Immigrant Child Poverty in France

Following Chapter 4 on the situation of immigrant children in Switzerland, we now examine their situation in France, another rich country in Western Europe. In 2004, the French Council on Employment, Incomes and Social Cohesion (CERC) estimated that roughly 1 million children in France were living below the French poverty rate of 50 per cent of the median income. Roughly 74 per cent of these children were in families headed by persons of French nationality. Roughly 26 per cent were living in families headed by persons of recent and not so recent immigration. The actual number of poor children, immigrant and non-immigrant, is probably higher today given the recent demographic trends (Martin, 2007, pp. 43–9).

In 2008, the French definition of the poverty threshold was brought into accord with that of the European Union, that is, the poverty threshold of 60 per cent of the median income instead of 50 per cent. According to this new definition, over 12 per cent of the French population in 2005 lived below the poverty line compared to 6 per cent under the old definition. The child poverty rate (for children under 18) in 2005 was 15.5 per cent instead of 8 per cent under the old definition (ONPES, 2008, p. 54).1

Although the numbers of poor people in France have remained relatively stable over several years, their material and non-material situations have substantially worsened. Between 2003 and 2005 alone the number of the ‘working poor’ has increased by 21 per cent (ONPES Travaux, 2008, p. 41). In France they are defined as persons living below 40 per cent of the median income. While individuals living alone are clearly at risk of poverty, households and especially single-parent households with children are even more severely affected.

Before discussing the plight of immigrant children in France, we first need to discuss briefly the magnitude and trends of overall immigration.
Immigration: magnitude and trends

Immigration to France is not new. France has been an important destination for immigration from within and outside Europe since the late 19th century and early 20th century. A low fertility rate, an enormous number of deaths during the First World War, the rapid economic expansion during the 1920s and reconstruction following the Second World War; all these factors generated a massive demand for foreign labour (Barou, 2007; INSEE, 2007a). However, since the end of the Second World War successive French governments have struggled to regulate immigration by revising complicated immigration policies (van Eeckhout, 2007, pp. 36–8). The fundamental fairness of these policies regarding respect for human dignity and rights of prospective immigrants to France discussed in Chapter 1 is now being called into question.

The statistics compiled by the French National Statistical Office (INSEE) distinguish between ‘foreigners’ and ‘immigrants’. The definition of foreigners is based on the nationality criterion; all those living in France without French nationality are considered foreigners. They include those who are born abroad and others who are born in France but of foreign parents. According to the INSEE annual survey for 2004, there were 3.51 million foreigners. Immigrants are defined in terms of a double criterion of nationality and place of birth. They include foreigners born abroad (about 3 million in 2004) and others who were born abroad but acquired French citizenship (about 2 million in 2004). Thus the total number of immigrants in 2004 was about 5 million, or 8.1 per cent of the French population (van Eeckhout, 2007, p. 14; INSEE, 2005, p. 34).

A child born in France of two foreign parents is considered a ‘foreigner’ except when both his/her parents themselves were also born in France. In the census population many children were erroneously counted as French when they should have been counted as foreigners. Thus there are problems with the statistics of immigrant children in France. According to the 1999 Census, about 410,000 minors born in France of foreign parents were erroneously classified as French by birth. INSEE has made adjustments to correct this bias. The adjusted figures show that the number of minors increases from 3.26 million to 3.67 million (INSEE, 2005, p. 34).

In early Spring 2007 the French Interministerial Committee for Fight Against Illegal Immigration (Comité interministeriel de lutte contre l’immigration clandestine) estimated that at least 90,000 persons who settle in France each year do so illegally.