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► **To cite this version:**

Julie Fromentin, Pierre Pistre. Immigrants in rural France: small numbers but increasingly diverse origins. *Population & Societies*, 2021, 591, pp.1-4. hal-04625728

HAL Id: hal-04625728

<https://hal.science/hal-04625728>

Submitted on 26 Jun 2024

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Population & Societies

Immigrants in rural France: small numbers but increasingly diverse origins

Julie Fromentin* and Pierre Pistre**

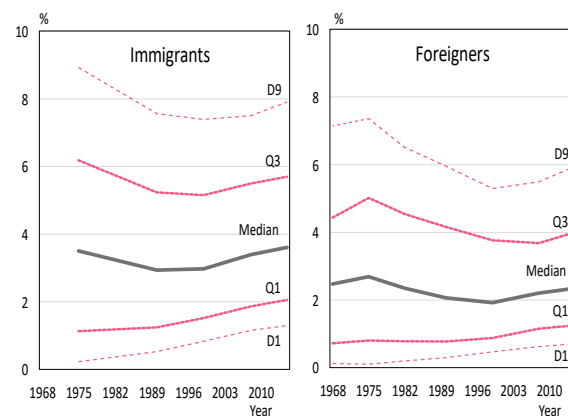
How many immigrants live in rural France today? How are they distributed across the country, and what are their characteristics? Drawing on census data, Julie Fromentin and Pierre Pistre examine how rural immigrant populations have evolved in France since the 1970s, in numerical terms, as a share of the population, or by origin.

Residential mobility is the main factor of change in French rural populations [1]. Since the 1970s and 1980s, new arrivals have been sufficient to offset departures and the natural deficit caused by the slight surplus of deaths over births. These rural newcomers contribute to changes in the social composition and geographical origin of rural communities. Most arrivals are French-born, but they also include immigrants, such as retirees from Northern Europe attracted by the French lifestyle and low property prices; workers, mostly from Europe, employed on farms or in construction; and, more recently, exiles from the Near and Middle East, Asia, and Africa [2]. We will draw upon the findings of the CAMIGRI research project (Box 1) to provide a detailed description of the rural immigrant population.

A small share in 2015, similar to that of the 1970s

Around 714,000 immigrants were living in rural France in 2015, representing 4.3% of the rural population. This proportion is smaller than that of immigrants in the French population as a whole (9.3%) or in predominantly urban areas (11.1%). Since the 1960s, the rural immigrant population in France has evolved in two ways (Figure 1). In most areas, it is practically equivalent in numbers and proportion to that of the mid-1970s, a time of mass labour immigration to fill jobs in industry (both urban and rural) and agriculture. In the other areas largely

Figure 1. Percentage of immigrants and foreigners in France by rural EPCI, 1968–2015



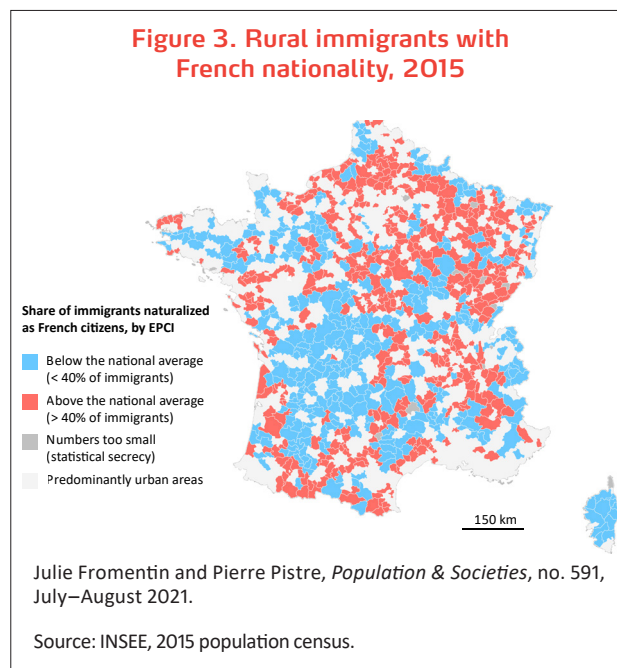
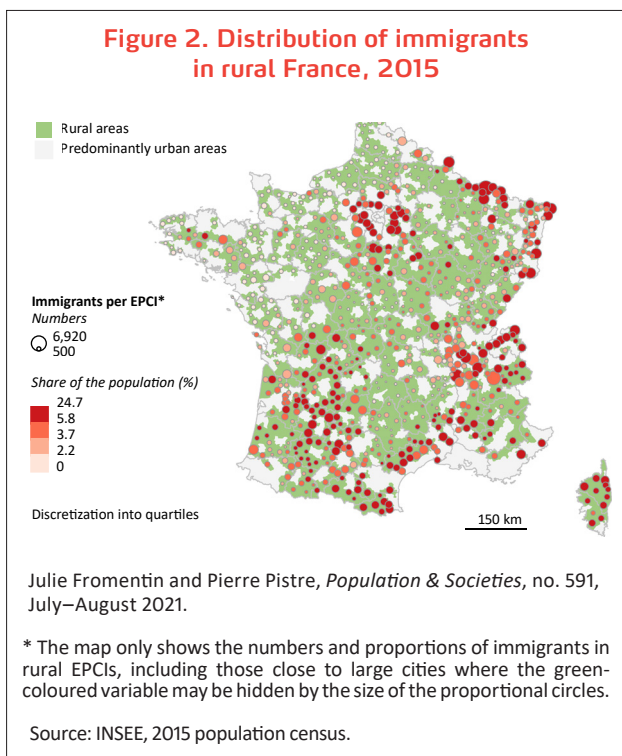
Julie Fromentin and Pierre Pistre, *Population & Societies*, no. 591, July–August 2021.

Interpretation: At the 2015 census, in half of all French rural groupings of municipalities (EPCIs, see Box 1), immigrants represented at least 3.6% of the population (median) and at least 7.9% in 10% of EPCIs (equal to or above the ninth decile [D9]).

Note: Immigrants are individuals born a foreigner and abroad. They may acquire French nationality after immigrating or keep their foreign nationality.

Coverage: Metropolitan France.

Source: INSEE, population censuses 1968–2015.



unaffected by labour immigration, it was not until the 1990s that a gradual increase in the presence of immigrants was observed. For this reason, the French rural immigrant population is more evenly distributed today than in the 1970s.⁽¹⁾

This is also the case for foreign nationals who provide partial information on the timing of arrivals.⁽²⁾ Totalling 487,000 in 2015, they accounted for 2.5% of the rural population (vs. 7.8% in predominantly urban areas) and were more evenly distributed across France than in the 1970s (Figure 1).

Unequal distribution across rural France

Today, the proportion of rural immigrants is higher in some regions than in others (Figure 2), mainly those close to the frontiers of Belgium, Germany, Switzerland, and, to a lesser extent, Italy and Spain. This is largely explained by freedom of movement between the Schengen Area countries, which enables workers to commute across international borders. Proportions are also higher in rural areas around large cities, particularly Paris, Lyon, and Toulouse, thus contributing to the ongoing process of peri-urbanization. The southern and western regions of inland France, from the Mediterranean to the south-

west, also have high concentrations of immigrants, mainly from Portugal and Spain, but also from Northern and Western Europe [3].

In addition, these patterns of spatial distribution vary by immigrant nationality (Figure 3). In rural areas close to large and medium-sized cities, especially in northern France, the proportion of immigrants with French nationality is above the national average (40% of immigrants). Often, they have been in France for many years and have migrated between different regions [4]. Conversely, immigrants with foreign nationality are over-represented in the northern and eastern border zones, in Corsica, central Brittany, and the central western part of France. Immigration to these regions is often more recent, and immigrants are mainly retired or working Europeans.

Diverse immigrant populations...

Rural immigrants in France come from a wide range of countries (Table 1), with Southern Europeans representing a large share of the total (30% vs. 18% in predominantly urban areas). Their numbers have been declining since the 1970s, and they now most often live in small one- or two-person households (respectively, 15% and 44% of individuals), a proportion equivalent to that of France as a whole (57%). They are also over-represented in southern France, where many Spanish, Portuguese, and Italian immigrants settled in the early 20th century for political and economic reasons.

(1) Under the definition adopted by the Haut Conseil à l'Intégration, an immigrant is a person born a foreigner and abroad, and whose habitual residence is in France. People born abroad with French nationality are not included (INSEE: <https://www.insee.fr/fr/metadonnees/definition/c1328>). A share of immigrants become French through naturalization, while others retain their foreign nationality. The status of immigrant is permanent: immigrants who acquire French nationality still belong to the immigrant population. Not all foreigners are immigrants because some are born in France. Therefore, the foreign and immigrant populations only partially overlap.

(2) Here, the 'foreigner' category is a proxy for measuring time since arrival. This variable (time since arrival) is only available at *département* level, so it is incompatible with our definition of rural areas; it also provides insights about the start of the settlement period, i.e. before some members of the foreign population acquired French nationality and were enumerated solely as immigrants.

Table 1. Distribution of immigrants in rural France by birth-country group

Birth-country group	Number of immigrants		Growth in immigrant numbers (mean annual rate, %)		Distribution of immigrants (%) by household size, 2015		
	Number	%	1975–1999	1999–2015	1 person	2 people	3 or more people
Southern Europe (incl. Spain, Italy, Portugal)	218,999	30.7	-1.5	-0.3	14.8	44.1	41.1
Western & Northern Europe	186,694	26.1	2.4	3.3	14.2	49.6	36.3
<i>of which the British Isles (United Kingdom, Ireland)</i>	76,079	10.7	8.8	7.2	11.5	57.5	31.0
<i>of which Benelux (Belgium, Luxembourg, Netherlands)</i>	57,849	8.1	1.1	2.7	15.1	43.5	41.4
North Africa (Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia)	114,472	16.0	0.4	1.1	9.5	24.2	66.3
Other European & former Soviet countries	58,690	8.2	-2.2	3.0	11.1	28.9	60.0
<i>of which Eastern Europe (incl. Bulgaria, Croatia, Poland)</i>	43,692	6.1	-2.4	2.0	12.8	30.3	56.9
Near and Middle East (incl. Iran, Turkey, Syria)	33,809	4.7	2.5	1.6	4.6	18.3	77.2
French-speaking Africa (incl. Côte d'Ivoire, Madagascar, Mali)	31,459	4.4	6.3	7.3	8.1	21.9	70.0
America & Oceania (incl. Argentina, Australia, United States)	26,592	3.7	5.0	4.3	8.4	29.7	61.9
Other African countries (incl. Egypt, Libya, Sudan)	15,665	2.2	7.4	5.2	9.3	25.0	65.8
Southeast Asia (Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam)	12,102	1.7	7.5	2.5	7.6	23.7	68.7
Other Asian countries (incl. Afghanistan, China, India)	15,517	2.2	7.9	4.6	7.6	26.3	66.0
Total	713,998	100.0	-1.0	1.7	12.1	37.3	50.6

Coverage: Metropolitan France.
Source: INSEE, 1975, 1999, and 2015 population censuses.

Around a quarter of rural immigrants are from Northern and Western Europe, and like those from Southern Europe, they live mainly in small households (64%). Nationals from the UK and Ireland alone account for 11% of rural immigrants and live mainly in western France. Their numbers increased sharply in the 1990s and 2000s, before levelling off after the economic crisis of 2007–2008 [5]. The share of immigrants from Benelux is also high (8%) and has been increasing since the 1970s.

While proportionally half as numerous as in predominantly urban areas (16% vs. 32%), North Africans also represent a large share of the total, with around one-third living in households of three or more people. They mainly live close to large and medium-sized cities, and their numbers have been increasingly steadily since the 1970s.

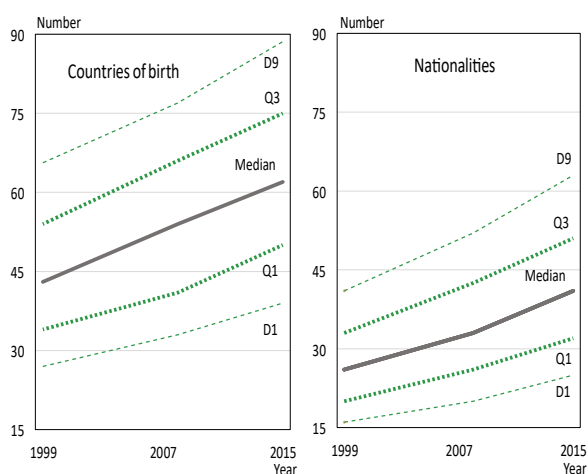
Around a quarter of rural immigrants (27%) come from other countries. Eastern Europeans account for 6% of the total, with an increase in inflows of workers to fill jobs in construction, agriculture, etc. since the expansion of the European Union in the 2000s. Immigrants of Near and Middle Eastern origin account for 5% of the total, and their numbers have been rising since the 1970s. Immigrants born in other

countries of Africa, and in America or Asia, are fewer in number but have contributed to the increasing diversity of nationalities in rural France since the 1990s at least (Figure 4).

... from an ever wider range of countries

Alongside the recent growth of immigrant and foreign populations in rural EPCIs (Figure 1 and Table 1), the number of different national origins has also increased (Figure 4). For example, the median number of different birth countries per EPCI rose from 42 to 62 between the 1999 and 2015 censuses. A similar trend is observed for nationalities (from 26 to 41) and concerns both older and more recent regions of destination. Only 1 rural EPCI in 10 (below or equal to the first decile [D1]) counts fewer than 40 countries of birth and fewer than 25 nationalities. These figures are naturally below those recorded in predominantly urban areas (median per EPCI: 100 countries of birth and 77 nationalities in 2015), where the number of immigrants and foreigners is much larger. The differences are tending to narrow, however, and the number of national origins has now levelled off at around 140 countries of birth and 120 nationalities in the most cosmopolitan urban EPCIs (equal to or above the ninth decile [D9]).

Figure 4. Numbers of countries of birth and nationalities in a rural EPCI, 1999–2015



Julie Fromentin and Pierre Pistre, *Population & Societies*, no. 591, July–August 2021.

Interpretation: In the 2015 census, at least 62 countries of birth were recorded in half of all French rural groupings of municipalities (EPCIs, see Box 1) (median); at least 89 countries of birth were recorded in 10% of EPCIs (equal to or above the ninth decile [D9]).

Coverage: Metropolitan France.

Source: INSEE, 1999, 2008, and 2015 population censuses.

Box 1. The CAMIGRI project*

The CAMIGRI* project (*Les campagnes françaises dans la dynamique des migrations internationales* [rural France in international migration dynamics]) studies international migration in rural areas of metropolitan France (mainland France and Corsica) and how immigrant populations have contributed to their evolution. Analyses are based on census data collected since the 1970s, accessed via the CASD secure data access centre (Ref. 10.34724/CASD), in association with local field surveys (for further information, see: <https://camigri.hypotheses.org/>).

The study defines the rural population as the people living in municipal groupings known as *Établissements publics de coopération intercommunale* (EPCI) in which the largest municipality had a population of less than 10,000 in the 2010 and 2015 censuses (921 in total). This geographical level was chosen for three reasons: (1) the selected EPCIs contain municipalities of under 10,000 inhabitants covered by an exhaustive population census (this is no longer the case for larger municipalities under the rules of the new annual census survey introduced in 2004); (2) most EPCIs have more than 5,000 inhabitants (for geographical zones with smaller populations it is illegal to publish data on inhabitants' nationalities and countries of birth); (3) EPCIs are recognized geographical entities with growing importance for local public policy.

* The CAMIGRI project was funded by the Agence nationale de la recherche and the Nouvelle-Aquitaine region.

The demographic and migratory dimensions of globalization are clearly visible in rural France.

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Abstract

In metropolitan France, immigrants or foreigners have represented a constant, albeit small (4.3% and 2.5%, respectively) share of the rural population since the 1970s. While most live close to international borders, in western France, or close to large or medium-sized cities, their spatial distribution is increasingly uniform across all regions of France. Most immigrants are from Southern, Western, and Northern Europe and from North Africa; these two groups differ notably in household size, with Europeans tending to live in smaller households. But inflows from other countries have increased, leading to a slow rise in the numbers of rural immigrants and foreigners and a diversification of origins since the 1990s at least.

Keywords

France, international migration, immigrants, foreigners, population census, rural areas