for work and intend to commit to intensive job-seeking that may include training periods. This share of their reception capacity includes priority places for single parents, as defined in the last paragraph of article L. 262-9 of the present code, who care for one or several children aged under three*”. In 2013, according to the “Plan against poverty” (*Plan de lutte contre la pauvreté*), a higher objective was formulated: to guarantee a place in a crèche for 10% of AROP children under 3. But this objective has never been reached.

⁵ According to the Recommendation (Article 3g), “healthy meal” or “healthy nutrition” means “*a balanced meal consumption, which provides children with nutrients necessary for their physical and mental development and for physical activity that complies with their physiological needs*”.

⁶ According to the Recommendation (Article 3h), “adequate housing” means “*a dwelling that meets the current national technical standards, is in a reasonable state of repair, provides a reasonable degree of thermal comfort, and is available and accessible at an affordable cost*”.

Table 1.1: Accessibility and affordability of ECEC

Childcare (usually under age 3)		Pre-school setting (usually age 3 to compulsory school age)	
Accessibility	Affordability	Accessibility	Affordability
PRIOR3years	NO	ENT-ALL3years	FREE-ALL3years

Note: “ENT-ALL3years” means a legal entitlement for all children from age 3. “PRIOR3years” means priority access for low-income children from age 3. “FREE-ALL3years” means free for all children from age 3. “NO” in the affordability column means not free for low-income households. If the information differs between centre-based and home-based care, the information provided applies to centre-based care.

In France, compulsory schooling begins for children who are 3 at the beginning of the school year: the policy does not establish universal access for children under 3.⁷ Although formal ECEC is widely available and diverse, it is not universal and is subject to significant social and territorial inequalities. However, for children over 3, access to ECEC is facilitated by the existence of pre-school education (*écoles maternelles*). Pre-school settings are formally part of primary schools (*primaires*) in France, together with elementary schools (*écoles élémentaires*), the foundations of which date from the late 19th century (Le Bihan and Martin, 2008).

In 2020, the budget in France for ECEC policy (from birth to age 6) amounted to €32 billion. This amount was divided between childcare for those under 3 (€14.7 billion), mostly financed by the family branch of the social security system (*Caisses d’allocations familiales* – CAF), and education and care for children aged 3-6 (€17.5 billion), mostly financed by the Ministry for Education and local authorities.

In 2020 and 2021, about 36% of children under 3 attended a formal ECEC facility for at least 30 hours (see Table A.1 in the Annex). Given that schooling is compulsory from age 3 for primary school, which includes pre-schooling, the coverage is close to 100% for children over 3.

ECEC for children under 3 has two main characteristics: a large, diverse range of places are available, but access is non-universal and very unequal.

According to the National Observatory of Early Childcare (*Observatoire national de l’accueil de la petite enfance* – ONAPE), the take-up rate of ECEC in 2019 was 59.8%. Children under 3 were split as follows:

- 33.0% in registered childminders’ homes (the principal formal childcare arrangement);
- 20.9% in collective crèches;
- 3.7% in pre-schooling; and
- 2.1% at the family home, looked after by childminders.

1.1.1 Conditions for qualifying as a “low-income child”

A low-income child is a child living in a household with less than 60% of the median equivalised disposable income. This condition applies according to the quota mentioned above (Section 1.1).

1.1.2 Relation between the group(s) of children who have free access and the AROPE population of children in the relevant age group(s)

In France, there is no free access for any child to ECEC, but a system of proportionate universality. To illustrate this, we can refer to the following case: for a household living on half

⁷ It is important to remember that, in France, pre-schooling is part of the primary school system, and instruction is compulsory for all children, French nationals and non-nationals alike, aged 3-16.

of the French minimum wage (“SMIC”) – €576 net per month, which concerns mainly single mothers – in 2019 the cost after social transfers per month for the parent(s) was €34 for a place in a crèche and €156 for a professional childminder. The crèche was therefore clearly the cheaper solution (ONAPE, 2019).

Looking at the AROPE population, another crucial piece of information concerns the unequal access to this cheaper form of ECEC. The difference between AROPE children and non-ARPE children in terms of participation in ECEC is very large in France: in 2019, for AROPE children aged 0-2, it was 44.1 percentage points lower than for non-ARPE children (Table A.2 in the Annex). France has the biggest such gap in the EU (Figure A.1 in the Annex). Free and effective access to ECEC for low-income children is therefore rather limited, with a significant disparity between AROPE and non-ARPE groups.

1.2 Main barriers to effective and free access to ECEC for low-income children

1.2.1 Financial barriers

The costs of formal ECEC vary depending on the option taken up by the parents. Household income is taken into account to balance out inequalities. An evaluation of the out-of-pocket costs involves taking into account the calculation methods for the main formal solutions (i.e. crèche, micro-crèche and registered childminder).

The cost of a place in a crèche is calculated in the same way throughout France, for state, municipal and private crèches, provided that the structure is that of a “unique service delivery” (*Prestation de Service Unique*). Micro-crèches are, however, subject to a different calculation method.⁸

The ONAPE has estimated for 2019 the out-of-pocket costs of households according to these different options. For low-income households (0.5 times the minimum wage), these costs were the lowest for collective solutions (*établissements d'accueil du jeune enfant*): the out-of-pocket costs for these families (cost of ECEC after subtraction of the corresponding state benefits and tax advantages) was estimated at €34 for a place in a crèche (3% contribution) compared with €156 for a childminder (23% contribution) (ONAPE, 2020).

1.2.2 Non-financial barriers

Despite the large, diverse range of ECEC services, provision is not universal (4 children in 10 do not have formal access) and is still very unequal, in terms of social origin, household income and geography.

Unequal access to the different forms of ECEC has been the object of a number of surveys and analyses. These include the education and training monitor for 2022, which noted that: “*While the participation of children at risk of poverty and exclusion has increased faster (+9.5 percentage points) than that of children without such a risk (+6 points), the gap between the two groups of children is among the highest in the EU, at 40.6 points.*”⁹ At the national level, it also includes the work of the ONAPE, which publishes annual reports. The 2021 report showed that formal ECEC services were not very accessible to low-income households: barely a quarter of them had access to this type of childcare, compared with 64% of families above the

⁸ In a micro-crèche, 3-4 childminders take care of a maximum of 10 children aged between 2½ months and 3 years.

⁹ This quotation can be found here: <https://op.europa.eu/webpub/eac/education-and-training-monitor-2022/en/country-reports/france.html#3-early-childhood-education-and-care>.

poverty line (ONAPE, 2021). Inactive and unemployed single-parent families were among the most vulnerable: these families had the lowest level of access to these services (only 1 in 5).

In addition, a wide gap exists between families' preferences and the options actually available. Although ECEC policy has been presented as making "free choice" easier for parents, the available surveys point to a clear gap between parents' wishes and their actual practices when it comes to ECEC. Once more, the ONAPE provides useful data. A 2017 survey commissioned by ONAPE on ECEC preferences makes it possible to measure these differences. For those who stated a preference,¹⁰ the difference between their wishes and reality were considerable. Although only 26% of families wanted to look after their children themselves, 47% actually did so. Similarly, while 30% of the families questioned said they wanted a place in a crèche, only 19% had actually obtained one. In addition, while only 20% said that they would like their child to be cared for by a childminder, this option was a reality for 28% of parents. Among the preferences expressed, the highest percentage (30%) concerned crèches, while in practice this solution was by far the least common.

A report for the Terra Nova think-tank pointed to the unequal access to this most popular choice among French parents: *"In 2013, 88% of children aged under three belonging to the 20% lowest-income households were mainly cared for by their parents. Only 5% of these children had a place in a crèche. In contrast, 22% of children from the highest-income families had a place in a crèche"* (De Bodman et al., 2017: p. 20).

Geographical inequalities are considerable and strongly correlated with social inequalities: the relationship between the number of childcare places available and the number of children under 3 varies from one department (administrative area – *département*), region, or municipality to another. Access to ECEC for children under 3 was, for instance, found to be much higher in the Brittany region than in Provence-Alpes-Côtes d'Azur, even if GDP per capita in 2021 was higher in the latter (€32,300 vs €29,200) (ONAPE, 2021). Moreover, the availability of childcare places was much greater in wealthy neighbourhoods than in working-class ones (ONAPE, 2021).

The absence of universal ECEC and the significant inequalities in access to it have been the subject of considerable public debate over the last decade, generating a series of proposals. This debate has led to the publication of an official report proposing a plan for children's first 1,000 days (Cyrułnik, 2020), and also a series of contributions by the High Council on Family, Childhood and Age and several think-tanks (including France Stratégie and Terra Nova).

Terra Nova has made the following recommendation: *"Crèches should be developed considerably in order to take in many more children from low-income households. The first condition involves establishing an ambitious target: 5% of low-income children currently attend a crèche as their main form of childcare; the state should aim to raise this figure to 30% in ten years. The effort required is considerable but nevertheless attainable, and would see crèches play a key role in the success of the least advantaged. This target would mean that in ten years, 135,000 disadvantaged children would attend a crèche at least three days a week (compared to 25,000 of these children currently). This therefore requires creating an additional 110,000 places. An estimated 200,000 new places would be required in total, which is the equivalent of increasing the total number of crèche places by 50% in ten years. An additional 6,000 to 7,000 crèches will probably have to be created to supplement the 12,000 crèches that currently exist"* (De Bodman, 2021).

The debate became even more intense in September 2021, with the delivery of a report to the Minister of Labour, Employment and Economic Inclusion, the Minister of Health and Solidarity, the Minister of Public Sector Transformation and Civil Service, and the Secretary of State for Children and Families. Suggestions in the report include establishing a right to childcare that

¹⁰ Almost 30% of the families in the survey did not express an ECEC preference for their child.

parents could enforce against local authorities (Heydeman and Damon, 2021). In addition, in March 2022, an opinion was delivered by the Economic, Social and Environmental Council entitled “Towards an early childcare public service”. The project of an early childhood public service also features on the work agenda of the High Council for the Family, Childhood and Age for 2023.

1.3 Free meals provision for low-income children in ECEC

The cost of meals and nappies has to be met by parents and is included in the calculation of ECEC costs, for both crèches and childminders. While income is in principle taken into account, meals are never free.

The issue of making meals at schools and in pre-schooling free has nevertheless been debated. Since 1 April 2019, the state has been committed to supporting the establishment of social pricing in school canteens, with a budget of €11.8 million in 2022 to allow the children of the lowest-income families to eat a school meal for a maximum of €1. For local authorities that set up a “€1 canteen” from 1 August 2022, the social tariff of €1 (maximum), subsidised by state aid of €3, is allocated to families whose dependants’ allowance, or “family quotient”, established by the CAF is equal to or lower than €1,000 gross per month.¹¹ Nevertheless, to implement this system, municipalities must be eligible for a “target” rural solidarity grant, which limits its scope. To date, about 1,000 municipalities (out of 36,000) have chosen this option.

2. Education and school-based activities

This section describes the situation regarding effective and free access for low-income children to education and school-based activities.

Section 2.1 maps the main school costs in public primary and secondary education, distinguishing between the following:¹²

- compulsory basic school materials (schoolbag, pens, glue, scissors, etc.);
- compulsory school materials (textbooks, school supplies, notebooks, etc.);
- compulsory specific clothing (uniform, sports clothing);
- IT equipment requested by the school;
- sports equipment or musical instruments requested by the school;
- compulsory extramural activities (e.g. school trips, sport, culture) that are part of the curriculum;
- other compulsory fees or costs; and
- transport costs to or from school.

Section 2.2 briefly describes the cash benefits specifically intended to help meet educational costs.

Finally, Section 2.3 seeks to identify the main barriers that prevent low-income children from having effective and free access to “school-based activities” as defined in the Council Recommendation establishing the ECG (see “Introduction” section). Given that the distinction between these activities and some of the activities covered above – especially the “compulsory

¹¹ The “family quotient” is the gross annual income (before any tax allowance) divided by 12 months plus the family benefits received divided by the number of “fiscal shares”. Each adult is assigned 1 share. The first two children are each assigned a 0.5 share. The third and each subsequent child is assigned 1 share, as is each child with disabilities. A single parent is assigned 2 shares.

¹² Tuition fees charged by private schools are not covered.

extramural activities (e.g. school trips, sport, culture) that are part of the curriculum” – may not always be clear-cut, the focus of Section 2.3 is specifically on school-based activities that are not part of the curriculum.

2.1 Mapping the main school costs in public primary and secondary education

Public education is free in France. This principle (*principe de gratuité de l'enseignement*) concerns the absence of fees with regards to teaching specifically (i.e. tuition fees and books). However, education-based activities, as listed in this report, are not all necessarily free, even for low-income children.

Table 2.1a: School costs of primary education (free for all/low-income children)

Basic material	Books	Clothing	IT	Sports or music equipment	Extra-mural activities	Other fees or costs	Transport
NO	ALL	NO	ALL	Sports: ALL Music: NA	ALL	NA	NO

Note: “ALL” means that this category is free for all children. “NO” means that most/all items in the category are not free for low-income children. “NA” (not applicable) means that this category is not requested/compulsory in the country.

In France, public¹³ primary education (up to age 11) is funded by municipalities,¹⁴ which also cover school-based costs, as long as they concern collective purchases (boards, tables, chairs etc.). However, families are expected to pay for individual purchases such as basic supplies (schoolbags and pens). No specific clothing is compulsory, although in gym class, students are expected to wear sports clothes. When IT equipment is requested in class, the school usually provides the equipment on site, hence free of charge (see Table 2.1a). The same applies to the provision of IT outside of class. Sports equipment is available to all children during class (swimming pool, gym, etc.). Students usually do not have to play any instrument in music class, as the focus is on singing. Extramural activities, when compulsory, are free as they are part of the curriculum. However, when they are not part of the curriculum, they are no longer necessarily free, although the school (and the responsible local authority) can try to help low-income households by providing subsidies or reduced rates (see Section 2.2). Transport to and from school is also expected to be paid for by families.

Table 2.1b: School costs of secondary education (free for all/low-income children)

Basic material	Books	Clothing	IT	Sports or music equipment	Extra-mural activities	Other fees or costs	Transport
NO	Lower secondary: ALL Upper secondary: NO	NO	ALL	Sports: ALL Music: NA	ALL	NA	NO

Note: “ALL” means that this category is free for all children. “NO” means that most/all items in the category are not free for low-income children. “NA” (not applicable) means that this category is not requested/compulsory in the country.

Public secondary education is also free in France. Middle-school (lower secondary) education (*collèges*, from 11 to 15) is funded by the department, while high school (upper secondary)

¹³ Only about 17% of children attend a private school in France.

¹⁴ Except for teachers, whose salaries are paid by the state.

education (*lycées*, from 16 to 18) is funded by the region. Compulsory education ends at age 16, but in 2020 a general training obligation (*obligation de formation*) was extended up to age 18. As for primary education, education-based activities are organised locally, by either school, department or region. Access to these school-based activities for low-income children is the same as in primary education, except for books. In middle schools, the state delivers a budget to the school to pay for the purchase of books to be lent to all children free of charge. In high schools, however, families are expected to pay for them (see Table 2.1b). To deal with this situation, several regions loan books to children for free, leading to some territorial inequalities. Some departments (e.g. Seine-Maritime) as well as regions (e.g. Ile-de-France) also provide tablets to children in order to replace books. The EU funds created in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, such as React-EU, have also been used in some regions (such as in Ile-de-France and Normandy) to provide digital equipment to students in public high schools.

2.1.1 Conditions for qualifying as a “low-income child”

Not applicable.

2.1.2 Relation between the group(s) of children who have free access and the AROPE population of children in the relevant age group(s)

Not applicable: access is free for all children in respect of books and IT, while there are no groups of children who have free access to basic materials, clothing and transport.

2.2 Cash benefits whose specific purpose is to help meet educational costs

A specific cash benefit exists in France to cover education-based activities that are not free for families, such as school supplies and materials – the back-to-school allowance (*allocation de rentrée scolaire* – ARS), which is paid out as a lump sum in August. This benefit is specifically targeted at low-income households with children in education aged 6-18. The rate of the allowance depends on the age of the child: €392.05 from 6 to 10, €413.69 from 11 to 14, and €428.02 from 15 to 18 (in 2022).

Access to the ARS depends on the household income two years previously (as stated in the tax declaration). The maximum annual threshold for being entitled to the benefit is assessed according to the number of children: €25,775 for one child, €31,723 for two children, €37,671 for three children, and €43,619 for four children, in 2023. When their income is slightly above these thresholds, households can claim an income-based differential allowance (*allocation différentielle*). There are no other criteria to be met.

In France in 2021, the AROP threshold for a household with two adults and two children under 14 was €28,577,¹⁵ which was lower than the threshold for a comparable household that received the benefit (€31,723): this means that the population receiving the benefit (around 5 million children) was larger than the restricted AROPE population (around 3 million children) in the same year.¹⁶ Non-take-up is low for this benefit (around 5%) as it is automatic for most families (when they already receive benefits and have a child under 16).¹⁷

The costs of many education-based activities are expected to be covered by families. These expenses are calculated every year by organisations (such as the *Confédération syndicale des familles*) as the cost of the new school year (*le coût de la rentrée scolaire*), which the ARS

¹⁵ Eurostat, EU-SILC and ECHP surveys [ILC_LI01__custom_4566916], downloaded on 14 December 2022.

¹⁶ Eurostat, EU-SILC [ILC_PEPS01N__custom_4568269], downloaded on 20 December 2022.

¹⁷ There are no official data on the non-take-up rate for this benefit. This rate can thus be found here: <https://www.mes-allocs.fr/blog/barometre-le-non-recours-aux-aides-sociales/>.

is supposed to help families cope with. However, despite few studies on the matter, it seems that the ARS does not always entirely cover these costs. In fact, they are highly dependent on schools and teachers: school supplies are not legally mandatory but are recommended by teachers, who individually give out a list of the items needed for their class. Subsequently, there can be some variation in the supplies that families are supposed to buy, depending on the level, the school and the teacher.

As a result, the ARS does not necessarily cover these costs. In 2004, a study for the CAF compared the ARS spending level with the spending level for families at this time of year, and showed that in 2002 the ARS covered two thirds of such costs, with significant variations depending on the age of the child: 79% of costs were covered for families with a child in primary school, but only 57% for families with a child in high school (Rastier, 2004). Accordingly, another CAF study showed that, in 2013, 75% of parents with a child in primary education in receipt of the benefit were satisfied with it, compared with 51% with a child in middle school, and only 40% with a child in high school (Jeanbart, Misset and Dauphin, 2014). Equivalent data are missing for the most recent years. Nevertheless, in response to the increase in these costs in 2022 due to inflation, the government increased the rates of the benefit by 4% in September that year.

Other limits of the ARS are also put forward by families' associations. First, it is a lump sum delivered in August and therefore only supposed to cover the costs of beginning the school year. However, several costs arise throughout the year, not only in August and September, and are therefore not necessarily covered. Second, the ARS is based on the household income calculated two years previously (as stated in the tax declaration): as a result, a family not receiving the benefit and whose situation has considerably deteriorated during the intervening time would not qualify for it.

Besides this benefit, other types of support may be available, at both the national and local levels, depending on the level of education. At the primary level, some grants (school attendance scholarships – *bourses de fréquentation scolaire*) are available to parents whose children are obliged to attend a school in a different town from their town of residence (as a boarder – *pensionnaire*). These grants are delivered by some departments to low-income households (hence the criteria differ from one department to another). More support is available at the secondary level. Some grants are delivered by the state, depending on household income and the number of dependent children. In middle schools, the annual rate for 2022/2023, assuming one dependent child, is €111 for a maximum income of €15,951, €306 for a maximum income of €8,622, and €477 for a maximum income of €3,042. In high schools, the rate is €459 for a maximum income of €19,014, €564 for a maximum income of €15,051, €666 for a maximum income of €12,783, €768 for a maximum income of €10,309, €867 for a maximum income of €6,407, and €972 for a maximum income of €2,504.

Alongside those grants, some other support can be provided at the secondary level by social funds (*fonds sociaux*). On the one hand, social funds (*fonds social collégien* and *fonds social lycéen*) exist in order to exceptionally support students facing specific expenses (transport, healthcare, clothes, sports equipment, books and school supplies). It can take the form of either cash benefits or in-kind benefits. On the other hand, another social fund for canteens (*fonds social pour les cantines*) can also provide exceptional benefits to help low-income children to pay for their lunches at the school's canteen. These funds deliver exceptional help, and the decision is made by the head of the school together with the school community. Other types of support can be offered by local authorities, and thus differ a lot from one region to another.

Lastly, two other cash benefits can be claimed for low-income children in upper secondary education who are already in receipt of a grant. The first one is a merit grant (*bourse au mérite*) for those in receipt of a grant and who got a high score (*mention Bien* or *Très bien*) at the final examination at the end of lower secondary education (*diplôme national du brevet*). It ranges

from €402 to €1,002 per year. The second one is targeted at young people aged 16-18 who come back to school after a break of at least five months (*bourse pour les 16-18 ans qui reprennent leurs études*). This benefit is a lump sum of €600/year.

2.3 Main barriers to effective and free access to school-based activities for low-income children

In France, school-based activities are provided in leisure centres (*accueil de loisirs*) for young people aged 3-17. They can take place either when the school is open but outside regular school hours (*temps périscolaire*) or when the school is closed, on weekends or holidays (*temps extrascolaire*). Outside associations are in charge of such activities, in co-ordination with schools and municipalities (i.e. schools are not directly in charge of them).

2.3.1 Financial barriers

Families have to pay for these activities, but the cost differs from one centre to another. It usually ranges from €10 to €30 a day, and varies not only according to the centre and the municipality but also according to income and household composition. When this is not the case, for weekends and holidays (*temps extrascolaire*), the CAF can deliver some support for low-income households as well (see for instance Table A.3 in the Annex), for up to 30 days or 60 half-days. The fact that income is taken into account in such activities allows (to some extent) wide access for low-income children to these activities, and at every age – unlike high-income children who, as they grow up, invest more into private cultural and sports activities (Lebon, 2010).

Some studies have also underlined two variables that militate against a child's participation in these activities, related to the availability of families to take care of children when they are not at school (Lebon, 2010). When mothers are not employed, it reduces the access of their children to school-based activities, as they would rather take care of them themselves. When grandparents are nearby and available to take care of children, this also reduces their participation. However, such studies do not allow an assessment of whether it is a mere financial barrier (despite a low cost, it is financially easier to rely on free help) or a non-financial barrier (a preference for the family compared with collective activities).

2.3.2 Non-financial barriers

There is some geographical variation in the provision of these education-based activities, inasmuch as leisure centres are not a public service provided directly by schools: 2 out of 3 municipalities actually do not have any leisure centre. Similarly, while 2 out of 3 municipalities have a primary school, only half of them provide a leisure centre to children. However, it would represent only 10% of children, since leisure centres are present in the most populated areas (Foirien, 2022). The main barrier therefore concerns low-income children in rural areas where there is no leisure centre.

3. Free meals at school

This section describes the situation regarding effective and free access for low-income children to at least one free healthy meal each school day.

3.1 Mapping free provision of school meals

Since the shift marked by the creation in 1988 of the minimum income allowance (*Revenu Minimum d'insertion*), seven laws and programmes have successively pursued the objective

of combating social exclusion and reducing poverty by acting on income, employment and training, housing and accommodation, health, and access to care and education. The question of food did not feature in these programmes, with the irregular exception of support for associations delivering food assistance. The national strategy on poverty action adopted by the French government in 2018 marked a turning point. Of the 35 measures included in this strategy, two concerned school meals (DIPLP, 2018).

The first measure involves a financial incentive for municipalities that offer social pricing to families whose children eat in the school canteen. The second measure creates a breakfast fund aimed at municipalities that offer free breakfasts to schoolchildren in recognised priority areas.

The justification for establishing these measures was the expectation of a high social return, by improving the quality of learning for children (greater concentration, improved academic results, changes in children's attitude to the school environment, and an improved school atmosphere).

These measures have been pursued, and feature in the 2022-2030 action plan presented by the French government for implementing Council Recommendation (EU) 2021/1004 of 14 June 2021 establishing a European Child Guarantee.

Municipalities are responsible for managing school meals in primary schools and decide on their implementation, organise logistics, and establish the price of the service to be paid by families. Apart from a few exceptions – such as the towns of Drancy, Le Bourget and Saint Denis in the Paris region, and some other provincial towns – where free meals are offered to all children, families always pay for school meals.

The cost price of a meal is around €9, divided equally between the cost of purchasing food and logistical expenditure (energy, staff). Municipalities only charge families for a fraction of the total cost. The difference between the cost price and the amount invoiced to families is covered by the municipal budget. On average, the amount invoiced to families is €3. This average nevertheless disguises considerable differences. While almost all municipalities with over 100,000 inhabitants apply a means-tested pricing system, only 10% of municipalities with fewer than 1,000 inhabitants do so, instead charging the same price to all families.

The use of the means-tested price structure varies from one municipality to the next. As an example, the price structure in Paris comprises 10 bands ranging from €0.13 (families whose monthly family quotient is lower than €234) to €7 (family quotient above €5,000). Most municipalities only use three price bands. In the case of occasional difficulties, families can solicit individual, discretionary assistance from their municipality, or from their department for middle schools, to receive supplementary assistance on social grounds.

Although it did not establish free meals for all children or low-income children, the 2018 national poverty action strategy did set up a specific measure with the creation of €1 meals. This support is not allocated to families but rather to local authorities, which are generally in rural areas or geographical areas considered to be in difficulty. Eligible municipalities – 12,000 out of the total of 35,000 – sign an agreement with the state and then receive support of €3 per meal served, for which families pay €1. To benefit, children must therefore live in a municipality that is eligible for this measure, runs a school meals service, and has signed an agreement with the state, while the household must have a monthly family quotient calculated by the CAF as equal to or below €1,000.

In 2021, out of a provisional budget of €15 million, €5.2 million was spent. During the 2020/2021 school year, almost 25,000 schoolchildren benefited from this measure, which was 27.6% of the target. For each meal served for €1, the municipality receives €3 from the state. The €5.2 million spent by the state corresponds to 1.73 million meals. Each of the 25,000 children concerned therefore benefited, on average, from 70 meals. In 2022, the measure's

objective was to make the price of school meals more accessible for 90,000 children. A target of 5 million meals was set for 2022.

The results indicator applicable for this measure is the improved academic results of disadvantaged schoolchildren who have benefited from social pricing for school meals; however, due to lack of monitoring, data are not available.

Initiated in 2018 as part of the national strategy but delayed due to the COVID-19 health crisis and lockdowns, the free breakfast for schoolchildren programme was relaunched at the start of the 2021/2022 school year. The strategy sprang from the observation, made in a report on the relationship between severe poverty and academic success, that 13% of children living in priority education areas, priority urban neighbourhoods (known as REP and REP+), and some rural areas, did not eat breakfast before setting off for school (Delahaye, 2015).

This measure, which initially only concerned REPs, has been progressively extended to cover some rural areas. Over 150,000 schoolchildren benefited from these breakfasts in 2020. Since 2021, all levels of primary school have been involved, and no longer only the first three levels; and the state budget allocated to municipalities taking part in the programme has been increased from €1 to €1.30 per breakfast.

The measure does not concern any particular group of children, but rather all children in the municipality concerned. The 2022 report evaluating the national strategy indicated that the number of beneficiary schoolchildren amounted to 230,000 in the first term of 2021/2022. Based on 36 weeks a year outside school holidays, and at an average estimated cost of €1.50 per breakfast, the amount spent during the first half of 2021/2022 financed about one breakfast a month per beneficiary child. According to the same hypothesis, the budget initially allocated over this same period would have theoretically financed about three breakfasts a month per beneficiary child. The number of corresponding breakfasts per child and per month in priority urban neighbourhoods is unknown. The provisional budget for the measure amounted to €48 million for 2019/2022, which was €12 million a year. The budget spent was €2.3 million in 2019, €2.3 million in 2020, and €7.8 million in 2021. The indicator to evaluate the evolution of academic results among disadvantaged schoolchildren benefiting from free breakfasts is not available due to an absence of data. The committee in charge of it was not able to launch an impact evaluation of this measure, since information on the schools in which these breakfasts are distributed is unavailable.

3.1.1 Conditions for qualifying as a “low-income child”

With a few exceptions, free school meals are not available to schoolchildren, while those exceptional free meals that do exist concern all schoolchildren, whatever the household income.

Concerning free breakfasts and €1 school meals, the primary criterion for defining beneficiary schoolchildren is geographical. The child must live in an area that meets a single criterion: income per inhabitant. Incomes are compared with the average income in the area in which the neighbourhood is located, and to the average income in France. This method has led to the identification of 1,300 neighbourhoods with over 10,000 inhabitants whose median monthly income is lower than €1,200.

For both measures concerned, in order to benefit, local authorities must draw up an agreement with the state. For €1 school meals, the key additional criterion is that the household must have a monthly family quotient equal to or below €1,000 (gross monthly income). Concerning free breakfasts, there is no additional criterion based on household income: the measure covers all children in the municipality concerned.

3.1.2 Relation between the group(s) of children who have free access and the AROPE population of children in the relevant age group(s)

As mentioned in Sections 3.1 and 3.1.1, with very few exceptions there is no free access to school canteens for children but only reduced costs for low-income households. Free breakfasts are implemented on a territorial basis and are not directly linked to family income. There are therefore no data available to assess the proportion of AROP children benefiting from these measures, resulting only in a strong presumption that these measures will benefit children from low-income households as a priority. Nonetheless, only 90,000 children were targeted in 2022 by the double selection criteria (municipality and family quotient): this represented only 11% of the 820,000 AROPE children in the same age group.¹⁸

3.2 Main barriers to effective and free access to school meals for low-income children

3.2.1 Financial barriers

No precise data are available on whether financial reasons create a barrier to taking up school meals. However, a 2017 study showed that although the number of school meals had increased sharply in the previous 20 years, significant disparities still existed (CNESCO, 2017). For example, in middle schools in priority education areas, 59% of schoolchildren never used the school canteen, compared with 22% in state schools outside these zones, and 24% in private middle schools. In addition, 40% of children from low-income households did not eat meals at school, compared with only 22% from high-income families. These inequalities may be linked to families' personal choices (Section 3.2.2), but the Defender of Rights noted in their 2019 report that: "*registration in the canteen requires for low-income households a proportionately higher rate of effort than for wealthy families*" (Défenseur des Droits, 2019). In a survey of the same year, the National Committee for Secular Action, found that 57% of families regretted that canteen rates were not modulated according to their income (CNAL, 2019). More recently, and in a period marked by rising canteen costs in many cities, a charity highlighted the difficulties faced by households with very low incomes in paying for canteen meals (Secours Catholique, 2022).

3.2.2 Non-financial barriers

The absence of studies on non-financial reasons for non-take-up of school meals is largely compensated for by observations made by parents' associations and the testimonies of professionals in the social sector. The factors that dissuade parents from using these services are mainly as follows.

- Out of the 10,000 municipalities in France initially and potentially eligible for the €1 school meals programme, 6,000 have no school. In view of the way the programme is organised, the lack of schools in disadvantaged areas is the primary barrier that explains why many low-income children do not have effective access to free school meals.
- The non-use of canteens can be a personal choice of families who prefer family catering.
- Local authorities can opt not to draw up an agreement with the state to implement these measures, either for financial reasons or to avoid having to increase local taxes.

¹⁸ Eurostat table [ILC_PEPS01N].

- The organisation of school meals, and in particular breakfasts, creates numerous logistical problems that local authorities are not always able to resolve.
- The organisation of the school day sometimes leaves too little time to set up breakfasts.
- There are difficulties in reaching some families (travellers, homeless people, and people housed in hotels).
- Regarding free breakfasts, a scientific and technical note from the National Agency for Food, Environmental and Occupational Health and Safety expressed concern over the increased prevalence of a double breakfast (i.e. at home and then at school) for a population of children already at risk of overweight and obesity (ANSES, 2021).

4. Healthcare

This section describes the situation regarding effective and free access for low-income children to healthcare, focusing on vaccinations, care from a general practitioner (GP) or infant nurses, specialist care, dental care (not orthodontics) and prescribed medicines.

4.1 Mapping the provision of free healthcare services and products

The French health insurance system, because of its universal nature, makes it extremely difficult, if not impossible, to analyse the specific situation of children from low-income households. They have exactly the same rights as children from families whose incomes are above the low-income thresholds. Over the years, the extension of the universality of the system has reduced the number of population groups, children and adults, outside of health insurance.

The French health insurance system reinforced its universal character when it established universal health protection (*protection universelle maladie* – PUMA) on 1 January 2016. This scheme makes it possible to claim benefits in kind from the health insurance system without having to provide proof of an occupational activity, or of stable, regular residence in France. This general access to the health insurance system does not discriminate between households according to income or age. Since this legislation came into force, employees and assimilated workers have no longer had to demonstrate a minimum occupational activity, and self-employed people can also claim coverage of their healthcare expenditure as soon as they start their occupational activity.

Table 4.1: Healthcare costs (free for all/low-income children)

Vaccination	GP	Infant nurses	Specialist care	Dental care (not orthodontics)	Prescribed medicines
ALL	POOR	POOR	POOR	POOR	POOR

Note(s): “ALL” means that all services/products in the category are free for all children. “POOR” means that they are free for low-income children.

“ALL” as indicated in Table 4.1 does not mean that services are free for all, which can occur in the case of third-party payment, but instead refers to the now general reimbursement of expenses incurred by all users of the French health system – children and adults, whether low-income or not. This mechanism is explained in detail below. “POOR” in the table above means that most of the services mentioned may be free for members of households (children and adults) benefiting from the public (means-tested) complementary health insurance scheme CSS (*complémentaire-santé solidaire*).

However, if certain services (dental or glasses) are not covered by CSS, this constitutes a financial barrier that can lead to denial of care. The "100% health" programme (see Section 4.2) is a response to this financial barrier.

The coverage of healthcare expenses by the health insurance system varies depending on the nature of the expenditure (70% for doctors, surgeons, dentists, and midwives; 60% for auxiliary medical staff; 30-100% for medication; and 80% for hospitalisation). These rates apply to practitioners registered with the health insurance system ("sector 1 registration"). In other cases (i.e. no registration or sector 2 registration, which allows practitioners to charge excess fees) reimbursements are lower or nil.

The health insurance system covers 100% of treatment costs for some diseases and long-term treatments, as well as compulsory services (e.g. measles inoculation).

A fixed fee of €1 for all healthcare services has been established, except for children under 18.

The share of healthcare expenditure not covered by the health insurance system can be covered by private "complémentaire santé" plans with mutual or private health insurance companies and provident institutions. Most such plans propose contracts with different levels of coverage. For example, some contracts also cover: some excess fees charged by specialists; supplementary services in the case of hospitalisation; and higher expenditure on hearing aids, dentures, glasses and contact lenses. The more extensive the coverage provided by a contract, the higher the contributions paid in by insured parties.

For low-income individuals (including children) however, CSS has been in place since 1 November 2019. The complementary share of care refundable by the health insurance system is covered by the CSS at 100% of the maximum rates established by the health insurance system. This relates to consultations with healthcare professionals, medication, and medical analyses, etc. The CSS also gives access to dentures, optical and hearing equipment, and some other medical items, with no out-of-pocket costs for the beneficiary.

4.1.1 Conditions for qualifying as a "low-income child"

The monthly income threshold in 2022 to benefit from CSS free of charge was €797 for a single person. Above this threshold and up to €1,076 of monthly income, CSS cost €1 a day. For a 4-person household, the respective thresholds amounted to €1,675 and €2,261. Whatever the situation, these thresholds always remained below the AROP threshold (€1,102 in 2022 for a single person).

4.1.2 Relation between the group(s) of children who have free access and the AROPE population of children in the relevant age group(s)

Under the PUMA, any child from a low-income household can access healthcare services, GPs or specialists, hospitals, and medical prescriptions. At the end of 2020, 7.2 million people were covered by CSS, an increase of 4.2% in one year including 5.9 million without financial participation and 1.3 million with financial participation (DREES, 2022). Assuming a total of 11 million people in poverty, the CSS can be estimated to cover two thirds of them, but there are no data making it possible to distribute this population according to age.

4.2 Cash benefits whose specific purpose is to help meet healthcare costs

The latest measure designed to further reduce healthcare expenditure is the "100% health" (100% Santé) programme. Since 1 January 2021, whether concerning hearing, optical or dental equipment, the programme has been accessible to all French people who benefit from a socially responsible "complémentaire santé" plan (currently 95% of the contracts sold on the market) or from CSS. All equipment featuring on the programme list is fully covered by the

social security system and “*complémentaire santé*” plans. The lists are drawn up by the healthcare professionals concerned, the state, the healthcare insurance system, “*complémentaire santé*” plans, and the manufacturers of the items. Insured parties who choose items from the list therefore incur no out-of-pocket expenditure.

4.3 Non-financial barriers to effective and free access to healthcare

Although the numerous measures described above should help to improve access to healthcare by reducing the cost of access and out-of-pocket payments, access to healthcare is only one aspect of reducing inequalities related to health, food, education, training, employment and habitat. Current pressures on the healthcare system include: a drop in the number of paediatricians; the emergence of “medical deserts”; the reduction of medical staff in primary, middle and high schools; and structural inadequacies in mental health services. All of these constitute a risk of worsening access to healthcare for both adults and children. In addition, the population groups that include low-income children remain on the fringes of society: non-nationals with irregular status; travellers and Roma communities; inhabitants of French overseas territories; and people without a regular, stable home. In the overseas territories, the situation in Mayotte continues to deteriorate (DREES, 2021; Médecins du Monde, 2021).

The research directorate of the Ministry of Health indicated in 2021 that low medical density was an aggravating factor in the denial of care for people in poverty (DREES, 2021). Based on data from 2017, the study showed that people with poor living conditions were 3 times more likely to forego care than others. In geographical areas with a high level of GPs, their risk was more than 8 times higher than that of the rest of the population. Being covered by a CSS plan protected people’s access to care – CSS (then called CMU-C) beneficiaries were 5 times less likely to forgo care than people without CSS.

An annual report of Médecins du Monde, one of the most active NGOs in France in the field of health among poor populations, showed the difficulties of access to rights and care for homeless populations, foreigners in irregular situations, households in slums, children and unaccompanied minors, and populations of the overseas departments (Réunion, Mayotte and Guyana) (Médecins du Monde, 2021).

5. Healthy nutrition

This section describes the situation regarding effective access for low-income children to healthy nutrition.

5.1 Main barriers to effective access to healthy nutrition

5.1.1 Financial barriers

The latest report by the Secours Catholique charity, which is one of the main distributors of food assistance, indicated that almost 7 million French people used food banks (Secours Catholique, 2022). Single-parent and large families represented almost a quarter of these. This massive demand for food assistance can be explained by the difference between the incomes of these households and the structure of their expenditure. While for a family comprising two adults and two children the AROP threshold is €2,571, the National Union of Family Associations (*Union Nationale des Associations Familiales*), which publishes typical family budgets, indicates that a family of this type is likely to spend about €940 on food, or 36% of

their income. Work by the National Council to Combat Exclusion (*Conseil national de lutte contre les exclusions*) showed that the cost of a child for a single-parent family represented 32-44% of its monthly budget: “Taking the case of a single-parent family, the specific costs of a child represent at least one-third of the reference budget of a single woman in employment with no children who lives in social housing (between 32% and 38% depending on the child’s age group). For the same woman renting private accommodation, the specific cost of the child is greater, representing from 39% to 44% of the budget of a single woman in employment” (CNLE, 2022: 192)”. Studies on the same theme by France Stratégie indicated that single-parent families faced fixed expenditure sometimes in excess of 40%. With fixed expenditure (energy, rent, etc.) constantly on the increase, households adjust their expenditure on food by combining three strategies: going without, using food banks, and purchasing lower-quality groceries in hard-discount supermarkets (CNLE, 2022; France Stratégie, 2021).

5.1.2 Non-financial barriers

Financial constraints are clearly the main barrier to effective access to healthy nutrition (see Section 5.1.1). However, one non-financial barrier is worth mentioning: cooking is difficult for families living in furnished hotels, insanitary housing and slums.

While efforts have been made to limit the harmful impacts of advertisements for non-recommended food and drink, the generally low costs of these products are undoubtedly strong incentives for consumption.

5.2 Publicly funded measures supporting access to healthy nutrition

The measures implemented by public authorities mainly relate to two areas: direct support for healthy food by supporting the main charity networks, and the instigation of plans and programmes aimed at improving food quality.

- In 2021 and 2022, as part of its Recovery and Resilience Plan, the government operated a support fund for associations taking action on poverty, mainly but not exclusively concerning associations distributing food, with a budget of €100 million over two years. The first call for projects, launched in 2020 with a budget of €50 million, was such a success that the government made all of the funds available. For 2021 and the following years, mobilisation has included EU funding, of which €132 million for 2020-2022 was part of the React-EU recovery assistance programme, and €647 million for 2021-2027 was part of the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+). Only non-profit associations accredited by the national authorities to deliver food assistance can benefit from the ESF+ programme. A decree by the Minister of Solidarity and Health and the Minister of Agriculture and Food dated 3 December 2021 established that the entities authorised to benefit from the foodstuffs obtained using ESF+ funds are the Red Cross, Les Restaurants du Coeur, the Secours Populaire, and the French Federation of Food Banks (*Fédération Française des Banques Alimentaires*). Food assistance delivered by these associations concerns households whose monthly income is lower than €1,000, and most often €700-800, per member of the household, but this amount can go up to €1,000 depending on the assessment of the situation of people by the association.

In September 2022, faced with rampant inflation in foodstuff prices, the government decided to provide exceptional help in the form of a food cheque to more than 9 million beneficiaries. The cheque amounted to €100 plus €50 per dependent child.

Lastly, a National Committee to Co-ordinate Action to Combat Food Insecurity (*Comité national de coordination de la lutte contre la précarité alimentaire*) was set up on 8 September 2020 by the Ministers for Solidarity, Agriculture and Food, and Housing,

at the initiative of the French Directorate-General for Social Cohesion (*Direction générale de la cohésion sociale*). Gathering all actors involved in action against food insecurity, this body works to co-ordinate food assistance action to improve the health and dignity of vulnerable people, and boost their autonomy, social inclusion, and participation in the environmental transition.

- The national food and nutrition programme adopted in 2019 and running until 2023 (PNA, 2019) has been developed along several lines: improving the nutritional quality of food available; combating food insecurity; improving consumer information; developing education on healthy food for young people; combating food waste; and promoting the French food heritage. To achieve this, it mobilises collective catering and an innovative approach. Although this programme does not constitute a direct set of measures promoting access to healthy food, it constitutes the general framework for guiding state policy in this area, and from this point of view it marks a real step forward in public policies. The key areas of action in the programme include the following:
 - increasing fibre, and reducing the salt, sugar, and fat content, in everyday foodstuffs thanks to a firm commitment from economic actors since 2020, and promoting “nutri-scores” with the aim of making them compulsory at EU level, in order to improve the nutritional quality of all processed food by promoting voluntary action from professionals;
 - protecting children and teenagers from exposure to advertisements for non-recommended food and drink, and encouraging the establishment of codes of conduct based on the new provisions of the European directive on audio-visual media services;
 - making high-quality, transparent mass catering widely available to everyone, and fostering the upgrading of mass catering through a 50% supply of organic, sustainable, quality produce by 2022;
 - spreading healthy eating education from pre-schooling to high school (teaching tools for healthy eating have been made available since 2019 to cover all ages, including a handbook and an educational toolbox on the “food” portal of the Eduscol website, along with lessons on taste); and
 - promoting and sharing at national level innovative local measures to inspire creativity – in each department by 2023, these initiatives will be showcased as part of local food projects (*projets alimentaires territoriaux*) and an annual symposium will be organised.
- Lastly, Act No 2021-1104 of 22 August 2021 on combating climate change and increasing resilience to deal with its impacts, known as the Climate and Resilience Act, establishes the adoption of a new national strategy on food that strengthens the above targets and extends the measures.

6. Adequate housing

This section describes the situation regarding effective access for low-income children to adequate housing.

6.1 Publicly funded measures supporting access to adequate housing – Housing allowances

Housing benefits cover part of households' expenditure on housing, including rent and charges for tenants and monthly mortgage payments and charges for property-buyers who took out a mortgage before 1 January 2018. These benefits comprise the personalised housing assistance (*aide personnalisée au logement* – APL), the family housing allowance (*allocation de logement familial* – ALF)], and the social housing allowance (*allocation de logement social* – ALS). The APL, which dates from 1977, is allocated to people living in government-regulated housing; ALF is paid out to families with at least one dependent child; and ALS, dating from 1971, has been extended to cover those who cannot claim one of the other allowances.

A section of the 2020 annual report of the Court of Auditors was one of the recent evaluations of this policy. The court insisted on the lack of clarity of this policy, whose impact on poor families is, however, one of the most important sources of social redistribution (Cour des Comptes, 2020).

In late 2020, 6.7 million people received housing allowances: 45% of them received APL; 37% ALS; and 18% ALF. Counting children and other dependants, 13.3 million people lived in a home that received a housing benefit, which was about 20% of the population. Among these beneficiaries, 17% were couples with children, and 21.2% were single-parent families. To be eligible for housing benefits, households must reside in housing declared to be decent (over 9 m² per person) for at least eight months a year.

In 2019, the total annual amount of housing benefits amounted to €16.6 billion – an average monthly benefit of €211 per household. The method used to calculate housing benefits is particularly complex and takes into account the income and composition of the household, the amount of rent, and the geographical area. 80% of beneficiary households have an income lower than the minimum wage (€1,678 gross per month), and 20% have an income of 1-2 times the minimum wage. Housing benefits are more likely to ensure the solvency of low-income people than any other benefit, and make the strongest contribution to reducing inequality (DREES, 2022).

Two other smaller-scale financial measures are also implemented, as follows.

- Housing solidarity funds (*fonds de solidarité logement* – FSL), which exist in each department, help households in financial difficulty to access and stay in housing. The eligibility criteria, nature and amount of help allocated are established by each department. They can take the form of subsidies to cover unpaid rent or bills (energy, water), as well as loans, guarantees, or deposits for accessing housing. In 2019, expenditure by FSLs amounted to an estimated €208 million in France (excluding Mayotte).
- Temporary housing assistance (*Aide au logement temporaire* – ALT) comprises two different types of assistance. ALT 1 is paid out to organisations and associations that have drawn up an agreement with the state and commit to taking in people in housing difficulties for limited stays. ALT 2 is paid out to municipalities with 5,000 inhabitants or more to make stopping sites available for travellers. In 2019 in France, the expenditure related to ALT 1 and 2 amounted to respectively €64 million and €24 million.

6.2 Publicly funded measures supporting access to adequate housing – Social housing

6.2.1 Mapping the provision of social housing

On 1 January 2021, 15.6% of main residences in France were rented social housing, which amounted to 5.2 million social dwellings. The average rent on that date was €5.99/m², which was 1.4% higher than the previous year. This increase was particularly high in the Paris region, Ile-de-France (2.5%). Rented social housing is more prevalent in large urban areas, representing 17% of main residences in urban areas with 200,000-1,999,999 inhabitants, compared with under 11% in those with fewer than 20,000 inhabitants. Households in the municipalities with the highest concentrations of rented social housing are on average economically poorer and more affected by unemployment than those in other urban areas (Fondation Abbé-Pierre, 2023).

Depending on the nature of the financing, social housing is divided into four categories, access to which corresponds to different income thresholds. “PLAI” housing (financed by the *prêt locatif aidé d'insertion* – assisted integration rental loan) is allocated to tenants in very precarious situations. To access housing in this category, the maximum gross monthly income of a 4-person family must be less than €2,690 in the Paris region and €1,954 in the rest of the country. Housing in the next highest category, “PLUS” housing (financed by the *prêt locatif à usage social* – rental loan for social use), corresponding to “HLM” rentals (housing at moderate rent – *habitations à loyer modéré*), applies thresholds of €4,905 and €3,534 respectively to the same size family (gross monthly income). These last two categories tend to accept more middle-class households.

The poverty rate is higher among tenants of social housing than for other categories of occupiers (i.e. 35%, compared with 23% for tenants in the private sector and 7% for owner-occupiers).

Almost a quarter (23%) of social housing is occupied by couples with children. Among families with children, large families are over-represented in rented accommodation, most of it social housing. Social housing occupied by families with children is mainly located in the Paris metropolitan area and in major metropolitan areas with over 200,000 inhabitants.

6.2.2 Main barriers to effective access to social housing

6.2.2.1 Financial barriers

The housing market is confronted with a double barrier. People living on the streets, estimated at 300,000 in the 2023 report by the Fondation Abbé Pierre charity, only rarely access PLAII-type social housing due to the low availability of this type of housing, despite the implementation of a programme entitled “housing first” (*logement d'abord*) (Fondation Abbé-Pierre, 2023). The lower middle classes remain stuck in private sector accommodation, excluded from property-ownership in the face of rising house prices.

The Fondation Abbé Pierre report points out the falling number of social housing units available, from 124,000 financed social housing units in 2016 to 95,000 in 2021, with a similar fall likely in 2022 according to initial estimates: “Therefore a long way from the government target of building 250,000 social housing units during the last two years, and even further from the target of 150,000 units per year, which was the official target several years ago.” (Fondation Abbé-Pierre, 2023). This drop in construction rates, even without the health crisis, is also related to economic measures taken by the government since 2018 – increased VAT for PLUS- and PLS-type constructions, and a deduction of €1.3 billion per year for social landlords as part of the obligation to reduce rents (solidarity rental reduction – *réduction de loyer de solidarité*).

6.2.2.2 Non-financial barriers

One of the non-financial barriers that hinders access to decent social housing for families with children is the difference between the demand for small apartments for young families with children and the type of social housing available on the market, which tends to comprise large apartments. In addition, the development of social housing projects outside working areas means that households are often obliged to possess two cars, especially in semi-urban areas where public transport is insufficient (Fondation Abbé-Pierre, 2023).

Although evictions dropped sharply during the COVID-19 health crisis, they have picked up again, amounting to 12,000 evictions in 2022 – mostly with no rehousing, and taking the rate back to pre-crisis levels.

6.3 Publicly funded measures supporting access to adequate housing – Other measures

Departmental mediation commissions introduced under a 2007 law establishing an enforceable right to housing have rendered more than 369,600 favourable decisions over the past 15 years, and rehoused 234,900 people. Families with children make up more than 50% of applicant households, including 39% for single-parent families. These requests are made following evictions or failure to respond to housing requests within a reasonable time (High Committee for the Right to Housing, 2022).

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Annex

Table A.1: Children in formal childcare or education by age group and duration – % of population of each age group

Under age 3					
Zero hours		1-29 hours		30 hours or over	
2020	2021	2020	2021	2020	2021
42.8	42.9	20.7	20.2	36.5	36.9

Source: Eurostat, EU-SILC survey [ILC_CAINDFORMAL__custom_4567542].

Table A.2: Percentage of children participating in ECEC, by AROPE status and age group in France, 2019

0-2 years		3 to minimum compulsory school age (CSA)	
AROPE	Non-AROPE	AROPE	Non-AROPE
14.8	58.9	95.1	95.6

Source: Eurostat.

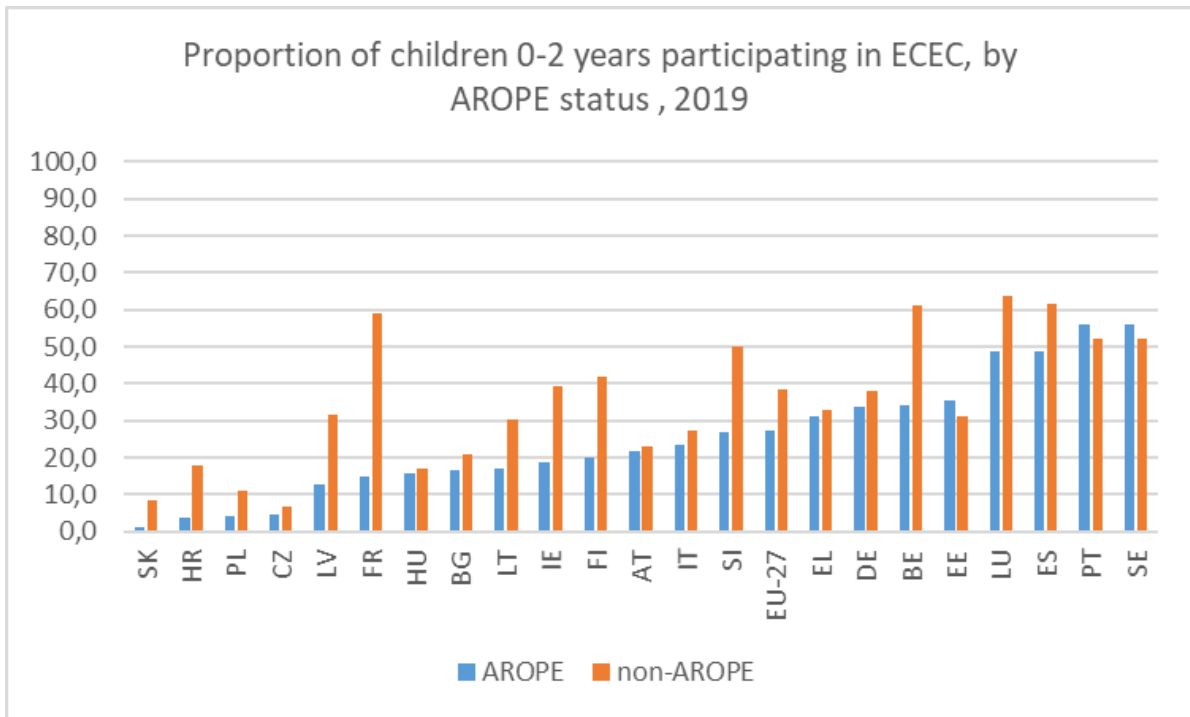
Table A.3: CAF support for low-income households to access leisure centres, 2023

Quotient familial ¹⁹	Household with one or two children	Household with three children or single mothers
€0-437	€6/day €3/half-day	€7/day €3.50/half-day
€438-820	€5/day €2.50/half-day	€6/day €3/half-day

Source: Caisses d'allocations familiales – CAF.

¹⁹ The *quotient familial* represents the household annual income divided by the number of persons within the household.

Figure A.1: Proportion of children (0-2) participating in ECEC, by AROPE status and country, 2019



Source: Eurostat.