

Improving life in France's lower-income neighbourhoods

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Last update: 19 June 2018



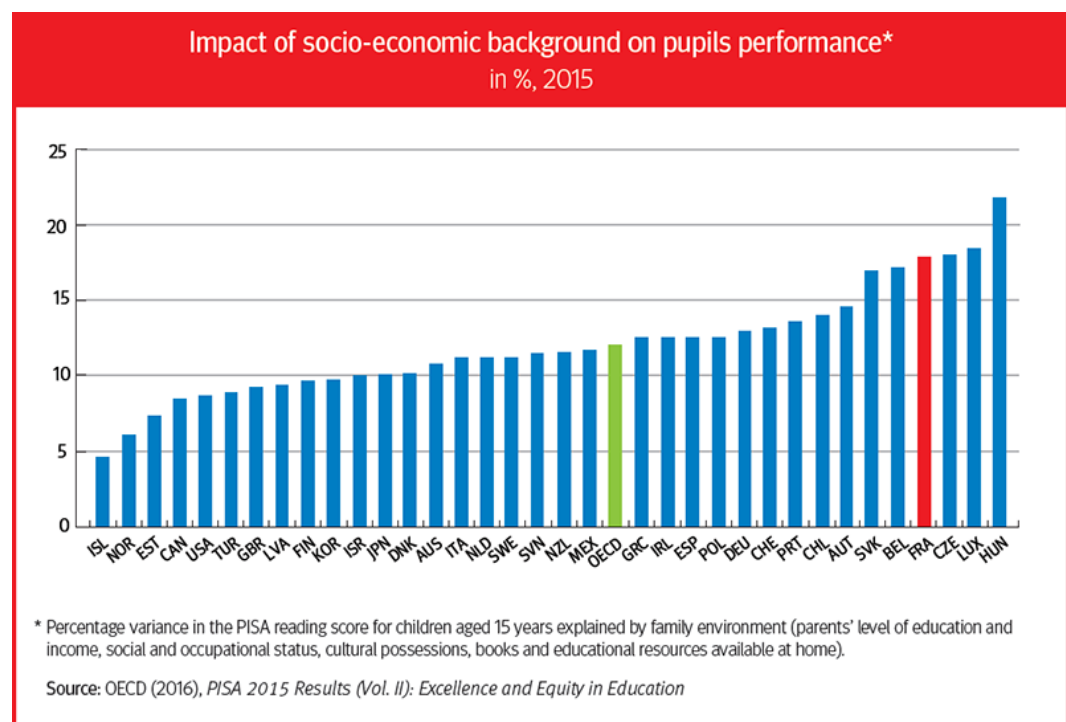
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While overall poverty is relatively low in France, it can be highly concentrated at the neighbourhood level. In some cases, 40% of households in such neighbourhoods are below the relative poverty line. Unemployment is high, children struggle in school, housing and urban infrastructure is run down, and there is a lack of local employers, public and private services, and amenities.

The French government deploys special education, employment, business and safety measures in these areas. There are also policies to promote social mixing: municipalities in areas of tension must devote at least 25% of housing to social housing or face fines. The *Programme National pour la Rénovation Urbaine* is a large-scale urban renovation programme that aims to attract residents from wealthier

areas to lower-income neighbourhoods where dilapidated social housing estates have been replaced with smaller units mixing social, private rental and owner-occupied housing. Such policies are based on the idea that high geographical concentrations of poverty reinforce and reproduce economic and social disadvantage. Indeed, in the United States, children who move away from neighbourhoods with a high concentration of poverty are found to attain higher levels of education and earnings than their peers who stayed behind.

While these results do not necessarily carry over to the French context where poverty overall is much lower and the social safety net stronger than in the US, there is clear evidence that social disadvantage is reinforced for inhabitants of France's poor neighbourhoods. Their unemployment risk is almost double that of individuals with comparable characteristics who live in wealthier neighbourhoods. Studies show that this is partly due to discrimination: those with foreign-sounding names or addresses in lower-income areas are less likely to obtain job interviews. Another issue is that many lower-income neighbourhoods are remote and poorly connected to transport infrastructure and services. This is especially a problem during off-hours, which particularly impacts low-skilled workers who are also less likely to have a driver's license or own a car. The recently released *OECD Economic Survey of France* concludes that active policies are needed to fight discrimination. This can include awareness campaigns for employment recruiters, mentoring and coaching sessions for job seekers, and direct placements with potential employers, something that has worked well for university graduates.



While the urban renovation programme has improved infrastructure, and many residents are satisfied with the results, the impact on social mixity is unclear. Echoing the experiences of other countries, many people whose buildings were being demolished to make way for mixed housing were relocated to other high-poverty neighbourhoods. Moreover, mixing different kinds of housing has not brought about more social interaction.

As the government plans to extend the programme, the *Economic Survey* recommends better integration with employment and social policies. Consultation with residents about planned renovation projects should be used as an entry point for basic skills and language training. Construction and renovation work could be an opportunity for apprenticeship-style training for building sector jobs. Indeed, consultation needs to improve, and citizen councils introduced in 2014 to help draft strategy documents for the economic and social development of lower-income neighbourhoods are a first step in that direction. Strong resident participation in designing and implementing renovation projects has been successfully practiced in Germany where residents often rehabilitate their buildings themselves. In the US, residents of demolished buildings often had negative experiences with forced relocation; they now have a right to return when construction is finished.



France has run priority education programmes that devote more resources to schools with disadvantaged pupils for more than 30 years but the impact of socio-economic background on learning outcomes is still among the highest in the OECD. The *OECD Economic Survey of France* argues that individualised support for struggling students suffers from not enough high-quality initial and continuing pedagogical training for teachers. More must be done to offer attractive pay and career prospects for teachers who work in schools with a high population of

disadvantaged children. While the bonus for teaching in priority education schools has recently been raised, it remains too low to stabilise teaching teams. And perversely, advantages for teachers in these schools have actually encouraged them to leave faster.

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