

Population & Societies

Who are the children enrolled in French daycare centres?

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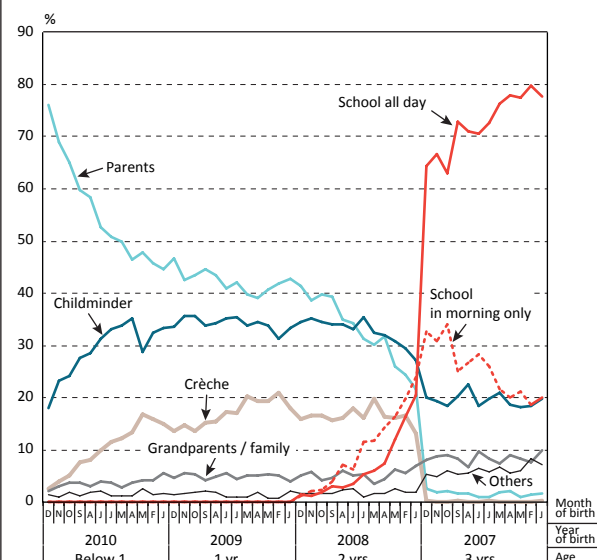
Daycare centres are very popular among parents of young children in France, yet in 2011 only 16% of preschoolers aged below 3 had a place. Beyond the fact that demand far outstrips supply, are some children, such as those from disadvantaged families, more likely to get a place than others? Analysing data from the 2011 family and housing survey (*Famille et Logements*), Nathalie Le Bouteillec, Lamia Kandil and Anne Solaz examine the profiles of the children who attend these centres.

Under the objectives set down by the Council of Europe in 2002, Member States were expected to provide childcare facilities for at least one-third of all children under 3 years of age by 2010. France has surpassed this target, with half of all under-3s enrolled in formal care, either with a childminder or in a daycare centre (*crèche*). While childminders are predominant, daycare centres have steadily increased their capacity over the last 20 years, providing places for 16% of preschool children in 2011. Collective daycare is much more widespread in northern Europe. Denmark, for example, offered places for 56% of preschool children in 2012. France thus offers more generous formal daycare provision than the European average, but places in collective *crèches* are scarce, despite strong parental demand.

Strong demand for daycare centres

When employers are asked about the measures needed to improve their employees' work-family balance, provision of daycare centres comes top of the list.[1] This is also the form of daycare favoured by parents of children aged under 3: after the birth of their child, 32% of parents report a preference for this option.⁽¹⁾ In their view, a

Figure 1. Daycare arrangements of children aged under 4 in January-February 2011 by age



Source: 2011 family and housing survey, INSEE.

Interpretation: Among children born in April 2008 (aged almost 3 at the time of the survey in 2011), 32% are looked after by a childminder, 30% by their parents and 18% in a daycare centre; 15% go to school in the morning and 8% all day.

collective *crèche* is beneficial for children's social development, helping to stimulate their intelligence and their autonomy. It also teaches them about social interaction, preparing them for entry into nursery school.

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(1) CNAF-TMO Régions survey, 2008.

[2] Parents also appreciate the skilled staff and the child-friendly environment. They are less happy, on the other hand, about the limited opening hours and the disruption of their children's natural sleep patterns. While parents with a child in formal daycare are generally satisfied with the service provided, four in ten would have preferred (and would sometimes still prefer) to switch to a different mode of care, in which case the crèche is mentioned most often.

Regional disparities in daycare provision

Many parents are unable to get a place for their child in a crèche, or cannot even apply because none are available in their locality. The situation is much better in large cities, Paris especially, where there are 38 places in daycare centres⁽²⁾ per 100 children below age 3, compared with a national average of 16. But the greatest disparities are between urban and rural areas. Alongside the high cost of daycare provision for small municipalities, this type of expenditure is not necessarily a priority for local authorities, so many parents living or working in rural areas have no access to collective daycare. When such facilities exist, places are allocated on the basis of social and family criteria. Some parents are angry about the lack of transparency and the inequality of treatment in the way places are allocated. So who are the parents and children who do get a place in a crèche? Do certain types of family take priority over others? Do they match the official selection criteria?

Half of all children are cared for by their parents

Drawing on data from the 2011 family and housing survey (*Famille et Logements*, see Box), we analyse the sociodemographic profiles of parents and children with a place in a collective daycare centre in 2011, for whom this was the main type of childcare arrangement. While this survey enables us to describe the populations currently using daycare centres, we cannot measure parental demand or the number of parents who abandon their attempt to find a place. The observed patterns of use thus reflect parental preferences, levels of local provision and the criteria for attributing places in collective facilities.

A non-negligible share of under-4s were already enrolled in school in 2011 (around 28%), entering nursery school in the year of their third birthday, as is the general rule in France. Some enter school at age two, but they were a small minority in 2011: while early school

Box. 2011 family and housing survey

The family and housing survey (*Famille et logements*) was conducted in France by INSEE from 20 January to 26 February 2011. A total of 360,000 adults living in 1400 municipalities were interviewed. This survey, coupled with the census, was designed to collect information over three generations (grandparents, children, grandchildren) on fertility and on new themes such as stepfamilies, same-sex parenting and shared residence. Complementing other surveys, it also provides data on the daycare arrangements of children aged below 4 in each respondent's household. [3] For each child, the following question was asked: «How is he/she usually cared for in the daytime on weekdays (apart from school, if he/she goes there)?» The response options included «Crèche (collective or family)», a category covering a range of collective facilities that are grouped under the title of «crèche» or «daycare centre» in this article. The other response categories were: «by the mother or father», «by a childminder», «by grandparents or family members», and «by others». The sample comprises 44,007 children below 4 years of age from 37,926 households. Our study more specifically concerns preschool children (i.e. 31,686 children from 29,284 households).

enrolment was broadly encouraged in the 1990s, the trend was later reversed in order to cut costs. While 35% of two-year-olds went to school in 2000, just 11% did so in 2012, and few schools accept children at such an early age. A return to the practice of enrolling two-year-olds in school has recently been envisaged in disadvantaged areas, however.

The proportion of children in formal childcare increases steadily with age (Figure 1), with the frequency of each type of care remaining stable until the transition to nursery school (visible after age 30 months). At these young ages, children often only attend school in the morning, while after their third birthday they generally stay on in the afternoon. At age three, practically all children go to school, either in the mornings or all day. Among preschoolers below 4 years of age, half are generally cared for by their parents during the week, probably the mother in the vast majority of cases, 29% go to a childminder and 16% attend a crèche or collective daycare facility. Just 4.5% of children are cared for mainly by grandparents or other family members.

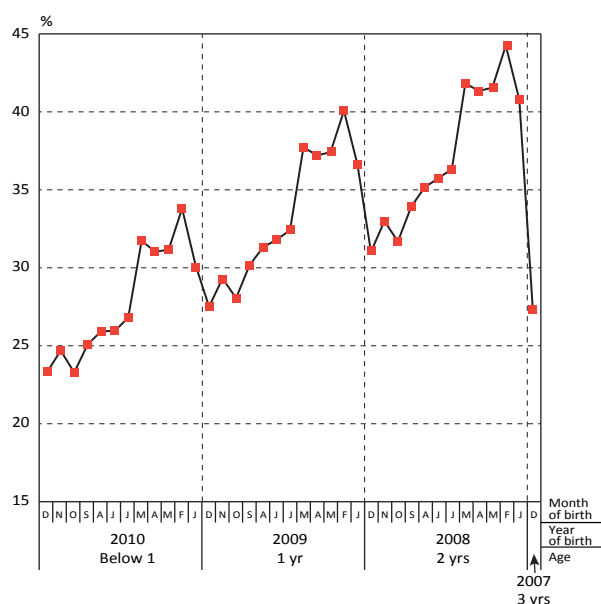
Fewer crèche places for children born in the autumn

Among children whose parents have opted for an external daycare solution (in most cases, children whose mothers are working or seeking employment), how likely are they to attend a crèche rather than being cared for by a childminder or by grandparents?

Comparing children of the same age (Figure 2), those born early in the year (January to April) are always more

(2) Including family daycare facilities (childminders who regularly take the children to a collective crèche) but excluding preschool play centres (*jardins d'enfants*).

Figure 2. Probability of attending a crèche by age and month of birth



Coverage: Pre-school children aged below 4 whose parents have opted for external daycare.

Source: 2011 family and housing survey, INSEE.

Interpretation: Among children whose parents have opted for external daycare, those born in February 2010 have a 34% chance, all other things being equal, of getting a place in a crèche, versus 27% for children born in December 2009.

Results based on the estimates of a bivariate model taking account of age, month of birth, sex, birth order, single/twin birth, adopted/biological child, lone-parent/two-parent family, parents' nationality, age, educational level, employment situation and occupational category, region and size of the municipality of residence.

likely to get a place in a crèche than those born in the last three months. Crèche places do not become available regularly across the year. Most places are freed up in September when the oldest children leave to attend nursery school, and they are taken up disproportionately by children born between January and June. Moreover, local authority meetings to allocate crèche places are generally organized just two or three times year, often with a meeting in spring to examine the applications of parents whose children are already born and who need a place for the autumn. Moreover, parents who have a child early in the year are often able to extend their leave until the autumn (combining maternity, parental and annual leave), thereby increasing their chances of a crèche place.

Places are allocated equally to boys and girls, and to children of biological or adoptive parents. The child's birth order does have an impact, however (Figure 3). Third children more frequently get a place in collective daycare than first or second children, the aim being to help mothers with large families who wish to stay in work. Likewise, twins and triplets are more likely to have a place than singletons.

No special treatment for lone-parent families

According to the national family allowance fund (Caisse nationale des allocations familiales), being the child of a lone parent is used as a criterion for allocating places by 13% of preschool childcare facilities, but many more take this factor into account when it is associated with another criterion (mother working or seeking employment, for example).[4] However, children of lone parents are no more likely than other children using external daycare to get a place in a crèche: these children represent 9.7% of all under-4s and accounted for 9% of all children enrolled in daycare centres in 2011. While this figure is quite close to the target of allocating one in ten crèche places to children from families in difficulty⁽³⁾, those raised in lone-parent families do not appear to take priority⁽⁴⁾. A higher target would be needed to ensure greater access for these children.

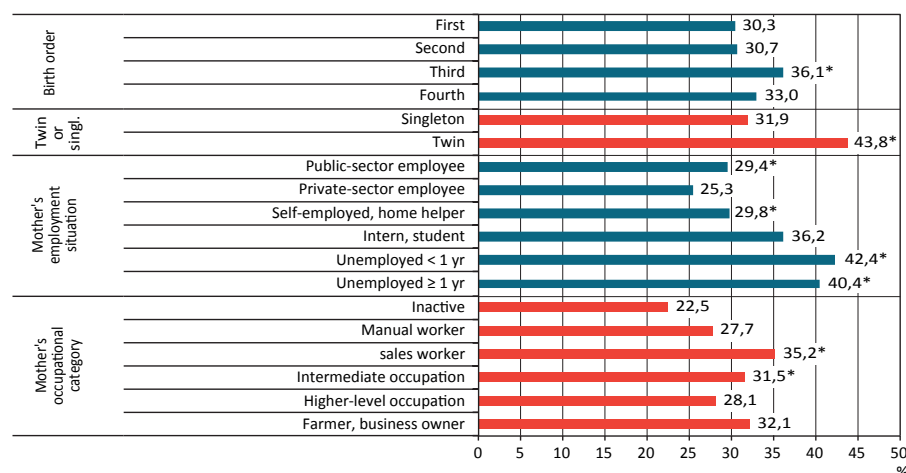
Extra help for professionally disadvantaged mothers

The parents' age and educational level have little effect on the probability of a place in a crèche, except in the cases of young mothers and of mothers with no qualifications. Compared with more educated women, far fewer unqualified mothers have a place in a crèche; they more often rely on grandparents or other family members if they do not look after the child themselves. Young mothers (i.e. aged 20-25 when the child was born), for their part, make greater use of daycare centres than older mothers. The employment situation is a determining factor. Of course, being in employment is often a precondition for obtaining a crèche place, but we observe that unemployed mothers are over-represented, suggesting that situations of occupational insecurity take priority when places are attributed. This does not apply for fathers in such situations, however. Women working in the public sector or who are self-employed more often have a crèche place than those working in the private sector, though this finding is linked to the large number of childcare centres for hospital workers. Women in sales and intermediate occupations also more often have a place than those in higher-level occupations, who may opt for a mode of care that is possibly more expensive and more suited to the parents' longer working hours (Figure 3). Alongside a concern for social diversity, preschool daycare facilities also seem to favour diversity of origins, although this criterion is not explicitly stated. Children in external care

(3) The 2013 national conference against poverty and for social inclusion recommended that one in ten crèche places be set aside for children from lone-parent families or whose parents receive minimum income support.

(4) Given that lone mothers use external daycare as much as mothers in a couple.

Figure 3. Chance of a place in a crèche by child's characteristics and mother's occupation



Coverage: Pre-school children aged below 4 whose parents have opted for external daycare.

Source: 2011 family and housing survey, INSEE.

Interpretation: Among children whose parents have opted for external daycare, those whose mothers are unemployed for at least one year have a 42% chance, all other things being equal, of attending a crèche, versus 29% for children whose mothers are public-sector employees. The model is the same as for Figure 2.

* Significant difference with respect to the reference category (first, child, singleton, private-sector employee, higher-level occupation).

with foreign mothers more frequently attend a daycare centre than those with French parents. This is also true for the children of immigrants' daughters. This may reflect a stronger preference among these women for this type of care. The father's national origin appears to have a lesser effect, showing that the mother's characteristics tend to weigh more heavily than the father's for the attribution of crèche places.

Regional differences (already highlighted by Acs [3]) are large, with a 17-20% chance of obtaining a place in Haute-Normandie, Centre, Basse-Normandie and Pays de Loire, almost 30% in the Paris region (Île-de-France) and nearly 50% in Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur and Corsica. These disparities correspond to the observed differences in coverage rates (crèche places per 100 children aged below 3).⁽⁵⁾ Analysing the profile of children with a crèche place does not shed light on the extent to which local levels of provision and parental preferences influence the choice of different childcare options. Independently of

(5) The Île-de-France and Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur regions have the highest coverage rates (19%). Rates are very low (7-9%) in the Haute-Normandie, Centre, Basse-Normandie and Pays de la Loire regions.

the major regional disparities which limit access to collective daycare, it is the mother's rather than the father's characteristics, notably in terms of educational level and employment, that influence the chance of gaining a place. There is also a «luck» factor, as shown by the disproportionate presence of children born in the first half of the year.

References

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[2] Clément Justinia, Nicolas Muriel, 2009, «Opinions et satisfaction des parents vis-à-vis des modes de garde», CNAF, *L'essentiel*, 82.

[3] Acs Marie, 2013, «Les spécificités régionales des modes de garde déclarés des enfants de moins de 3 ans», DREES, *Études et Résultats*, 839.

[4] Candiago Philippe, Moreira Marina, Ruffiot Amédine, Robin Kim, Maneveau Romain, 2012, «Les publics des établissements d'accueil du jeune enfant (EAJE), Attribution des places et gestion au quotidien», CNAF, *Dossier d'études*, 152.

Abstract

Children born early in the year are more likely to get a place in collective daycare than those born in the autumn. Places are allocated equally, however to boys and girls, and to children of biological or adoptive parents. Third children more frequently get a place in collective daycare than first or second children, the aim being to help mothers with large families who wish to stay in work. Likewise, twins and triplets are more likely to have a place than singletons. Children of unemployed mothers are over-represented, while children from lone-parent families do not appear to take priority, despite a policy to favour their enrolment.