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What people in France know about population: Evidence from a recent survey

Virginie De Luca Barrusse*, Cécile Lefèvre**, and Jacques Véron***

What do people in France know and think about population? Using data from a survey conducted in 2018 on a representative sample of the general population, Virginie De Luca Barrusse, Cécile Lefèvre, and Jacques Véron take stock of the state of awareness and opinions in France about current population issues and their changes over the last 70 years.

What do people in France think about population issues? What topics do they find most interesting? What do they worry about? The POP-AWARE survey on awareness and perception of population issues, conducted at the end of 2018 on a representative sample of the general population as part of the ELIPSS programme (Box 1), provides new insights on population awareness in France and on opinions about demographic issues. It follows on from a series of INED surveys between 1949 and 1987, using identical wording for some of the questions to facilitate comparison. But this latest version covers a much broader range of topics, at both global and national levels. The survey includes factual questions, but it also asks respondents to give their opinions, sometimes via open questions to obtain more nuanced responses.

A clear interest in population questions

As was already the case in the late 1950s, people in France still take an interest in population issues, and their interest is even increasing (Table). In 2018, 92% of respondents considered these issues important or very important versus 75% in 1959.

Box 1. POP-AWARE, a survey conducted as part of the ELIPSS programme

Serving the scientific community, ELIPSS (Étude longitudinale par internet pour les sciences sociales) is an Internet panel representative of the population living in mainland France [6]. The panellists, aged 18 to 79 and selected randomly by INSEE, respond to the ELIPSS online surveys using a touch tablet. For further details, see https://www.elipss.fr/fr/ (in French) and http://quanti.dime-shs.sciences-po.fr/en/.

Led by CRIDUP, the demographic research centre of Université de Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne, in association with Université de Paris and INED, the POP-AWARE survey on awareness and perception of population issues[a] was held in September and October 2018. The questionnaire was sent to 2,590 panellists and was completed by 2,148, giving a response rate of 83%. Weighting was used to ensure sample representativeness.

(a) It is based partly on a pilot survey by Université de Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne, coordinated by Virginie Dejoux and Renaud Orain in an educational context. It also draws upon a survey administered to students in the last year of secondary school [1].

The share of respondents who consider population questions to be 'very important' increases with age: 25% among the under-40s versus 45% among people aged 60 and over. But whatever their age group, occupation, occupational category, or even level of interest in politics, 90% of respondents see these questions as either 'important' or 'very important'. The POP-AWARE survey also asked the same

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Table. Importance attached to population questions in France (percentage distribution)

Year	1959	1965	2018
Very important	27	30	31
Important	48	41	61
Not very important	10	6	7
Unimportant		5	1
Non-response	15	18	0*
Total	100	100	100

Note: Response to the question 'In your opinion, population questions such as those concerning the number and distribution of inhabitants and how they may change are…'

* This value, close to 0 (0.03%), is a consequence of the survey method, which does not allow immediate non-response.

Sources: [2] and POP-AWARE 2018.

question not just for France but also for the whole world. The results are very similar, with a high level of reported interest, suggesting that respondents attach importance to population questions in general, and not only to the situation in France.

Resources are the main topic of concern

Over half of respondents (53%) gave a correct answer for the world population size: 'slightly more than 7 billion'. However, there is a strong tendency to overestimate. More than 13% of respondents (10% of men, 16% of women) chose a figure of above 16 billion (more than double the actual number) and more than a quarter (26% of men, 32% of women) a figure of slightly above 10 billion. This threshold of 10 billion by 2050 is often cited by the media in sometimes alarming reports about the United Nations population projections, which probably explains why more than three-quarters of respondents see world population growth solely as 'a risk' (whereas 3% see it solely as an 'opportunity', 12% see it as both 'an opportunity and a risk', and 12% opt for 'neither one or the other').

But what are the major causes for concern, and which words do respondents use to express them? Recorded in an open answer, the main preoccupation is the depletion of the world's 'resources' (*ressources*), be they 'natural' (*naturelles*), 'energy' (*énergétiques*) or 'food' (*alimentaires*). Regarding the latter, mentioned by 30% of respondents, the term 'hunger' (*faim*) is rarely used, but 'famine' (*famine*) appears quite often. The two words most frequently used are 'food' (*nourriture*) and 'feed' (*nourrir*). Other sources of concern include pollution (13% of responses) and water (10%). Only 5% mention the climate: 'warming' (*réchauffement*), 'change' (*changement*), or 'disturbance' (*dérèglement*). The term 'overpopulation' (*surpopulation*) is used by fewer than 7% of respondents to this question.

When respondents are asked to select and rank the three most important global population issues from among a list of six items, 47% put 'the effects of world population growth on sustainable development' in first place, and 23% select 'population movements linked to environmental factors (hurricanes, tsunamis, drought) and climate change'. The 'effects of political and economic circumstances on migration' is ranked first by only 16% of respondents and 'population ageing' by just 10%. Fewer than 3% select 'decline in births' and 'numerical imbalance between men and women'.

However, when respondents are asked to link a major population issue to each region of the world, 59% associate Europe with population ageing. For Africa, population displacements are seen as the key challenge, and for Asia, population growth. Respondents thus clearly distinguish between global and regional challenges.

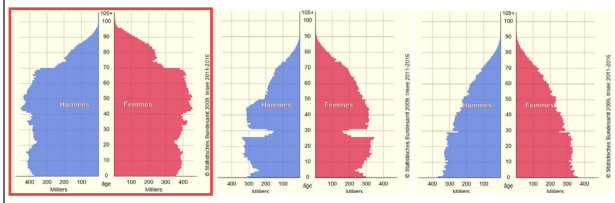
Population of France: a preference for stability

For France, be it population size, age structure, or male and female life expectancy, respondents are quite knowledgeable about the demographic situation. For example, 57% recognized the current population pyramid of France (framed in Figure 1) from among the three they were shown.

Figure 1. Population pyramids for France shown to respondents

Q14A. *Which of the following population pyramids corresponds to the situation in France?*

How to read a population pyramid:
The base represents population size at each age by sex (males to the left, females to the right).



Source for the population pyramids: INSEE, interactive tool, https://www.insee.fr/en/statistiques/3312960/

Next, when asked to express a preference for population growth, stability, or decline, 65% expressed a preference for stability. This response differs markedly from those given in the 13 previous surveys conducted by INED (Figure 2). In the immediate post-war period, when the baby boom was in full swing, the preference was

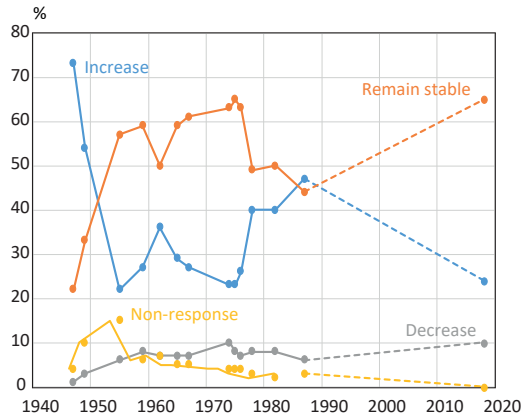
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for population growth. The main reason given was 'patriotism, strength, prestige': 38% and 35%, respectively, of those in favour of population growth in 1947 and 1949 ranked this answer first, well above factors linked to output or wealth creation. Since 1955 (except marginally in 1987), most respondents have expressed a preference for the population to 'stay more or less the same' (with the supporters of stability even exceeding 60% in surveys conducted between 1967 and 1976). In each survey, the dominant concern was 'fear of unemployment, of a lack of job opportunities'. This factor was mentioned as early as 1955, although it was not until the early 1970s that unemployment started increasing. The 1975 survey and the four following ones revealed a renewed preference for population growth, perhaps in response to the end of the baby boom and the subsequent drop in births, which received widespread media coverage. While we do not know how these opinions evolved in the following years, most respondents in 2018 favoured population stability for France.

In the 2018 POP-AWARE survey, 63% of respondents say birth numbers in France are at the 'right' level. Consistent with a preference for population stability, 59% think that two is the ideal number of children, and 33% prefer three. In the surveys from 1947 to 1967, the three-child family was the most popular ideal, preferred by 40% of respondents and even by 50% in 1967. The two-child family, preferred by 30% to 40% of respondents, took second place. The situation reversed in 1974, when the two-child norm slightly overtook that of three children.

POP-AWARE also surveyed respondents' knowledge and opinions about migration and ageing. When asked about the countries with the highest proportion of immigrants, they cited the United States, Germany, and Canada in that order, whereas the top three countries are the United Arab Emirates, Switzerland, and Australia (each of these possible answers appeared in a list of 10 countries). Respondents doubtless reasoned in terms of absolute numbers rather than proportions and were perhaps influenced by the United States' and Canada's reputations as major receiving countries. Asked about the three main countries of origin of immigrants living in France, respondents ranked Syria first, although Syrians only represent a small fraction of the total. The top three countries of origin are actually Algeria, Morocco, and Portugal. Current events appear to have a stronger impact on people's perceptions than long-term trends. The perceived scale of Syrian immigration is explained by the extensive media coverage of the 'migrant crisis'.

Figure 2. Reported preferences regarding population change in France, 1947–2018



V. De Luca Barrusse, C. Lefèvre and J. Véron, *Population & Societies* no. 572, INED, December 2019.

Note: Response to the question 'In your opinion, it would be preferable for the French population to…'
Sources: [2, 3, 4, 5] and POP-AWARE 2018.

More than a third of respondents correctly attributed ageing to a simultaneous decline in births and in mortality at advanced ages. And 70% correctly identified Japan as the country where people currently live longest. Numerical representations of migration thus appear to be more strongly influenced by topical events than is the case for ageing, with the use of statistics in the migration debate sometimes creating a distorted vision of reality.

Demography, a topic of discussion

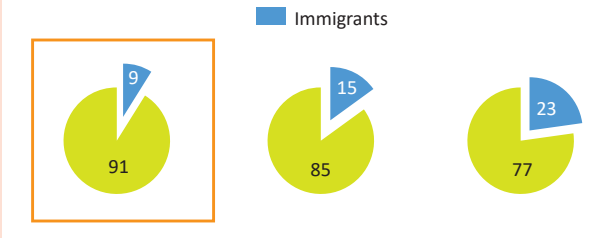
At the end of the questionnaire, respondents were asked about their perceived levels of demographic knowledge and their access to this knowledge. Did they feel well informed? What were their main information sources?

Paradoxically, more than half feel ill-informed, with a notable difference between men and women (52% and 62%). The proportion who consider themselves ill-informed is lowest among manual workers and highest among clerical workers, with more than 10 points of difference between the two occupational categories (52% and 63%). The proportion of respondents who think they are well informed increases with age. The most educated more frequently think that they are 'well informed' or 'quite well informed' than the other categories, although 56% consider themselves 'ill-informed'. This question on the perceived level of knowledge was asked at the end of the questionnaire, after several questions perceived as 'difficult' by respondents. This may have heightened their feeling of not knowing enough.

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Box 2. How pie charts influence responses

A question on the proportion of immigrants in France was asked to respondents randomly in one of two ways: by asking them either to select the pie chart (shown below) that corresponds to the situation in France (QA) or to choose from a list of items with no visual representation (QB).



QA: *In your opinion, which pie chart shows the proportion of immigrants in the population of France today?*

QB: *In your opinion, what is the proportion of immigrants in the population of France today?*
1. 9%
2. 15%
3. 23%

In both cases, the proportion (9% in 2018) is overestimated, especially when the respondents see a pie chart, with 26% choosing the right answer, 39% the intermediate answer, and 30% the highest answer (the remaining 5% correspond to non-responses). When respondents are asked to choose between three percentages (QB), the scores are respectively, 39%, 40%, and 20%.

Pie charts produce a more distorted perception of immigrant proportions, suggesting that their use should be avoided here.

In answer to the question 'How did you learn about these [population] issues?', 65% of respondents mentioned the radio and TV. The press came second (44% of responses), and 'discussions' third (34%), followed by websites (26%), books (slightly below 10%), and classes or lectures (6%). The information sources are diverse, but more than a third of respondents thus mentioned 'discussions' as a source of information, proving that population questions are familiar topics of interest and that respondents feel concerned by them. This source is cited most often by middle-aged respondents (ages 30–39 and 40–49) and much less at ages 70 and over (40% and 28% of responses, respectively). One might assume that discussions of this kind occur mainly in the workplace, but unemployed people actually mentioned them slightly more often than did people in employment. There are few differences across occupational categories but more pronounced variations by educational level: 30% among the least educated and 45% among the highest educated.

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Abstract

The POP-AWARE survey on awareness and perception of population issues confirms the French population's interest in demographic topics, as already revealed in earlier INED surveys. The answers to the knowledge questions show that despite feeling ill-informed, respondents generally have an accurate understanding of the demographic situation in France and the world. Far from considering demographic topics obscure or technical, a large share of the population takes an active interest in these issues and feels directly concerned.

Keywords

population issues, knowledge about population, opinions, survey, ELIPSS, France.

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