

The French ECEC paradox: universal ambitions, unequal realities



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Abstract

The French ECEC system combines near-universal preschool access from age three with highly stratified access to formal childcare for children under three. Despite substantial public investment and a diversified supply of childminders and daycare centers, early childcare remains marked by geographic disparities and strong socioeconomic inequalities. High-income, dual-earner households are far more likely to secure formal care than other households. Several policy initiatives have aimed to expand supply and promote social diversity, but their impact on equity remains limited. At the same time, workforce shortages and rising reliance on private providers raise concerns about quality, affordability, and accessibility of early childcare. This report highlights France's paradox: high overall coverage paired with persistent inequalities in access, underscoring the need for reforms that align universal ambitions with equitable provision.

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1. Introduction

France has a relatively long-standing tradition of early childhood education and care (ECEC) service provision compared to many other European countries. In the first comparative studies in the mid-1980s, France presented a relatively high public coverage for those years in services for children below 3 years (around 20-25%), and an almost universal coverage (95%) for children in pre-school (Philipps and Moss, 1989). The French coverage rate for 0-2 children was only second to the one found in Denmark (44%) and Sweden (29%), and similar to the one present in Belgium and Finland.

In Europe, ECEC systems are generally organised in two main ways according to children's ages (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2019): separate/dual settings for younger and older children with a transition usually around the age of 3; unitary settings for the whole age range, up until the start of primary education. In this respect, France belongs to the first cluster, having a dual ECEC system, differentiating early childcare (0-3) from preschool education (3-6). Early childcare is accessible from as early as two and a half months after birth, coinciding with the end of statutory maternity leave.

While preschool (*école maternelle*) is free, universal, and mandatory for children aged three to five, childcare before the age of three is more decentralised and diverse. Preschool education has a long-standing tradition and is primarily focused on education: it is part of the national primary education system and is monitored by the Ministry of Education. In contrast, childcare for children under three is centered on care, and varies in terms of providers and structures, although most formal arrangements are centrally regulated in terms of structural quality. Unlike many other European countries, there has been little appetite in France for harmonising and integrating these two systems (Hulpia et al., 2024).

In this report, we focus mostly on early (0-3) formal care, although we provide some elements on the preschool system. Around half of all children under the age of three (44% in 2021) are cared for through early (0-3) formal care (ONAPE, 2023). An element of cross-country differentiation among ECEC systems for children below 3 years is the extent to which they are mostly based on daycare centers or are based on a variety of formal arrangements. Unlike many European countries, France belongs to this latter cluster, and proposes regulated childminders (*assistantes maternelles*), private at-home nannies, and various forms of regulated, collective daycare centers (*crèches; halte garderies; micro-crèches*). Childminders play an important role, accounting for 53% of full-time slots available¹, followed by daycare

¹ These numbers refer to the number of full time slots available, rather than the number of children using them. There can be a difference between statistics relating to the number of available slots, versus statistics relating to the children using them: slots can be not filled; more than one child can use the same a slot if they are part time;

centers (38%), preschools (6%), and home-based workers such as nannies (4%) (*ibidem*). At the same time, while childminders are predominant, daycare centers have steadily increased their capacity over the last 20 years.

Day-care centers' provision is based on an (increasingly) diverse mix of providers: 40% are run by local authorities, 33% by private for-profit organisations, and 22% by non-profit associations (ONAPE, 2023). Municipal authorities play a significant role in service provision, but the state maintains a central role in regulating and financing them. As a result, the majority of daycare centers are state-funded but run by at the local level (Panico & Kitzmann, 2020).

With respect to financing, France has one of the highest spending in the OECD towards families with young children, with subsidies towards services such as childcare constituting an important portion of this spending (Adema, Clark, and Thevenon, 2020). Childcare subsidies can be provided directly to the service supplier if it is public, or to the parent if private. For public daycare centers, government subsidies are given directly to the centers, based on parents' incomes. The lower the household income, the less parents pay for daycare, with central funding compensating the centers for the difference. This funding model results in relatively uniform out-of-pocket fees for daycare centers across the country, although there is significant variation based on household income. There is also relatively little variation in the subsidies' amount received by parents who choose childminders, nannies, or private daycare providers. However, parents may experience more variation in their out-of-pocket expenses, as these providers have more flexibility in setting their prices (albeit within limits for regulated childminders).

Despite an early start, in the 1970s and 1980s, a rapid expansion over the last 20 years, and increasing political attention to the expansion of childcare slots for children under three, several key challenges remain.

First, access to formal care is heavily socially stratified. Since 2002, the share of children under three cared for in a daycare center or by a childminder has nearly doubled (respectively +9 percentage points, and +7 percentage points), linked to rising maternal employment rates (ONAPE, 2023). However, childcare arrangements still vary considerably based on parents' employment status, social class, the availability of care services in the region, family composition, and the age of the child.

Second, while quality is considered high, in practice this is difficult to assess: there are few formal evaluations, no nationally set curriculum (Panico & Kitzmann, 2020), and there are likely

and children can use more than one childcare arrangement, for example crèche in the morning and a childminder in the afternoon.

to be differences between care provided by public versus private sector providers, and between type of care such as daycare centers versus childminders.

Third, formal childcare, and especially collective daycare, has been put at the forefront of France's recent anti-poverty strategy ([Ministère des Solidarités et de la Santé 2018](#)), and is increasingly having to integrate the needs of diverse populations.

These challenges must be put in the context of broader demographic trends. In recent years, France has experienced a decline in birth rates. In 2022, only 726,000 babies were born, the lowest number since 1946, representing a 2.2% decrease from the previous year (ONAPE, 2023). Since 2011, the number of children under the age of three has decreased by 15%. This drop is primarily attributed to a decline in fertility rates, with fewer women having children (ONAPE, 2023). Also, migration has changed the demand for childcare. France continues to see significant immigration, with many families coming from countries with higher fertility rates. This influx contributes to an increasingly diverse population of children, which poses both opportunities and challenges for childcare services in terms of promoting social integration and addressing the needs of children from immigrant backgrounds. Childcare facilities, especially in metropolitan regions, can therefore be at the forefront of supporting children at risk of social exclusion, with a growing need for inclusive practices and culturally responsive care. Finally, labor market and family changes, particularly the increasing participation of women to the workforce and the growing number of single parent families, have created additional demands on childcare services, particularly for flexible and affordable childcare, creating a strain on the existing system. The rise in part-time and irregular work hours further complicates parents' access to stable childcare.

This study examines key ECEC-specific policy issues in France, such as access, quality, and cost, using both national and regional levels of analysis, focusing on the 0 to 3 years. At the national level, it focuses on the overall governance structure, accessibility and affordability of the French early childcare system. It also examines local variability in service accessibility and quality, at the municipal and metropolitan levels, using three case studies in the Paris metropolitan area: Paris, Val-de-Marne, and Seine-Saint-Denis (deprived suburban). These case studies explore the implications of local governance and administrative processes on the effectiveness of early childcare provision, access, and equity, highlighting key challenges and opportunities for future policy reforms in France.

2. Availability, access to, and use of services

2.1 Overview

As stated in the introduction, France achieved near-universal access for children three-to-six years of age through the *écoles maternelles* (preschool) several decades ago. These services are free, universal, and mandatory from the age of three (see section 2.2 for further information on the preschool system). For children under the age of three, the picture is different. Informal and parental care remains the predominant form of care for this age group, with 59% of children under three cared for by parents or relatives in 2021 (ONAPE, 2023).

In 2021, the total number of early childcare slots, excluding the department of Mayotte, reached 1.3 million, which represents a coverage ratio of 59.4 places per 100 children. This has been relatively stable over time, although with a slight increase from 58.8 places in 2020, primarily attributed to the decline in the number of children under three rather than a substantial increase in childcare provision (ONAPE, 2023). While the French childcare system is considered to be “universal” in the sense that it doesn’t target a particular population, there is no legal guarantee of a place in early childcare for children under the age of 3 (this is instead the case from age 3, within preschools).

Within this overall trend, families can usually choose among different early childcare types. France’s early childhood policy aims to give families a wide choice of types of care, so that parents can find suitable childcare that fits their needs. Regulated childminders (i.e. registered childminders, regulated by the state, who look after 2 to 4 children in their own home) account for 31.6 places per 100 children under 3 years old, while collective childcare (i.e. *daycare*, collective childcare for regular, mostly full-time care, and *halte-garderies*, collective childcare for part-time and irregular childcare) provide 22.3 places. Additionally, early access to preschools (*écoles maternelles*) for children aged 2 to 3 represents 3.4 places per 100 children, and home-based care services (such as private nannies, who are not regulated and look after 1 to 2 children at the parents’ home) account for 2.1 places. These theoretical coverage rates are not exactly aligned with actual usage, due to some households using several types of care for the same child, while others rely only on part-time use. Some slots can also be unused. For instance, in 2021, 20% of children under the age of 3 were cared for by childminders, and 18% in collective childcare, such as daycare centers (*crèches*) in 2021 (*ibidem*).

While France’s diversity of childcare types is supposed to provide parents with choice, most parents prefer collective daycare (Virost, 2017), but demand outstrips supply, with regulated childminders often seen as a second-choice option. Early access to collective care also appears to be correlated to a greater stability in care trajectories. In a study, 15% of children

were found to experience unstable care trajectories, with several changes of childcare arrangements. These unstable trajectories were more common among households in the lowest socio-professional categories. The financial, professional, residential and family instabilities encountered by these families make it difficult to maintain a single childcare arrangement over the long term (Francou, Panico, Solaz, 2017).

Large disparities across regions and population subgroups in the access and use of these various services are a relevant facet of ECEC in France. They are investigated in detail, further below.

2.2 Preschool in France

In France, the preschool system is very separate from early care. Preschool is universally available in France during the academic year that children turn 3 years old (sometimes 2), for three years until children are about 6 years old, via publicly funded *écoles maternelles*. The right to *école maternelle* was initiated in 1833 and enshrined in 1881. Today, all children in France are entitled to *école maternelle* from September of the calendar year in which they turn three until they enter primary school.

An important innovation, not impacting on actual usage, but with significant symbolic implications, is that since 2019 it has been legislated that the initiation of formal mandatory education is at age 3 (rather than age 6), although parents can apply for a derogation to home school.

Ecole maternelle is strongly integrated within the French education system, rather than the childcare set up. It shares the same guiding principles, opening hours, administration and financing as elementary schools. Instruction is delivered by highly-trained staff (with qualifications identical to those required for primary school teachers, including a five-year university degree at ISCED 7 level, regular mandatory continuing professional development training, and a three-year 'induction' period with extra checks and support for new teachers) in classrooms ranging from 20 to 30 children (24 children on average), with the assistance of a teaching assistant at certain times of the day. Preschool teachers command the same starting salaries as those in the primary school sector. Curricula are nationally designed, regulated and funded by the Ministry of Education, whereas wraparound services in preschool (including lunch and afterschool sessions) are delivered and funded by local municipalities. The level of financing by the state per pupil is the same in preschool as in elementary school (roughly 8500 euros per student in 2023, DEPP, 2024a), a steady increase from 6500 euros at constant price in 2008.

There are no tuition fees, although relatively small fees, scaled by household income, are charged for wraparound services including lunch and afterschool sessions. Children may participate part- or full-day, at least in the first year, especially if they are not yet potty trained. Preschools can be public or private, and public preschools in disadvantaged areas can be eligible for extra resources, such as additional funding per pupil and a higher teacher-student ratio to decrease class size.

In addition, in 2005 a law encouraged preschools in disadvantaged areas² to extend programming to 2-year-olds. Even since before this law, preschools sometimes accommodated children as young as 2 and either group them in their own classes or include them in 3-year-old classes. As of 2015, about 11% of 2-year-olds were enrolled in preschool in France, this proportion has been stable since about 2011, following a decrease from a peak in 2000 when over a third of 2-year-olds were enrolled (Abdouni, 2016). This decrease is linked to demographic trends: there was an increase in the number of children aged 3 to 5 (who are legally required to receive a preschool slot) between 2000 and 2010, and therefore preschools had a lower capacity to include younger children, who were not legally required to be admitted (Ben Ali, 2012). There are strong regional differences in these rates: for example, only 2,8% of 2-year-olds in Seine Saint Denis (a deprived department in a Greater Paris region) were enrolled, versus over one fifth of 2-year-olds in relatively wealthy regions such as Brittany (Abdouni, 2016).

Currently, not only are childcare for children below 3 years and preschools separate, but there is also limited discussion about the possible integration of the preschool system with the 0 to 3-year-old childcare system. A recent report by the Haut Conseil de la Famille, de l'Age et de l'Enfance (HCFEA, 2019) only mentions the need for improved harmonisation of professional training, largely to guarantee career progression for professionals working with children under the age of 6, and in support of developing a “common culture” for all those working with young children.

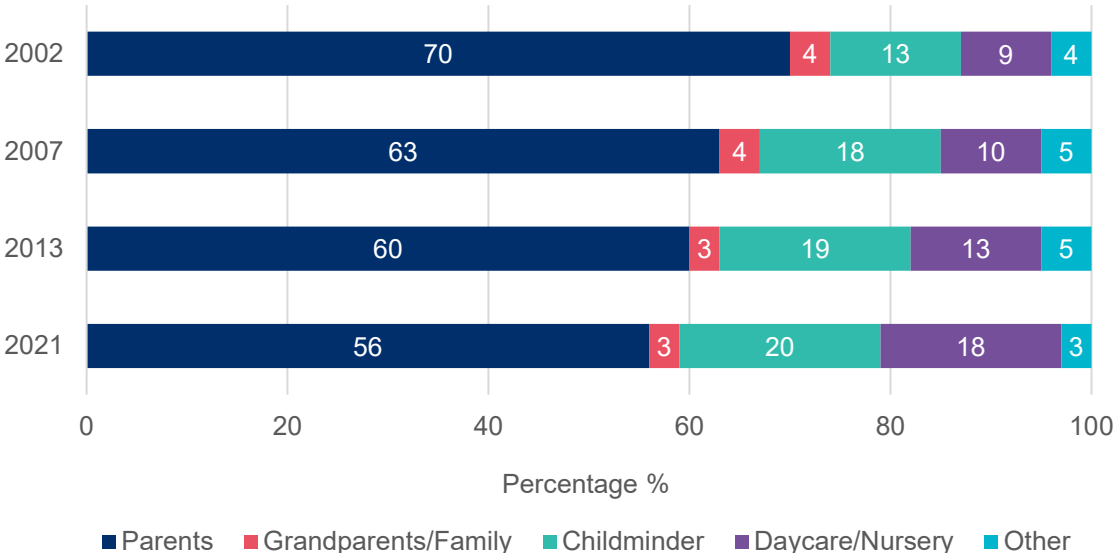
2.3 Early childcare services: trends over time

The availability of early childcare services and their use have expanded significantly over the last two decades in response to growing societal changes, notably maternal employment trends. In 2002, 30% of children below the age of 3 were not looked after by their own parents;

² Defined as “priority education areas” (*zones d'éducation prioritaires*). The designation of these areas is made by the Ministry of National Education, in consultation with local education authorities, on the basis of several indicators: the proportion of students from low-income or working-class families, the share of pupils receiving need-based scholarships, the level of academic difficulties (such as grade repetition and performance in national assessments), and the socio-economic profile of the neighborhoods served, often overlapping with “priority neighborhoods” in urban policy.

this increased to 40% in 2013 and to 44% by 2021 (DRESS, 2023). Figure 1 shows changes over the first two decades of the new century by nature of the care provider.

Figure 1. Evolution of weekly childcare arrangements for children under the age of three, 2002-2021



Source: Enquête mode de garde et d'accueil des jeunes enfants, authors' adaptation from DREES (2023) <https://drees.solidarites-sante.gouv.fr/sites/default/files/2023-02/ER1257MAJ.pdf>
 Note : Childminder: Private Childminders. Licensed home-based childcare provider
 Daycare: Include all collective Early childcare facilities (full-time daycare and haltes-garderies) Other: mainly include nannies, preschool, informal care, and baby-sitter. Week refers to Monday to Friday, from 8am to 7pm.

Regulated childminders provide the majority of early childcare, with 696,000 places (53% of the total) in 2021. The proportion of children looked after by a childminder has increased over time: in 2002, 13% of all children under the age of 3 were looked after by a childminder, increasing to 20% in 2021 (DRESS, 2021). Paradoxically, while the number of slots has increased, the number of private childminders, on the other hand, is slowly declining, with a 4.3% decrease in 2022, which corresponds to 10,800 childminders exiting the labor force compared to 2021, largely due to an aging population of childminders that are retiring without being replaced.

The second most common mode of care is collective childcare, which offered 491,200 places, or 38% of the total childcare coverage for children under three in 2021 (ONAPE, 2023). The proportion of children attending daycare has also increased in the last 20 years, doubling from 9% in 2002 to 18% in 2021 (DRESS, 2021).

Not all collective childcare types have been increasing at the same speed. The rapid expansion of *micro-crèches* has been a key driver of this increase, contributing to 11,900 new places in 2021 (ONAPE, 2023). These facilities are small-scale, private, and often more expensive

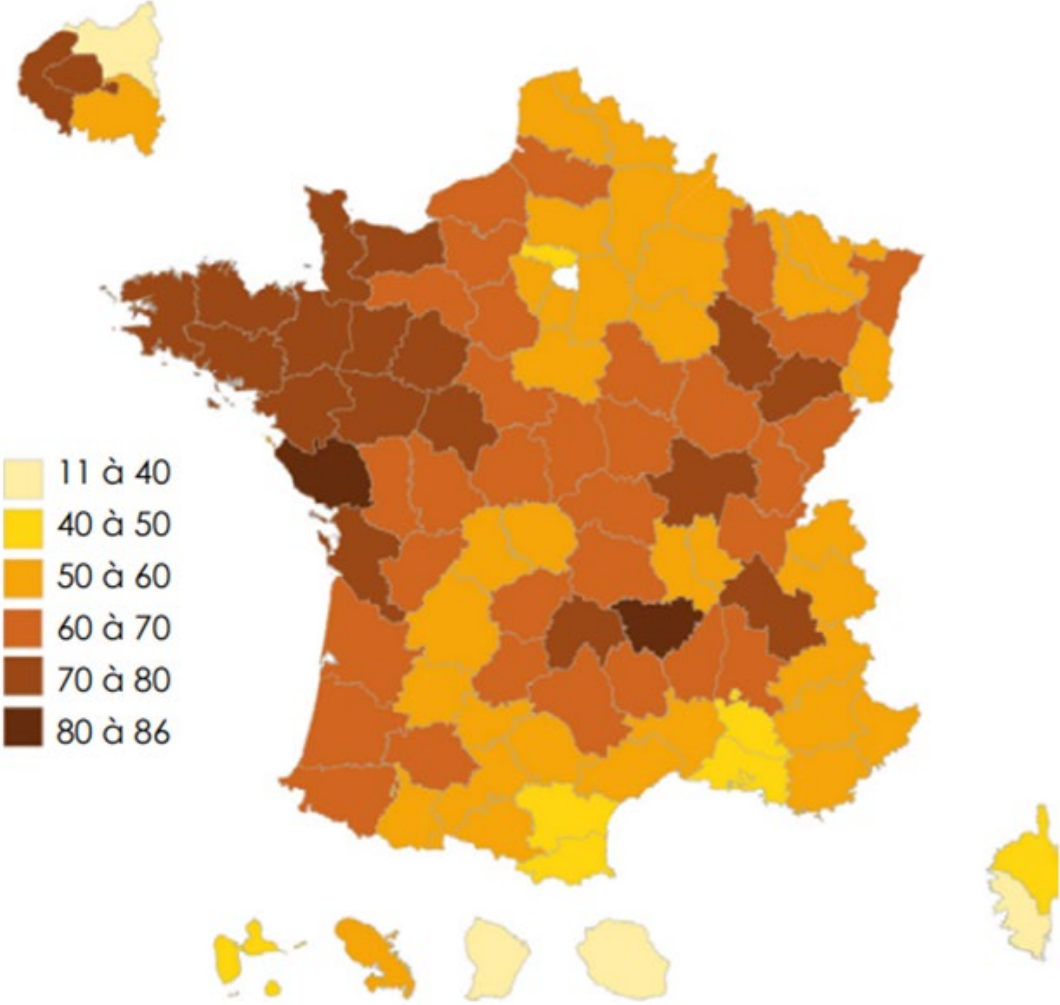
daycare centers, which poses a challenge to social inclusion as parents' out-of-pocket fees might be higher than in a municipal *crèche*. Services such as *haltes-garderies*, which cater to occasional care needs, are also increasingly in-demand. Originally designed for children whose mothers did not work, *haltes-garderies* now increasingly care for children whose parents work part-time or irregular hours (Panico & Kitzmann, 2020), an increasingly important mode of employment. *Halte-garderies* have expanded faster than standard *crèches*, with the number of places nearly tripling over the past 20 years (*ibidem*).

There are two main sources of heterogeneity in early childcare access relevant to the French context: 1) Geographic disparities, and 2) Socio-economic disparities.

2.4 Geographic disparities in overall coverage and by type of coverage

The availability of early childcare for children below 3 years of age is not uniform across the country, with significant geographic disparities. Despite efforts to reduce these disparities, they persist, particularly penalising rural areas and economically disadvantaged regions, where access to early childcare remains limited, ranging from 11 places for 100 children under the age of 3 in Guyane to 85 places in Vendée. In general, as displayed in Figure 2, relatively wealthy Western regions such as Brittany and Pays de la Loire are well endowed, offering more than 70 places per 100 children. In contrast, districts (*départements*) like Seine-Saint-Denis, a disadvantaged district with a high proportion of immigrant population, in the Paris metropolitan area, offer fewer than 35 places per 100 children. This heterogeneity underscores the importance of local-level analyses, as availability varies greatly depending on the region and municipality (ONAPE, 2023).

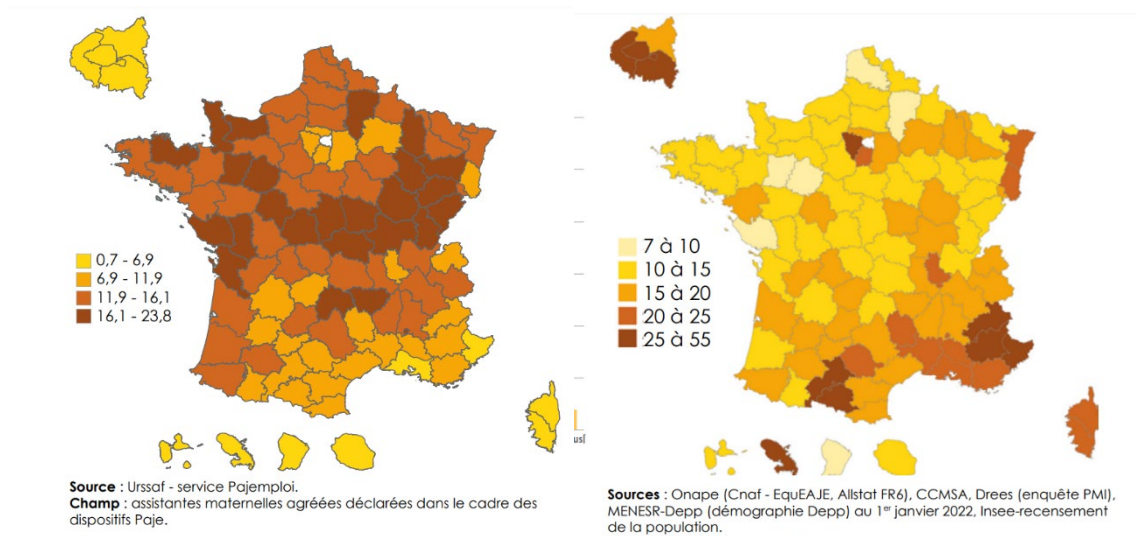
Figure 2. Early childcare coverage rate by district in 2021, per 100 children below the age of 3 from ONAPE (2023)



Sources: Onape - Cnaf (EquEAJE, Allstat FR6), CCMSA, Drees (PMI survey), MENESR-Depp, Insee, Ircem, and Urssaf Caisse Nationale Scope: France excluding Mayotte.

Pronounced heterogeneities *between regions* concern not only the overall offer of childcare but also the types of care available. Daycare centers are predominantly concentrated in regions with large urban agglomerations, such as Île-de-France, Strasbourg, Bordeaux, Marseille, Cannes, Nice, Lyon, Toulouse, Reims, Pau, and Andorra (ONAPE, 2018). In contrast, childminders are more prevalent in rural regions and regions where daycare centers are scarce, leading to what can be described as a “negative distribution” between the two types of care, as displayed in Figure 3. For example, rural regions such as Brittany, Meuse, Haute-Marne, Vosges, Cantal, Haute-Loire, Landes, Gers, Jura, Doubs, Saône-et-Loire, and Ain are better endowed with childminders, offering more individualised care.

Figure 3. Geographical distribution of the number of places provided by childminders (left) and by collective childcare (right) per 100 children under 3, 2022 (in %)



Source: ONAPE, 2023

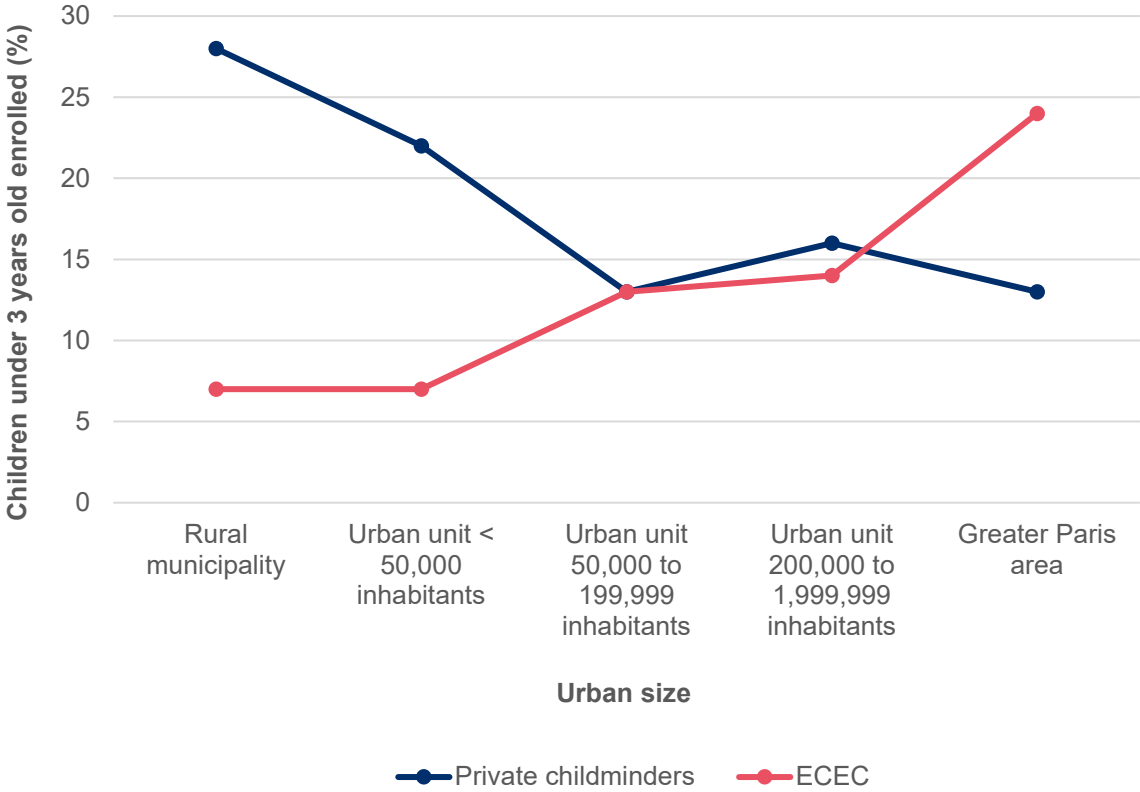
Furthermore, the availability of childcare reflects not just an urban-rural divide, but also regional economic disparities, with wealthier regions benefiting from a wider variety of childcare options. In general, the regional distribution of early childcare tends to balance itself out between childminders and daycare centers slots (ONAPE, 2018). However, poorer regions, such as Seine-Saint-Denis, Aude, Pas-de-Calais, Creuse, Pyrénées-Orientales, and Ardennes, are not well-endowed with neither daycare centers nor childminders. This lack of access to both forms of childcare further exacerbates inequalities for households living in these regions.

There are also substantial differences in the type of care available in rural and urban areas *within regions*. As depicted in Figure 4, in rural areas, there is a higher reliance on childminders (*assistantes maternelles*), as the number of childminders per child under three is significantly greater compared to urban regions. In contrast, daycare centers and other collective care facilities are concentrated in urban areas, where the higher population density makes it easier to coordinate the supply and demand for childcare. In large cities, such as those in Val de Marne or Île-de-France, households have more options for collective childcare and thus tend to rely more on daycare centers, while the number of childminders remains low. This geographic imbalance in the distribution of childcare types creates additional challenges for rural families, where the lack of collective childcare options limits flexibility and access, especially for parents seeking affordable or subsidised care options.

Finally, within urban agglomerations, disparities exist between wealthier and more disadvantaged neighborhoods (David, 1999). Daycare centers and other childcare facilities

are often concentrated in affluent areas, leaving lower-income neighborhoods underserved (Bennett, 2012; Collombet, 2018; Vandenbroeck & Lazzari, 2014).

Figure 4. Percentage of children under three enrolled in collective childcare and childminders according to the size of the urban unit in 2013



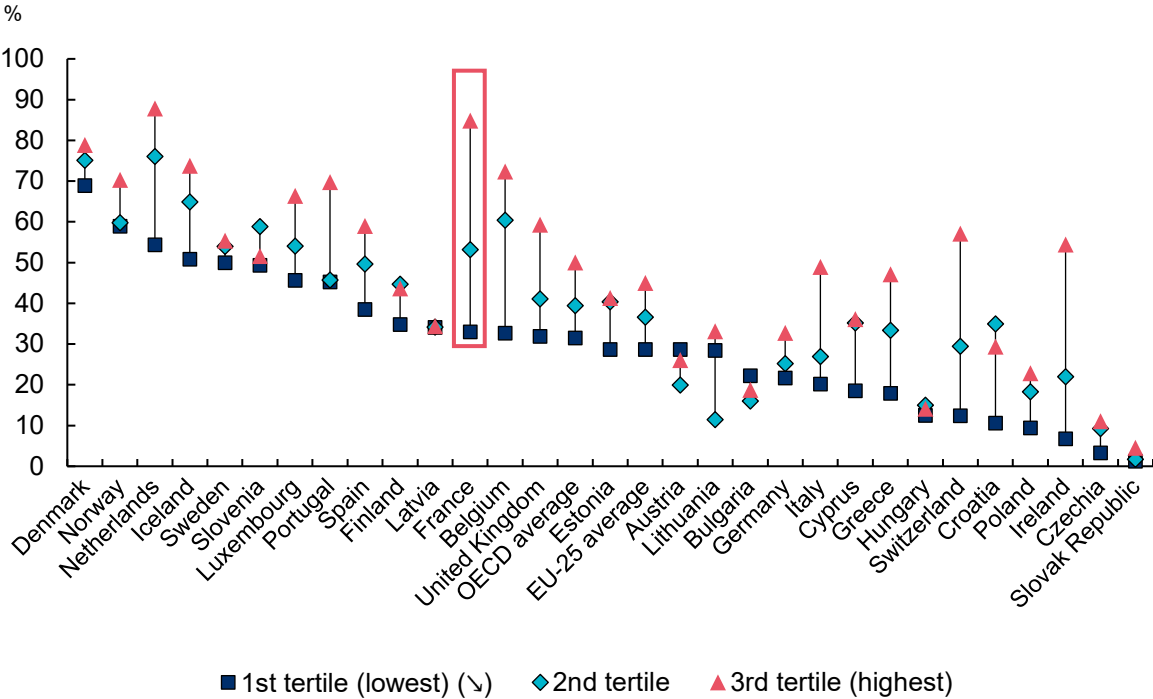
Source: Survey on Childcare and Early Childhood Services, DREES, 2013.
 Note: Childcare mode during weekdays is defined as Monday to Friday, between 8 AM and 7 PM.
 Scope: Metropolitan France, children under 3 years old.

2.5 Socioeconomic inequalities in access

The geographical heterogeneities outlined above compound another significant disparity: inequalities in access according to the socioeconomic background of the household. Households from high socioeconomic status backgrounds (high-SES) are significantly more likely to use early childcare than those from lower socioeconomic status backgrounds (low-SES). Although this pattern is common across OECD countries, France stands out in comparative perspective for having two specificities: on the one hand, a relatively high coverage rate, on the other, a particularly large access gap according to SES, as displayed in Figure 5 (OECD, 2025). National statistics confirm this facet of the French ECEC system: in 2021, only 23% of children from low-income families (6th decile of income) were enrolled in formal childcare, compared to 70% of children from higher-income families (ONAPE, 2023). These disparities are particularly pronounced for home-based care services, such as

childminders, where only 6% of children from low-income families are enrolled, compared to 18% in daycare centers, while these children represent 29% of children below 3 (ONAPE, 2023).

Figure 5. Early childcare participation rates by equivalised disposable household income tertile, for children under three (2022 or latest available)



Source: Authors' elaboration of OECD Family database data (<https://www.oecd.org/en/data/datasets/oecd-family-database.html>)

Although this pattern is consistent across all measures of socioeconomic background, parental employment status plays a crucial role in determining access to childcare services. In families where both parents are employed, 82% of children under three are enrolled in early childcare, while this figure drops to 21% for families where both parents are unemployed or inactive. These disparities are particularly pronounced for home-based care services, such as childminders, where only 3% of children from these families are enrolled, compared to 11% in daycare centers, while they represent 18% of children below 3 (ONAPE, 2023). Single-parent households also face challenges in accessing formal childcare: 63% of children in working single-parent families are in formal care, and 23% when the parent is inactive (ONAPE, 2023).

Access to early childcare services also likely differs across migrant background groups, however there is a recent dearth of studies on it, which, furthermore, tend to focus on specific subgroups. For example, work using a survey on recent non-EU arrivals receiving their first

resident permit in 2018 showed that this group underused formal childcare for their children aged 0 to 2 years compared to the general population (Eremenko and Unterreiner, 2023). Attendance was highest for migrants from Central Africa, and for those whose mother was proficient in French, while was lower for those from North Africa and Asia, and was particularly low for those whose mothers are not proficient in French (Eremenko and Unterreiner, 2023). As in the general population, children from more disadvantaged households were less likely to be enrolled in formal childcare than more advantaged peers, as were those living in rural areas (Eremenko and Unterreiner, 2023). Single mothers from an immigrant background were slightly more likely to use formal group care such as crèches, and slightly less likely to use formal individual care such as childminders than single native mothers, in a general population sample from 2011, including when controlling for household characteristics such as socio-economic background, household demographics, and location (Thierry et al., 2018). These mothers were also slightly more likely to seek early access to preschool (at age 2 rather than age 3) than single native mothers, although differences were not statistically significant (Thierry et al., 2018).

2.6 Determinants of access to and use of early childcare services

The previous sections have shown how a comparatively high average ECEC coverage rate in France is accompanied by marked differences in service use by geographic context and socioeconomic background. This section explores the supply- and demand-side factors that influence whether children enroll in and attend early childcare services.

Supply-side factors (Archambault et al. [2019](#); Kulic et al. [2019](#)) or ‘direct’ factors (OECD [2025](#)), “include the characteristics of early childcare programs themselves, as well as their institutional environments (funding mechanisms, geographic location, etc.).” (Archambault et al. [2019](#)). Demand-side factors or ‘indirect factors’ (OECD [2025](#)), refer to how families respond to these supply-side factors and other individual-level mechanisms that shape their intention to use early childcare and application behaviors. These factors are fundamentally linked to families’ resources (economic, social, cultural, and temporal; Kulic et al. [2019](#)), which in turn determine the strategies they can leverage to secure a childcare spot.

2.7 Supply side factors

2.7.1 Affordability varies across early childcare type and household income

We saw that a distinctive feature of the French system is that, at the national level, most of the supply is not provided by daycare centers, as in many OECD countries, but by regulated childminders. In some areas, childminders can be the only type of care available. This feature is crucial to understanding the determinants of access. As we will discuss in the next section, due to different subsidy systems, the out-of-pocket fees for low-income parents have so far been higher if they use childminders rather than daycare. On the other hand, childminders can sometimes be less expensive than daycare for more affluent households (IGAS, 2017). Additionally, subsidies for daycare centers are paid directly to the centers without any input from households, who simply pay the remaining amount. This is not the case for childminders, as it is up to the parents to apply for subsidies and pay the costs upfront. Furthermore, employing a childminder (or a nanny) puts parents in the position of being employers, which can be a symbolic and administrative burden, particularly for low-SES parents (Carbuccion et al., 2020).

The daycare offer is also not always adapted to families' needs. Indeed, while historically daycare centers received subsidies from the benefits office (*Caf, Caisse des allocations familiales*) per half day, a subsidy reform implemented in 2014 (*réforme de la PSU*) changed the system to a subsidy per effective hour. While this reform was supposed to better match the needs of the parents, daycare centers adjusted to this reform by creating packages of 9, 10, or 11 hours of childcare, with no possibility for lower volumes. Therefore, some parents pay for more hours than they would need (Carbuccion, 2025).

2.7.2 Highly heterogeneous availability of services...

Access to early childhood services in France is strongly influenced by the availability of facilities, which is highly heterogeneous, as shown previously (David, 1999; ONAPE, 2023). These territorial disparities have major consequences for early childcare access. First, in some neighborhoods, no childcare facilities may be located near the family's home. This can be a particular barrier for low-SES families that are often less mobile due to limited access to transportation (Maksim, 2011), which can exacerbate socioeconomic differences in early childcare access.

2.7.3 ... which creates waiting lists and the application of access criteria that pose challenges to inclusion

Second, due to the lack of available places, facilities often have long waiting lists (David, 1999), and allocation criteria exist to distribute the existing spots in most municipalities. However, these allocation criteria are not mandatory and are left to the discretion of the facilities or municipalities. They may or may not be publicly available to parents (Laithier, 2018; Heim, 2024; Heim & Combe, 2020; Herman, 2017). Appendix I provides examples of allocation criteria and their weighting in several French municipalities. Some municipalities present clear scoring grids that specify how many points a household receives if it meets a given criterion (e.g., single-parent family). As a result, each household is assigned a priority score, and those with the highest scores are allocated slots first until all slots are filled. In some areas, only the allocation criteria are listed without details on the relative importance of each criterion. Additionally, in other cases, no information is available about how slots are allocated or the basis for such decisions.

Paris is a compelling illustration of this diversity in functioning. There is substantial heterogeneity in allocation processes within this city, where, unlike all other cities, slot attribution is done at the neighborhood level (*arrondissement*) (Chambre Régionale des Comptes, 2017). In some neighborhoods, the slot allocation process is opaque, with no indication of how it is conducted. This opacity persists in these neighborhoods, even though the municipality has created a tool to make this process more transparent and homogeneous across neighborhoods. Among many other things, this tool provides a set of allocation criteria from which neighborhoods are free to select the ones they wish to use. However, neighbourhoods can also choose not to utilise this tool. As a result, some neighborhoods have adopted it, while others have not and remain opaque. Furthermore, those that adopted it appear to use it very heterogeneously.

Table 1 illustrates the heterogeneity in the adoption of allocation criteria among six neighborhoods. We see that neighborhoods differ both in the number of criteria they consider and in the chosen criteria themselves. Additionally, neighborhoods vary in how they apply these criteria. For instance, in some neighborhoods, such as the 19th, criteria are public (see Appendix I), but there is no indication of the relative weight of each criterion. Other neighborhoods provide a clear scoring grid, detailing the number of points assigned to each criterion. In the 20th, for instance, single-parent families receive 25 points—the maximum on this grid—and the same applies to households earning less than €1,200 per month, as shown in Appendix I. In the 18th, single-parent families are also given top priority; however, more

points are awarded to households earning between €1,001 and €2,500 than to those earning less than €1,000 per month.

In general, priority is often given to dual earners households, which can further reinforce inequalities (see Appendix I). Historically, early childcare expansion has been seen as a policy instrument to reconcile work and family life. As a result, facilities have a longstanding tradition of prioritising dual-earner couples, which tends to disadvantage low-income families, who are more likely to experience precarious employment or unstable family situations (Collombet, 2018; Le Bouteillec et al., 2014). Moreover, priority is often given to households with siblings already in the facility, which can further reinforce inequalities.

While government policy now encourages no longer using this criterion to improve access to less advantaged groups (See also Section 2.8), in practice, they are still used for slot allocation. Carbuccia et al. (2025) provide ample empirical evidence on how these micro-mechanisms function and the strategies (and their limitations) that can be implemented to improve such access (see Box 1 below).

Table 1. ECEC admission criteria in six Parisian neighborhoods

PRIORITY CRITERIA CHOSEN BY THE PARIS ARRONDISSEMENTS								
		y	v	z	u	x	w	TOTAL
1	Child medical problems	X	X	X	X	X	X	6/6
2	Housing difficulties	X		X			X	3/6
3	Multiple births	X		X	X	X	X	5/6
4	Adoption	X		X	X	X	X	5/6
5	Transfer from another arrondissement	X		X	X		X	4/6
6	Senate quota			X				1/6
7	Parents who are miners			X	X	X	X	4/6
8	Parent has antisocial employment hours			X			X	2/6
9	Priority family crèche			X	X	X	X	4/6
10	Parent medical problem	X	X	X	X	X	X	6/6
11	Siblings admitted to nursery	X	X	X	X		X	5/6
12	Large family	X	X	X	X	X		5/6
13	Single-parent family	X	X	X	X		X	5/6
14	Distance to school		X	X				2/6
15	Child has a disability			X		X		2/6
16	Re-entering the labour market		X	X	X			3/6
17	Parental leave 6 months			X	X		X	3/6
18	Request crèche other sector			X	X		X	3/6
19	Disability of another child within the family	X		X	X	X		4/6
20	Siblings on the Registered list		X	X	X		X	4/6
21	PMI follow-up	X	X	X	X	X	X	6/6
22	Welfare benefits		X	X	X		X	4/6
23	Employment problems			X	X		X	3/6
24	Break in childcare arrangements			X	X	X	X	4/6
25	HG File			X	X	X		3/6
26	Parental leave one yr			X	X		X	3/6
27	Disability parent	X	X	X	X	X		5/6
28	Siblings with a place		X	X			X	3/6
29	Child protection	X	X	X	X	X		5/6
30	Ville de Paris staff	X	X	X	X	X	X	6/6
31	End of parental leave			X	X		X	3/6
32	Student			X	X	X		3/6
33	Relocation of an admitted child			X	X		X	3/6
34	One parent is not within Paris during week			X	X			2/6
35	Previous refusal			X			X	2/6
36	No comments			X				1/6
TOTAL		14/3 6	14/3 6	36/3 6	28/3 6	16/3 6	24/3 6	

Source: Figure extracted from Chambre Régionale des Comptes (2017)

Note: Y, V, Z, U, X, W are six anonymised neighborhoods. The 36 criteria correspond to the ones provided by the municipality through their tool. “X” in a given column and a given line signals that the criterion that corresponds to this line is used in the neighborhood that corresponds to the given column.

Box 1. The impact of the administrative burden and of information costs on social inequalities in early childcare access in France

This three-arm randomised control trial followed 1,859 families in the Paris metropolitan area to test whether reducing informational and administrative barriers could improve early childcare access for low-SES and immigrant households. Families were randomly assigned to: (1) a control group; (2) an information group that received clear details on availability, affordability, and procedures; or (3) a support group that received both the information and personalised support with applications through phone calls.

Results show that information alone had little effect, but personalised support substantially increased application rates and narrowed socioeconomic and immigrant gaps on application: low-SES and immigrant families who received support became just as likely to apply as their more affluent counterparts. Yet, these gains in applications did not translate into improved access for these households. By contrast, high-SES dual-earner households who received support experienced increased access to daycare centers in particular, although no increase in overall early childcare usage was detected. Thus, this indicates that dual-earner households switched from other types of childcares, such as childminders, to their preferred type of childcare, namely daycare thanks to the support. Although national guidelines state that dual-earner households should no longer be prioritised, these results suggest that the allocation criteria used to assign available slots continue to exacerbate inequalities by still favoring such factors.

Overall, the study demonstrates that accessing early childcare is a twofold challenge for low-SES and immigrant families: administrative burdens prevent them from applying, and allocation criteria further disadvantage them even once they do.

Source: Carbuccia et al. (2025)

2.7.4 Application system and timing

In order to secure a slot as early as possible, parents are encouraged to apply to childcare facilities during pregnancy, as time since application is often one additional criterion taken into account when allocating the slots. Since high-SES households tend to apply earlier, this criterion further exacerbates inequalities (Heim, 2024). Furthermore, the application process is tied to the school year, with most places being assigned in June for care starting in September. Families of children born later in the year struggle to secure a spot, adding an additional layer of inequality (Le Bouteillec et al., 2014).

In addition to complying with the application calendar, parents are encouraged to apply to several types of facilities to increase their chances. For example, alongside classic municipal-

run *crèches*, parents can also apply to departmental daycare centers, associative daycare centers, and *micro-crèches*. While the prices and funding for associative and departmental daycare centers are similar to those of municipal centers, private daycare centers may charge different fees and require a partnership with parents' employers to secure a place. *Micro-crèches* operate on the same subsidy scale as childminders and are generally much more expensive for parents than other daycare centers. Application to these different facilities must be made separately and imply different procedures. For example, some applications may need to be done on-site and others online, and sometimes parents must apply both on-site and online.

This fragmented system creates substantial information frictions, with no central website or institutional actor that consolidates all the information on the various types of early childcare options, their relative costs based on parents' income and household composition, and their application procedures. Social workers are often not trained in these issues. Municipalities may provide information on municipal daycare centers and sometimes also on associative daycare centers, while "*relais petite enfance*" provides information on childminders and occasionally on nannies; however, these services are heterogeneous across municipalities.

As a result, there is significant variability in both the availability and quality of information accessible to parents across cities and neighborhoods in Paris. For instance, in some neighborhoods of Paris, there are websites featuring extensive information on childcare facilities, the different types of childcare, application procedures and calendars, and criteria for allocating places (where applicable), while others offer very little information (Chambre Régionale des Comptes, 2017). Some neighborhoods have one or more professional workers whose role is to assist parents with the daycare application process and fill out the application with them, while others lack this service, with applications occasionally available only online. Additionally, some neighborhoods organise information meetings where they provide parents with essential details (e.g. how to apply, the cost of daycare, the different childcare options available in the neighborhood) and can answer parents' questions, while others do not. The heterogeneities can be found between cities within the same region, such as in Val de Marne or in Seine Saint Denis.

2.8 Demand Side Factors

2.8.1 Parental employment

Parental employment status (especially stable permanent employment) is not evenly distributed across social groups and geographical areas, and it plays a crucial role in determining access to childcare services, partially, explaining the differences by

socioeconomic background (Garnier et al., 2023). In families where both parents are employed, 82% of children under three are enrolled in early childcare, while this figure drops to 21% for families where both parents are unemployed or inactive. These disparities are particularly pronounced for home-based care services, such as childminders, where only 3% of children from these families are enrolled, compared to 11% in daycare centers, while they represent 18% of children below 3 (ONAPE, 2023). Single-parent households also face challenges in accessing formal childcare: 63% of children in working single-parent families are in formal care, and 23% when the parent is inactive (ONAPE, 2023).

2.8.2 The role of social networks and knowledge of ECEC services in navigating a complex system

Navigating the complex early childcare system in France can be a daunting task. The differences between childcare types, application procedures, and fees are often opaque, and this lack of information creates disparities in behavior between more informed and less informed households. High-SES households often have more access to social networks — friends, family, and community resources — that can help them navigate the system more effectively than low-SES families.

Carbuccia et al. (2025) demonstrates the importance of information levels in childcare access. It assesses the heterogeneity of the effectiveness of the information and personalised support treatment based on the level of information households had when recruited (See Box 1). The impacts of this treatment on the least informed households are substantial, both in terms of application and access rates³. The probability that households with the lowest knowledge of early childcare apply for early childcare increased by 42 percentage points when treated. Moreover, the probability that these households access early childcare increased by 48 percentage points, while we cannot distinguish their probability of accessing early childcare from 0 in the control group.

2.8.3 Diversity of needs and practices, and mismatch with the early childcare system

In addition to their struggles in navigating this complex system, low-SES families often have different needs when it comes to childcare. These families may prefer or need more flexible or occasional childcare options, particularly if parents are unemployed or work irregular hours, an increasingly common feature for more disadvantaged or immigrant populations (Garnier et al., 2023; Martin et al., 2005). However, most municipal daycare centers, which are often the only

³ These results need to be interpreted with caution due to the low sample size in this group (about 300 households).

type of care known by low-SES households, are not designed for part-time care. As previously explained, they usually require parents to commit to full-day blocks, which can be both financially and practically challenging for low-income families. Moreover, as explained above, low-SES households tend to apply later than their high-SES counterparts, which reduces their chances of securing a spot (ONAPE, 2023; Heim & Combe 2024).

2.8.4 Digital divide and administrative barriers

Another potential determinant of the unequal access is the growing trend toward the digitalisation of the application process. In some regions, such as Val-de-Marne, applications for public daycare centers are entirely digitised, requiring access to computers and email accounts (Figure 6).

However, many low-SES families do not have regular access to computers or the internet and often lack the digital literacy needed to navigate online application systems. For instance, in the sample of Carbuccia et al. (2024), 32% of low-SES households did not have access to a computer, compared to 4% of high-SES households. As a result, many low-SES families either fail to complete the application process or do not even try (Archambault et al., 2019).

Figure 6. Val de Marne Application Website for Daycare centers



2.8.5 The role of norms and perceptions

Finally, cultural norms and expectations around childcare may also play a role in determining demand, although evidence for the contribution of this factor remains very limited within the French context (Carbuccia et al., 2024). Besides, because no indicator is available to parents, objective quality likely play little role in determining choice and access. However, perceived quality can play a role, although it is still insufficiently documented in France (Carbuccia et al., 2025). In general, daycare is popular among parents: after birth, 32% of parents report a preference for this option. As summarised by Fagnani (2014:83) “crèches are highly valued by families, as a result of the staff’s qualification requirements . . . and of the prevalent idea that crèches provide an ‘ideal’ preparation for the transition to nursery school and consequently to primary education.”

This overall preference for daycare hides however some subgroup differences. Several studies report for example that immigrant mothers, particularly from the Middle East and North Africa, one of the largest migrant groups in France, are less likely to prefer formal care to parental care for their children (Eremenko et al., 2017), and indeed are less likely to enroll their children in formal care (Berger, Panico and Solaz, 2021; Eremenko and Unterreiner, 2023). This is not a trivial group: 25% of children aged 0–4 years in France had at least one immigrant parent (Lê et al., 2022).

As illustrated in Box 2 and demonstrated by Carbuccia (2025), perceived accessibility also play a role in parents' decision-making and behavior.

Box 2. Perceived accessibility of early childcare facilities in France in comparative perspective

Despite a high childcare services coverage rate compared to other European countries, perceived accessibility is relatively low in France (yellow in the figures below), and the differences in perceptions across households by income are marked compared to other countries.

According to a study of factors influencing perceived accessibility of early childcare facilities in European countries – such as national ECEC system characteristics (type of provision: universal or not; free or not); operation (separation between 0-3 and 3-6 or not); type of regulation (decentralised or not) and ratio of public investment compared to private investment) - using data from the European Quality of Life Style study (EQLS, 2012), countries in which perceived accessibility is significantly higher than in others, controlling for GDP, are those where the **provision** is:

- **entirely public** (no private structures)
- **unified** (i.e. where there is no separation between 0-3 and 3-6)
- based on a **high level of public spending** (particularly important for low-income families).

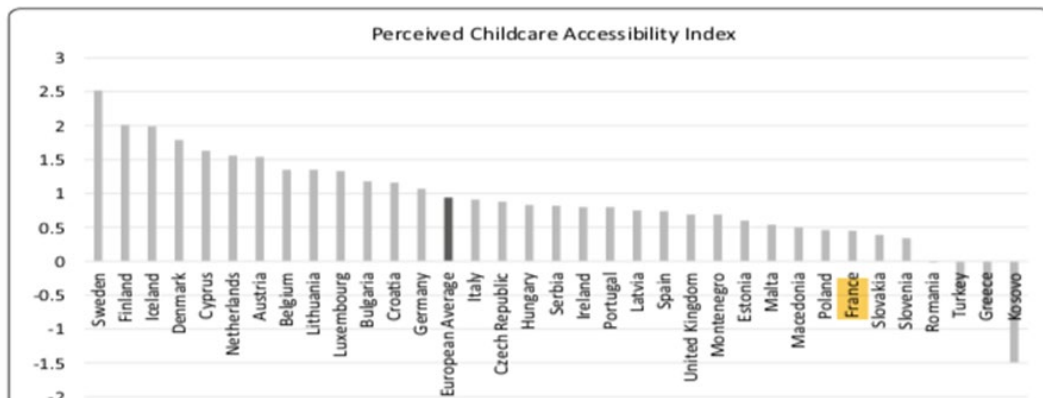


Fig. 1 Perceived childcare accessibility index (PCA) across Europe (Source: EQLS (2012), weighted data)

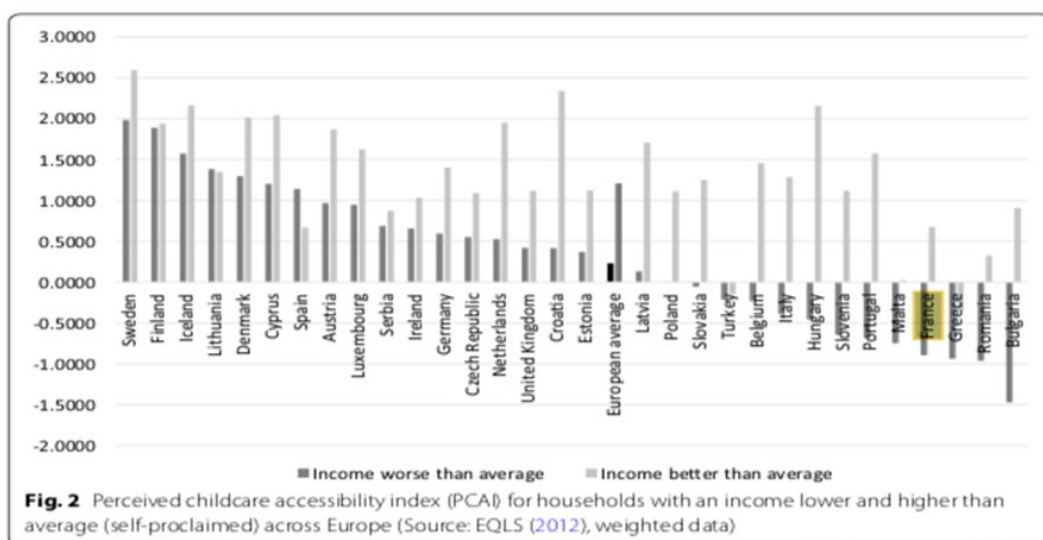


Fig. 2 Perceived childcare accessibility index (PCA) for households with an income lower and higher than average (self-proclaimed) across Europe (Source: EQLS (2012), weighted data)

Source: Ünver et al. (2018)

2.9 Efforts to expand service access

In France, several key measures have been introduced in the last two decades to increase access and use of services, both in terms of total capacity and to address inequalities in access, particularly among underserved populations or areas. These measures include efforts to expand the number of places in daycare centers, as well as targeted bonuses like the "*Bonus Territoires*" and the "*Bonus Mixité Sociale*," designed to promote access in disadvantaged areas and foster social diversity. Additionally, the AVIP daycare (*Crèches AVIP*) program aims to support parents in job-seeking situations by offering dedicated childcare slots. Finally, recent initiatives have sought to increase transparency in how childcare slots are allocated. We discuss these measures here.

Until the early 2000s, the development of collective childcare facilities was primarily decided by local authorities. However, starting in the early 2000s with the introduction of the first national daycare plan (*Plan crèche*), significant investments were made at the national level to increase the number of daycare places. These plans aimed to expand the availability of childcare by opening new facilities and expanding existing ones. By 2016, it was estimated that since the launch of the first plan in 2000, a total of €2 billion had been invested, not including the annual operating costs of the new childcare places created (IGAS, 2017; Pora, 2020). The plans are coordinated at the national level by the Cnaf (*Caisse nationale des allocations familiales*), with implementation managed by local authorities and supported by regional Caf offices.

Between 2000 and 2016, these investments resulted in the creation of 150,000 new childcare places. However, despite this expansion, it has had limited success in addressing inequalities in access. Research indicates that much of the increase resulted in a substitution effect, whereby higher income families who previously relied on private childminders or nannies shifted to daycare centers (Pora, 2020). Consequently, while the total number of daycare places increased, the overall hours worked by childminders declined in the same areas, and access to childcare for lower income families did not improve significantly (INSEE, 2020).

In a similar effort, as part of a broader anti-poverty strategy, the government committed €400 million between 2018 and 2022 to create an additional 30,000 places, with a specific effort to increase coverage in more deprived areas in order to foster child development in more disadvantaged groups (Ministère des Solidarités et de la Santé, 2018). However, early evidence suggests that this investment has had a limited impact on increasing childcare enrollment, particularly among low-SES households.

Finally, as aforementioned, the expansion of daycare supply has partly been driven by the expansion of *micro-crèches*, contributing to 11,900 new places in 2021 (ONAPE, 2023). However, these facilities are private, and often substantially more expensive daycare centers (See Section 4), especially for low-income families, which poses a challenge to social inclusion.

Bonus Territoires

To address geographical inequalities, the *Bonus Territoires* was introduced as part of the 2018 Anti-poverty strategy to address geographic disparities in childcare access by incentivising the creation of new daycare slots in disadvantaged urban areas, known as "*quartiers prioritaires de la politique de la ville*" (QPV). This bonus provides an additional €1,000 for each new childcare place created in these priority areas, with the aim of reducing the financial strain on poorer municipalities. The government allocated €565 million to this initiative between 2019

and 2022. However, progress has been slower than anticipated. By 2019, only 270 new daycare places had been created in QPV areas, far less than the intended targets (France Stratégie, 2021), highlighting ongoing challenges in expanding access to childcare in these underserved regions.

Bonus Mixité Sociale

The "*Bonus Mixité Sociale*" was introduced as part of the 2018 anti-poverty strategy to promote social diversity in daycare centers, with the goal of ensuring that at least 10% of children in these facilities come from low-income families. Initially, €75 million was allocated for 2019, aiming to cover 90,000 daycare slots (Ministère des Solidarités et de la Santé, 2018). The bonus offers financial support to daycare centers that serve a higher proportion of low-income families, providing up to €2,100 per slot where the average parental contribution is less than €0.75 per hour (France Stratégie, 2021). By the end of 2019, the measure had achieved 91% of its target, relating to 82,000 slots.

However, concerns have been raised regarding its implementation, and there is limited data to fully assess its impact. One key issue is that the bonus is not specifically tied to new places for children from low-income families but applies to all slots in a center where families pay modest fees, including existing slots. This raises questions about whether the bonus is genuinely fostering social diversity or simply providing additional funds to centers that already cater to a high proportion of low-income families (France Stratégie, 2021). Furthermore, a recent study (DRESS, 2021) shows that nearly half of daycare centers (46% in 2019) accommodating between 30% and 40% of children in poverty do not benefit from the bonus, while, conversely, 8% of those accommodating between 10% and 20% of children in poverty do benefit from it. Besides, some stakeholders argue that, rather than encouraging social inclusion, the measure could unintentionally reinforce segregation, creating "ghetto daycare centers" that concentrate disadvantaged families, rather than promoting a diverse socioeconomic mix across all daycare centers.

AVIP Daycare centers (Aide à la Vocation d'Insertion Professionnelle)

The AVIP daycare centers (*Crèches AVIP*) initiative, launched in 2016, reserves daycare places for children of parents actively seeking employment. In its initial form, these daycare centers collaborate with social and employment agencies, such as the employment agency (*Pôle emploi*), to provide tailored support to these families, helping parents balance job-seeking activities with childcare needs. By 2021, 262 crèches had been labeled as AVIP across 33 departments. However, evaluations of the program have revealed significant heterogeneity in its implementation across regions (Forzy et al., 2022). In many cases, AVIP daycare centers

have primarily formalised existing practices of supporting a certain number of low-income families rather than creating new dynamics of social inclusion. Additionally, many of the places in AVIP daycare centers are reserved for full-time care, which does not align with the more flexible needs of many job-seeking parents, limiting the program's effectiveness (Forzy et al., 2022).

Transparency in slot allocation

A longstanding issue in the French early childcare system is the lack of transparency in how daycare places are allocated. Currently, daycare centers and municipalities, which often allocate the places, are not required to publish their criteria for slot allocation, and many do not formalise any criteria at all, which may lead to perceptions of unfairness. To address this, the government has proposed measures to create a national framework for slot allocation that promotes more equitable and transparent access procedures. This would include the publication of criteria and the creation of standardised point-based systems to prioritise families, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds (France Stratégie, 2021). However, the measure has neither identified quantitative targets nor allocated funds, with no legal commitment to adopt it, and no information is currently collected on its actual application. As of today, it is therefore not possible to evaluate this measure. Indeed, an evaluation concluded: “The evolution of the methods for allocating daycare spots is unknown, and no information is collected to ascertain the effective application of the national scale, which was established in 2019” (Comité d’évaluation de la stratégie anti pauvreté, 2022).

Therefore, while significant efforts have been made to expand the availability of childcare places and address disparities in access, many challenges remain. Geographic and socio-economic inequalities persist, with some policies having unintended consequences that limit their effectiveness.

Additionally, tensions between expanding access and maintaining quality continue to pose challenges, particularly in the context of ongoing staff shortages in the early childcare sector. It is estimated that about 10 000 posts have been vacant for more than 3 months in the daycare sector, or about 10% of the total size of the sector (CNAF, 2022), and that over 100 000 childminders will retire before 2030 (Conseil National de la Refondation, 2023). Unfilled vacancies in the daycare sector are unequally distributed geographically, and are particularly problematic in the Ile de France region, corresponding to about 3% of the total slot volume, and least in Brittany, corresponding to 1,3% of slots (CNAF, 2022). This may partly be due to relatively low salaries given the required qualifications. On average, starting salaries for a fully qualified “*éducateurs de jeunes enfants*” (EJE) working full time in a crèche is about 1900 euros outside the Paris region. This role requires a three-year tertiary vocational qualification

(Terranova, 2024). A less qualified (a one-year tertiary qualification) role, the “*auxiliaires de puériculture*”, have a starting salary of about 1800 euros on average. Childminders typically earn less. A report also suggests few opportunities for career progression and the physical and emotional difficulties of the job as areas to address to attract more qualified staff towards this profession (Terranova, 2024).

Strategies to address this have included initiatives such as “*Les métiers n’ont pas de genre*” (“Jobs have no gender”), a communication strategy aimed at addressing the gender imbalance and making the sector more attractive and diverse. An information platform aiming to hire more teachers (*Devenir Enseignant*, Becoming a Teacher) brings together resources on the training and hiring protocols to become a teacher, including in preschools, but not in *crèches*. Financial support is also provided to students of initial ECEC training (Eurydice & EACEA, 2023). Furthermore, educational requirements, previously set at ISCED 7, have been lowered to ISCED 6 for staff working with older children (aged 3-6 years) for the period 2023-2026, due to recruitment difficulties (Eurydice & EACEA, 2023). Finally, the *Pacte Enfance* (“Pact for childhood”) contains a continuing professional training programme for 600,000 professionals, although this was revised to 200 000, and only 50 000 professionals have only actually received training under this program to date (Comité de l’évaluation de la stratégie anti pauvreté, 2022).

3. Quality

3.1 Understanding quality: structural and process dimensions

Quality can be understood as comprising two main dimensions: structural quality and process quality. Structural quality refers to more easily quantifiable aspects of care, such as staff-to-child ratios, group sizes, staff qualifications, and the physical environment. These indicators are in many countries subject to regulation and may influence children's development by creating conditions that support higher-quality interactions (Bigras & Lemay, 2012; Bradley & Vandell, 2007; Melhuish et al., 2015; OECD, 2018; Slot, 2018). Process quality, on the other hand, refers to the types of interactions that occur throughout the day between the caregivers, children, and families. It also considers the activities that children engage in throughout their day. These aspects of care may influence child development in particular in the areas of social, emotional, and cognitive growth (Slot, 2018; Bigras & Lemay, 2012).

In France, while structural quality guidelines for all formal modes of childcare, whether center based or individual, are available and elaborated at national level (HCFEA, 2019), there is limited regulation of process quality criteria: there is no curricula before the preschool years,

and pedagogical guidelines, established in 2021, but not extensively diffused to staff, who largely lack knowledge of them (IGAS, 2023), are not binding. This is reflected in evaluations of early childcare quality, which are carried out by local child protection agencies and are focused on structural quality, with no data available on process quality (OECD, 2018; Eurydice, 2019). There are no top-level binding directives on how evaluations should be carried out, nor their frequency, the involvement of stakeholders such as parents, nor the type of data collected (OECD, 2018; Eurydice, 2019).

The French early childcare system is generally considered to offer high-quality care, especially in daycare, and a study, using nationally representative data for children born in 2011, found causal effects linking attendance to formal daycare on early language and socioemotional development compared to parental care, with stronger effects for children from disadvantaged backgrounds (Berger, Panico and Solaz, 2021). However, recent reports highlight that this quality can be heterogeneous, and the lack of a national curricula has been noted (Panico & Kitzmann, 2020; IGAS, 2023). Furthermore, the lack of systematic monitoring and evaluation of process quality means there is less understanding of the day-to-day interactions and experiences of children in these settings, despite their critical importance for child development.

3.2 Structural quality by type of provision: daycare centers vs. childminders

There are substantial differences in the structural quality of care between daycare centers and childminders. We review and discuss four main dimensions of this quality: 1) Professional training; 2) Staff-to-child ratios, 3) Physical infrastructure, 4) Staff stability

Structural quality is partly guided by national-level guidelines that formalise certain aspects of formal care, such as staff-to-child ratios, hygiene and nutrition practices, and staff qualifications (HCFEA, 2019). These guidelines were updated in 2021 in the *Charte nationale de qualité d'accueil*. Staff working in daycare centers are required to have high levels of formal education. Each daycare center must include professionals with national qualifications such as early childhood educators (requiring three years of post-secondary education) and childcare workers (requiring four years of post-secondary education), alongside assistants who have completed vocational training (1435 hours of theoretical courses specific to the early childhood period, and 840 hours of internships within early care settings). The staff composition of each daycare center can also be composed of a maximum of 60% of holders of a CAP early childhood (240 hours of training and 120 hours of internship) or other specialised training of an equivalent or higher hourly volume. However, the requirements have been lowered for 2023–2026 in areas experiencing recruitment difficulties.

In theory, daycare and childminder care are intended to provide comparably high-quality care. Yet training and education requirements are more stringent for daycare staff than for childminders: childminders are only required to complete only 120 hours of training, with 80 hours completed before they start caring for children. Daycare facilities also offer more favorable work conditions for employees than childminding, including higher salaries per full time post, relatively easier work hours (36 hours a week on average for a staff in a daycare center, versus 51 hours per week for a childminder), and more opportunities for continuing professional training (Devetter, 2012), which can be challenging to access for childminders.

The staff-to-child ratio is another important indicator of structural quality. In daycare, the staff-to-child ratio is regulated at 1:5 for infants and 1:8 for toddlers, whereas childminders can care for up to four children under the age of six, with no additional staff. This difference in staffing levels has implications for the level of individual attention and interaction children receive, which in turn affects the overall process quality. As the international consensus recommends a ratio of 1:3 for children under the age of two and a maximum of 1:5 for children between two and three years of age, in groups of no more than eight children (Ahnert et al., 2006; Melhuish et al., 2015; Slot, 2018; Tardif, 2012), France's daycare centers, therefore, fall short of these standards, particularly as daycare face growing demand and staffing shortages.

There are also differences in the physical infrastructures used. Daycare centers are typically better equipped to provide age-appropriate spaces for children, with regulated standards for facilities, whereas the quality of home environments for childminders can vary widely.

Due to the recruitment crisis outlined above which creates increasingly challenging working conditions, daycare centers currently often face high staff turnover, which can hinder children from forming stable, high-quality relationships with caregivers. This issue is less prevalent among childminders, who typically offer more continuity in care, allowing for stronger, more consistent bonds to develop between children and their caregivers.

Table 2 summarises the key differences in structural characteristics between daycare centers and childminders in France. Overall, daycare centers generally score higher on aspects like physical infrastructure and staff qualifications but often face challenges with staff turnover and less favorable staff-to-child ratios. In contrast, childminders provide more continuity in care, with smaller group sizes and better staff stability, but may have limitations in terms of infrastructure and formal training.

Table 2. Summary of differences in structural characteristics between daycare and childminders and their impact on children’s development

Early childcare type	Physical infrastructure	Qualifications	Physical activity	Group size	Staff-to-child ratios	Staff stability
Daycare centers	+	+	+	-	-	-
Childminders	-	-	-	+	+	+

Source: Carbuccia et al. (2020)

Note: Legend: + : rather positive indicator ; - : point of attention on this type of care

In light of these defining features of structural quality, and even though service quality in France tends to be higher than in several other OECD countries, a recent national evaluation of the quality of early childcare concludes that national standards, in terms of staff-to-child ratios, qualifications of professionals, or the absence of standards (for instance, with respect to the size of groups of children), mean that standards set by scientific consensus are not met and do not currently make it possible to guarantee high-quality childcare for all children (IGAS, 2023).

3.3 Quality monitoring

In France, oversight of early childcare services is primarily the responsibility of the Maternal and Child Health Services (*Protection Maternelle et Infantile*, PMI), which are funded and managed at the district (*département*) level. Daycare centers are strictly regulated by the Public Health Code and cannot operate without prior authorisation from local authorities—whether at the district level for private facilities or the municipal level for public ones—after an accreditation process led by the PMI (Pora, 2020). This authorisation also defines the maximum number of children that the facility is allowed to accommodate. Once the facility opens, the PMI is also responsible for conducting inspections to ensure compliance with regulations related to staff-to-child ratios, physical space, safety standards, and staff qualifications. Inspections include observations, interviews, and self-assessments, (OECD, 2016). For childminders, the PMI is also responsible for monitoring that national standards are met. This includes granting and renewing operating licenses (*agrément*s) every five years and conducting home visits to assess the safety and appropriateness of the environment for childcare.

However, in practice, the PMI's capacity to perform regular and thorough inspections is limited. The heavy workload associated with reviewing applications for daycare creation or extensions, operating licenses, and modification of daycare facilities often constrains their ability to conduct

regular quality inspections once centers are open or the operating license is granted (IGAS, 2023). Besides, as aforementioned, although this regulatory framework enforces structural quality indicators —such as staff qualifications and facility standards— there is no national framework for assessing process quality (Eurydice, 2019; OECD, 2018b). Addressing these gaps in monitoring, particularly for process quality, is essential for maintaining and improving care standards as the demand for early childhood services continues to grow.

3.4 Trade-offs between expanding access and maintaining quality

One of the key challenges in France’s early childcare system is balancing the expansion of childcare places while maintaining high quality. Slots have mostly been and continue to be offered on a full-time basis. Part time remains very rare except for *halte-garderies*. As demand for childcare has increased, particularly in urban areas, there has been pressure to open more places, sometimes at the cost of quality. First, due to the ongoing shortage of qualified childcare professionals, many daycare centers are forced to hire less experienced staff or increase the staff-to-child ratio beyond recommended levels, which can negatively impact both structural and process quality.

Second, to meet growing demand, the sector was opened up to the private sector in 2004. This rise of private childcare providers, particularly in urban areas, has led to concerns about declining quality, with several high-profile cases of neglect and inadequate care in private daycare centers. These scandals have raised questions about the oversight and regulation of private providers, who may not always operate on the same motives and adhere to the same standards as publicly funded daycare centers. Without more robust monitoring and accountability mechanisms, the quality of care in private settings remains uneven and, in some cases, substandard (IGAS, 2023).

4. Cost and financing

4.1 The childcare system within a wider welfare ecosystem for families in France

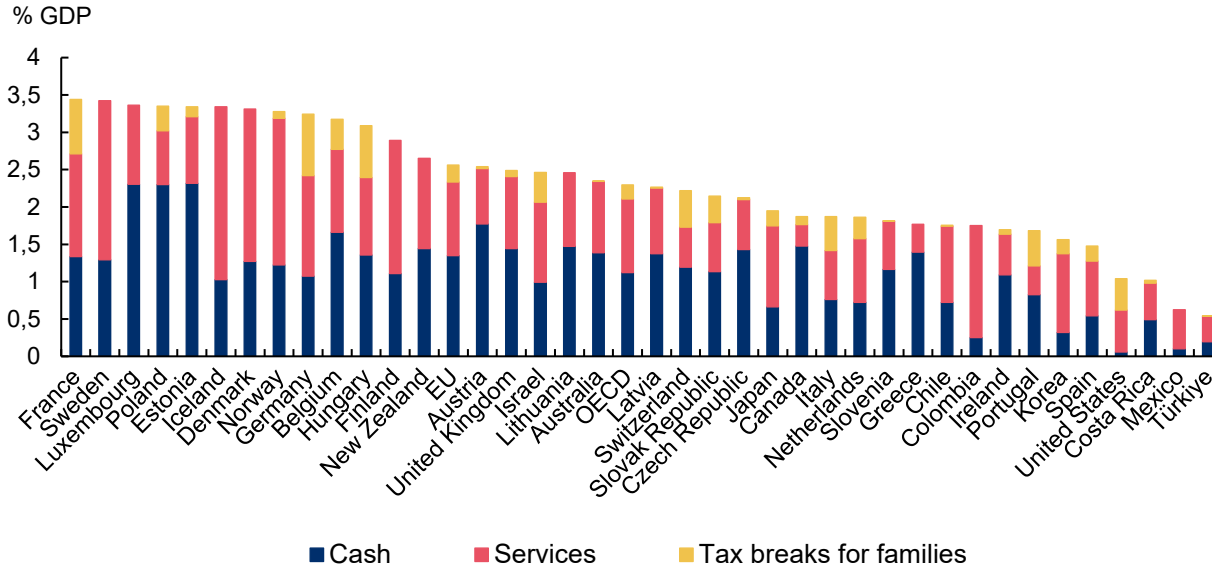
According to the OECD (2024)⁴, in 2019, France, together with Sweden, had the highest spending as a % of GDP on family benefits across all OECD countries: 3.4% of GDP was spent on policies such as cash benefits, tax breaks, and childcare services, compared to a European Union (EU) and OECD average respectively equal to 2.6% and 2.3% (Figure 7). This includes both central and local public spending. Indeed, France stands out as providing both

⁴ OECD Family Database (2024) – indicator: PF1.1 Public spending on family benefits, <http://www.oecd.org/social/expenditure.htm>

comparatively generous cash and tax benefits alongside high spending on services for families with children, such as healthcare and childcare, making it a unique family policy setting.

Over a third of this spending was devoted to cash transfers, whereas ECEC services' expenditure was equivalent to 1.4% of the GDP (1% at the EU and OECD level). However, the French expenditure on ECEC services is lower than the one in Nordic countries (around 2%).

Figure 7. Public expenditure on family benefits by type of expenditure, in percent of GDP, 2019 and latest available



Source: OECD Family Database (2024) – indicator: PF1.1 Public spending on family benefits

Furthermore, in comparative perspective, the French level of spending on family benefits has remained relatively high over time, with a sizable increase in the 1990s, especially in relation to ECEC services' expenditure (Table 3). Compared to the other countries included in the Fondazione Agnelli study, France stands out for the higher expenditure levels in general and, in ECEC services, over time.

Table 3. Public spending on family benefits in cash, services and tax measures, as per cent of GDP, 1980-2019

Country	Spending type	1980	1991	2001	2011	2019
France	Total	..	..	3.7	3.7	3.4
	Cash	2.0	1.4	1.4	1.6	1.3
	Services	0.3	1.0	1.5	1.3	1.4
	Tax-breaks for families	..	..	0.8	0.8	0.7
Germany	Total	..	..	3.0	3.0	3.2
	Cash	1.8	1.5	1.3	1.2	1.1
	Services	0.2	0.6	0.7	0.9	1.3
	Tax-breaks for families	..	..	0.9	0.8	0.8
Italy	Total	..	..	..	1.8	1.9
	Cash	0.9	0.5	0.6	0.7	0.8
	Services	0.1	0.2	0.6	0.6	0.7
	Tax-breaks for families	..	..	0.0	0.5	0.5
Spain	Total	..	..	0.9	1.5	1.5
	Cash	0.4	0.2	0.3	0.5	0.5
	Services	0.0	0.1	0.6	0.8	0.7
	Tax-breaks for families	..	..	0.0	0.1	0.2
United Kingdom	Total	..	..	2.5	4.1	2.5
	Cash	1.7	1.5	1.6	2.5	1.4
	Services	0.5	0.4	0.8	1.4	1.0
	Tax-breaks for families	..	..	0.1	0.3	0.1

Source: OECD Family Database (2024) – indicator: PF1.1 Public spending on family benefits

Services such as childcare, as well as the availability of statutory paid maternity and paternity leave (although relatively short compared to other European countries, Maldonado and Nieuwenhuis, 2020) and of flexible work policies support a high rate of maternal employment: over 70% of mothers work, and most full time (Adema, Clark, Thévenon, 2020). Beyond childcare, services aimed at families with young children include dedicated maternity and early childhood health services provided through the PMI centers, entirely free to parents, and broader systems, such as social housing, which accommodates over 20% of households with children (Algava, Bloch, Robert-Bobée, 2021).

Cash transfers towards families make up over a third of spending towards families. While cash benefit system is historically universal, reforms initiated in the 2010s are moving it towards a more means-tested system. Child benefits are particularly generous in early childhood, and are provided through a bundle of benefits called the *Prestation d'Accueil du Jeune Enfant* (PAJE). The PAJE is composed of four components:

a) *Prime à la naissance*: A one-off birth allowance of around €100, paid to parents around the seventh month of pregnancy.

b) *Allocation de base*: A means-tested monthly allowance provided to households until the child reaches the age of three.

c) *Prestation partagée d'éducation de l'enfant* (PreParE): This allowance corresponds to parental leave. The maximum subsidy is €448.48 per month if a parent stops working for up to one year for the first child, and up to three years for the second child and beyond. Parents are entitled by the law to extend the duration of parental leave if they are not offered a childcare spot (Pora, 2020).

d) *Complément de libre choix du mode de garde* (Cmg): An early childcare subsidy provided to parents who choose to hire a childminder, nanny, or use private daycare services.

It is important to note that despite this seemingly favorable policy environment, childhood poverty in France is higher than the poverty rate for the overall population (20% versus 14% in 2014), especially for children living with a single parent or with more than three siblings: for these groups, child poverty rates reached 40% (HCFEA, 2018). In general, while France compares relatively favorably with the rest of Europe in terms of overall poverty rates, it is a poor performer for child poverty (Eurostar, 2024). These inequalities are reflected in children's development, from birth: work has documented stark socioeconomic inequalities in birthweight, language development, obesity etc. (Panico and Tô, 2023; Grobon, Panico and Solaz, 2019; Panico et al., 2023). Such inequalities are comparable to those found in other countries in terms of magnitude of the gaps if not always in underlying mechanisms (Panico, Goisis and Martinson, 2024; Panico et al., 2023).

4.2 Cost and financing of ECEC: an overview

In France, public expenditures on early childcare (children under three years old) reached €16.1 billion in 2022 (ONAPE, 2023), with a mix of different funding bodies. The main funders are the Family branch of Social Security, local authorities, and the state. The Family branch of Social Security covers the largest portion, contributing €10.8 billion (two-thirds of total costs). This included direct payments to families through programs such as the *Complément de mode de garde* (CMG) for households hiring a childminder or a nanny and for parental leave (PreParE), as well as contributions towards the operation and investment in childcare facilities. Local governments (*collectivités territoriales*) also played a significant role, contributing €3.1 billion to the financing of public early childcare services, especially collective childcare and preschool education. The State contributed an additional €2.3 billion, primarily through tax credits and reductions, as well as through funding for early preschool education for children aged 2 to 3 (*toutes petites sections*) within preschools (ONAPE, 2023). Early childcare is also funded through the private sector, including private daycare companies, and firms.

The financial responsibilities for who pays for care and in what proportion depend on the type of care and the household's income. For instance, the Family branch of Social Security finances 75% of the cost of individual childcare (e.g., childminders), 60% of the cost of collective childcare (e.g., daycare), and does not contribute to preschool education (IGAS, 2017). The overall average cost of a slot also varies substantially by type of care. On average, collective care is the most expensive type of care, while early preschool is the least expensive, with around 475€ per month per slot on average. In contrast, the monthly cost of a daycare slot is €1,482, while a full-time childminder slot costs €1,142 (for a full-time schedule of 9 hours per day, 18 days per month) (IGAS, 2017).

The cost of childcare services varies little across regions. Prices for collective childcare, such as daycare centers, are generally uniform at the national level, except for some private daycare centers that do not follow national guidelines. The cost of childminders may vary slightly by region, but it remains largely regulated, with both a national minimum (€3.24 gross per hour in 2023) and a maximum cap. In contrast, the cost of private nannies is not regulated, leading to potentially significant regional variations. However, there is a lack of available data to capture these differences.

4.3 Cost and financing by early childcare type

4.3.1 Collective daycares

In 2022, the total cost of running collective childcare facilities for children under three years old was €6.6 billion. Of this, 44% was funded by the *Prestation de Service Unique* (PSU), the primary subsidy provided by the Family branch of Social Security to support collective childcare. Local authorities (municipalities) contributed an additional 23%, while families covered 17% of the total costs (ONAPE, 2023). Additional funding also comes from regions, private businesses, the State, and other public bodies, making up the remaining.

Both the creation and operation of collective childcare centers are largely financed by the Family branch of Social Security and municipalities. First, while the initial investment is primarily the responsibility of the managing entity (often the municipality), significant financial support is provided by the Family branch through multiannual investment plans for daycare creation (*Plan crèche*).

Second, a large share of childcare slots are paid for by the Family branch directly to childcare facilities through a single service benefit (PSU). This benefit covers a portion of the hourly cost, with the exact amount depending on the households' incomes and number of children enrolled. Based on how much a household pays, the PSU covers up to 66% of the hourly cost, subject to a floor and a ceiling, with the remaining paid by the managing entity, typically the

municipality. For associative childcare centers, the additional amount is often funded through a municipal subsidy to the managing association. The remaining out-of-pocket expenses to parents are also eligible for a tax credit up to 50% of the costs borne by parents, up to €3500 per year per child (i.e., up to €1750 tax rebate).

4.3.4 Individual care

Costs of individual care, such as regulated childminders or private nannies, are born upfront directly by households, with allowances from the Family branch of Social Security and the State through tax deductions. Unlike collective daycare centers, individual care providers do not receive financial support for starting their activities nor for ongoing operational costs, as this type of care takes place in private homes (either the childminder's, or the parents' for private nannies).

Families using individual childcare are eligible for the *Complément de mode de garde* (CMG), a cash allowance that is part of a package of benefits available in early childhood, the *Prestation d'accueil du jeune enfant* (PAJE) paid by the Family branch of Social Security. The amount of the CMG varies based on the family's income and the type of care arrangement chosen. When parents directly employ a childminder or nanny, they receive financial assistance ranging from €174.55 to €461.40 per month depending on their income. The Family branch covers the worker's social security contributions—100% for childminders and 50% for home-based private nannies. If parents use a service provider to hire a childminder or nanny, they are eligible for higher financial assistance, ranging from €465.49 to €698.20 for childminders and from €610.93 to €843.69 for nannies, depending on their income.

Additionally, families can benefit from tax credits for childcare expenses. This includes a tax credit for employing a childminder or nanny, with higher ceilings for the latter.

4.3.5 Private collective care

Over the last fifteen years, public funding has also played a crucial role in shaping new business models for private collective childcare services (IGAS, 2017). Since 2004, private daycare centers have been eligible for the same public funding as other daycare centers, including subsidies from the Family branch of Social Security through the PSU and investment aid. However, in order to qualify, private daycare centers must reserve at least 30% of their capacity for local residents. While these centers benefit from significant public funding, the share of the cost borne by the private operator remains substantial—around 46% of the total operating costs. The remaining costs are either directly financed by private companies (as in the case of company crèches) or indirectly through reservation fees paid by companies that

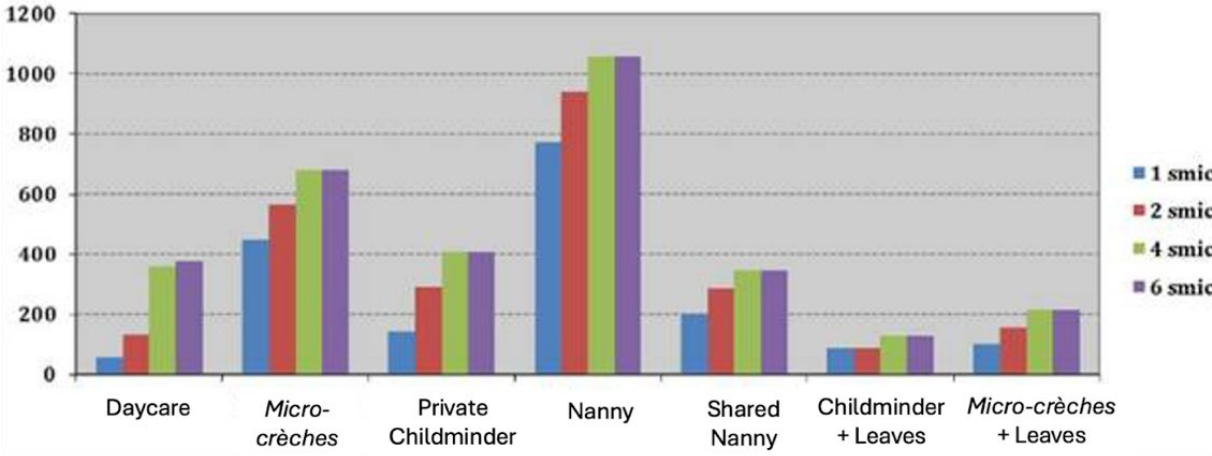
secure daycare slots for their employees. Municipalities also sometimes outsource the creation and management of daycare slots to these private companies.

Micro-crèches are small, private daycare centers that can welcome no more than 12 children. Families using micro-crèches are also eligible for financial assistance but through the CMG. As a result, the out-of-pocket costs remain considerably higher than for traditional daycare centers. The difference in costs between micro-crèches and traditional daycare centers can be as high as €400 per month, making micro-crèches an option primarily for affluent families who are unable to secure a place in a daycare (IGAS, 2017).

4.4 Out-of-pocket costs for families by income

The diversity in types of childcare, and funding models leads to significant disparities in the out-of-pocket expenses for families. Additionally, within the same type of care, the financial effort required from households with their income levels and the composition of their households.

Figure 8. Out-of-pocket expenditures depending on household income for by early childcare type



Source: Mission. Données CNAF
 Note: 1 SMIC corresponds to one time the minimum wage in 2015 (€1,457.5), 2 SMIC two times the minimum wage from IGAS (2017)

Because collective childcare is the most heavily subsidised type of care, it is the most affordable for households. In the national fee schedule, the upper bound of the hourly price paid by households for daycare is about 0.06% of their total monthly income, with a lower and upper threshold on the total fees (IGAS, 2017). By contrast, other formal childcare solutions, i.e. childminders or at-home childcare are much more expensive, especially for families at the lowest end of the income distribution. However, due to different subsidy systems (PSU on the

one hand, and CMG on the other hand), the gap between the cost of individual childcare and the cost of collective childcare for families is narrowing for families on higher incomes.

For example, for a family earning around two times the minimum wage (see Figure 8), the out-of-pocket cost for a full-time daycare slot is typically as low as €132 per month, with diapers and meals included, compared to €286 per month for a childminder. However, for families earning four or six times the minimum wage, the cost gap narrows, with childminders becoming comparable to daycare.

4.5 Efforts to increase affordability

An important reform was the introduction of the tiered payment system (*tiers-payant*) for the CMG, which, since 2019, allows households to benefit from third-party payments, meaning that they do not have to advance the costs of childminder services before receiving reimbursements from the Cnaf (Ministère des Solidarités et de la Santé, 2019). This reform was introduced at the national level to remove financial barriers for low-income families, who often struggled to pay for childcare upfront. However, while this system has alleviated some financial pressures, its impact on reducing inequalities may remain limited due to the high cost of childminders compared to daycare centers.

Starting in September 2025, another reform of the CMG will be implemented (Convention d'objective et de gestion de la Cnaf). The reform explicitly aims to align the costs of childminders with those of daycare centers, thereby reducing financial barriers to childminders for families with lower incomes. For example, a household with two parents earning a combined monthly net income of €2,000 and requiring 160 hours of childcare per month previously received a CMG of €339.42, leaving an out-of-pocket cost of €436.58. After the reform, their CMG will rise to €577.92, and their out-of-pocket cost will fall to €198.08—a reduction of €238.50 per month. By contrast, a household with two parents earning a combined €6,000 net per month and requiring 90 hours of childcare previously received €203.62 in CMG, with an out-of-pocket cost of €232.88. After the reform, their CMG will decrease to €157.86, and their out-of-pocket will increase to €278.64, a loss of €45.76 per month.

5. Case study: childcare provision in three districts in the Greater Paris area

To illustrate how service accessibility and quality vary locally, we carry out a case study on the Paris metropolitan area, comparing three districts: Paris, Val-de-Marne, and Seine-Saint-Denis. These three districts (*départements*) illustrate disparities in service availability and accessibility, despite their geographic proximity and shared urban characteristics.

5.1 District wealth and socioeconomic profiles

Paris is the wealthiest district in France across all indicators, with a highly affluent population and considerable public resources. It is highly dense and well connected. Val-de-Marne represents a relatively wealthy, mostly suburban district although it has a more mixed-income population and it is significantly less wealthy than Paris. Seine-Saint-Denis, an inner suburb, is one of the most economically disadvantaged areas in France across all economic indicators, facing high poverty rates, with limited public fundings. This lower level of wealth is reflected in the limited coverage of childcare services.

5.2 General coverage in early childcare

The availability of early childcare services varies significantly across these districts as depicted in Table 1 and Figure 8, although they are geographically close. Paris has the highest coverage of France, with 80.1 slots per 100 children under three in 2021, far above the national average of 59.1. Val-de-Marne provides a moderate level of childcare coverage at 52.6 slots per 100 children in 2021, close to the national average. Seine-Saint-Denis has one of the lowest childcare coverage rates in France, with 34.6 slots per 100 children. This limited availability is a significant challenge for families in the area, although many of them express a need for childcare to stabilise their financial situation.

Figure 8. Early childcare coverage rates in the case study districts (2021)

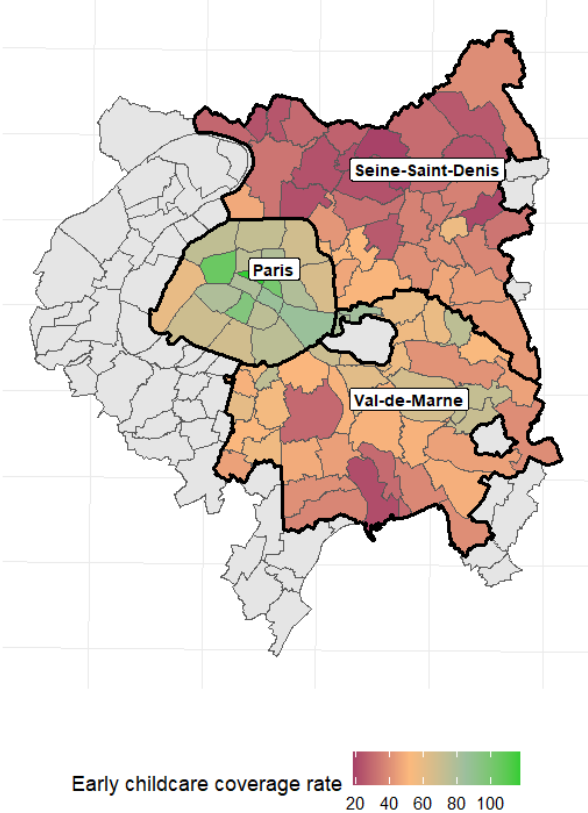


Table 4: Average Coverage in Districts of the Case Study (2021)

District	French National Average Coverage (2021)	Average District coverage (2021)	Average Daycare coverage in each district	Average Childminder coverage in each district
Paris	59.1	80.1	59.1	4.1
Val-de-Marne	59.1	52.6	31.8	15.3
Seine-Saint-Denis	59.1	34.6	19.9	11.3

Source: data caf, 2021 database (<https://data.caf.fr/pages/accueil-ods/>)

5.3 Childcare types

Given that these are three urban areas, one commonality is that the main form of childcare is daycare, in contrast to most French districts, where childminders are the predominant option. Paris relies heavily on municipal (public) daycare centers, boasting a higher proportion of

daycare slots than the national average, with 59.1 out of 80.1 available slots per 100 children aged 0 to 3. There are very few childminder slots in Paris, which are generally more prevalent in the city's less affluent neighborhoods, often located at the city's periphery, where fewer public daycare options are available. Val-de-Marne presents a more balanced mix of daycare centers and childminders, offering 31.8 slots for daycare and 15.3 slots for childminders per 100 children. Seine-Saint-Denis exhibits a similar split but with lower overall availability, providing 19.9 slots for daycare centers and 11.3 slots for childminders per 100 children. This distribution results in fewer childcare options for parents and a stronger reliance on family-based or informal care.

5.4 Application procedures and admission criteria

Although daycare provides for most of the early childcare slots in each district, childcare application processes and admission criteria differ significantly: Paris uses a decentralised approach, with applications managed by each neighborhood (*arrondissement*). Val-de-Marne has a more centralised application system at the municipal level. Most daycare applications are processed online *via* a website provided by the district that has no mobile version, creating accessibility challenges for parents without computer access. Seine-Saint-Denis applications are typically managed by each municipality, resulting in notable disparities in procedures. The admission criteria that govern who is prioritised for accessing daycare are the responsibility of each municipality or each neighborhood in Paris. Since the decision on who to prioritise is left to the mayors, the criteria put forward are often strategic choices linked to electoral strategies and political choices (Carbuccia, 2025). As a result, these criteria significantly vary across neighborhoods and cities. For instance, in Villejuif, a city in Val-de-Marne, parents who have previously accessed daycare for one child cannot apply again for another child, and non-dual-earner households are strongly discouraged from applying. In contrast, many socially mixed neighborhoods in Paris prioritise low-income and vulnerable families when allocating daycare slots, often giving priority to households in which one child is already attending daycare (see Appendix I).

5.5 Quality of childcare services

While there is limited data on quality across the three districts, a few key points emerge: Paris, due to its resources, generally offers higher-quality facilities with well-trained staff and better physical infrastructures. In contrast, Seine-Saint-Denis faces significant challenges in maintaining high-quality services due to budget constraints, with limited funds available for staff training and facility improvements. In particular, Seine-Saint-Denis experiences sharp shortage of childcare professionals, and wealth inequalities between districts further reinforce

these dynamics. For instance, Paris has attracted many childcare professionals who previously worked in Seine-Saint-Denis by offering access to subsidised accommodation and various benefits.

5.6 Affordability and out-of-pocket costs

The cost of daycare is relatively homogeneous across the three districts due to France's income-based fee structure. However, differences in average income levels across these districts, displayed in Table 2, influence how costs are distributed: families in Paris, who typically have higher incomes, contribute more to out-of-pocket expenses, as outlined in Table 3. Therefore, because the amount of the Family branch subsidies depends on parents' out-of-pocket costs – the more parents pay, the less the Family branch pays- and this slightly reduces the public funding required in Paris (see section 4.3.1). In contrast, families in economically struggling areas like Seine-Saint-Denis bear a lower financial burden individually, as public authorities subsidise a larger portion of childcare costs, leading to significant public expenditure in one of France's poorest districts.

Table 5. Mean income net of taxes by district (2021) and share of dual earner households over the sum of all households in the districts (2020)

District	Paris	Val de Marne	Seine Saint Denis
Average Individual Income, Net of Taxes	4176€	2903€	2306€
Share of dual earners households	25%	29%	24%

Source: Authors' elaboration from Insee 2021 and Insee 2023

Note: All households in the districts include those with or without children below 25 years

Table 6. Simulated out-of-pocket expenses for a typical dual-earner family

District	Paris	Val de Marne	Seine Saint Denis
Simulated ⁵ out-of-pocket expenses for a typical dual-earner family in which both parents earn the average income, with one child, and use daycare 40h a week	593€	574€	457€
Simulated out-of-pocket expenses for a single-parent family in which the parent earns the average income, with one child, and use daycare 40h a week	413€	287€	228€

⁵ Simulations were based on the PSU scheme (hourly cost of daycare = 0,0619% of household income for a household with one child).

Note: A typical dual-earner family is one in which both parents earn the average income, with one child, and use daycare 40h a week, in each district. Simulations were based on the PSU scheme (hourly cost of daycare = 0,0619% of household income for a household with one child).

In contrast, the out-of-pocket fees for childminders vary slightly across regions within Greater Paris. The regional average rate is around €4 gross per hour, but this can fluctuate, with higher rates in more affluent neighborhoods of Paris compared to the outskirts of Seine-Saint-Denis. Additionally, some cities struggling to provide daycare slots within Val-de-Marne and Seine-Saint-Denis, such as Saint-Maurice, have implemented municipal subsidies to align the cost of childminders with that of public daycare. These subsidies, however, which are left to the initiative of the cities, can be conditional on both parents working, as in Saint-Maurice, highlighting an additional layer of access criteria in lower-income areas

6. Policy discussion & Conclusion

The international literature generally describes France by highlighting significant public investment in families, high coverage of childcare, and the development of places in public preschool. Reforms from the 1990s to facilitate the reconciliation of work and family life and a diversification of the types of childcare available, have been qualified by policy makers as promoting “free choice” (Martin, 2010). While the French early childcare system is therefore often seen as an example of a high-access, high quality system, the reality is more complex. Several challenges need to be highlighted.

First, while access rates to early childhood care and education (before age 3) seem overall high by OECD standards, national coverage rates hide stark inequalities in access across socioeconomic groups. Since 2019, various grants have been launched as part of the national strategy for preventing and combating poverty, which includes an aim to increase the rate of ECEC attendance of disadvantaged children. In particular, the Diversity Grant should compensate ECEC settings that serve a large share of socioeconomically disadvantaged families for the costs that they incur in adapting services to the specific needs of these families and children. Yet only facilities with a very large proportion of disadvantaged users are eligible. As a result, only a small number of providers benefit from this. Furthermore, providers note that this bonus does fully not compensate for the loss of income associated with admitting a more disadvantaged population (Cour des Comptes, 2024).

Second, the mix of central and local funding and governance has resulted in strong geographical variations in service provision, with some areas particularly underserved. While local funding allows program managers to adapt more easily to local needs, the French

experience suggests that more central funding might smooth these regional inequalities. Furthermore, the various governance layers might impede some smaller local authorities from considering delivering such services. Therefore, a simplification of procedures and governance might encourage more local municipalities to provide services. The “Territorial” bonus, launched as part of the anti poverty strategy, which was supposed to encourage the provision of more childcare slots, was ultimately mostly taken up by areas with already high coverage, which providers considered to be more lucrative and already had the “know how” of navigating this complex landscape (Cour des Comptes, 2024).

Third, while most parents prefer formal collective daycare, demand far outstrips supply, so that the most used childcare arrangement for children under 3 is regulated childminders. Availability and access to childcare by type, is very unequal, with less advantaged families having the least access to daycare, which has been shown to be particularly positive for child development in France, especially among the most disadvantaged families (Berger et al., 2021). As a result, advantaged children have the double advantage of more enriching environments both at home, but also through the daycare system, with consequences for inequalities in early child development. While recent policy initiatives have attempted to increase the offer of daycare in disadvantaged areas, there have been few programs aimed at the demand side.

Fourth, an increasing demand for childcare is mostly being met by private providers, with questions about the quality of care delivered and about accessibility for low-SES families, given their lower affordability. The regulation of these providers, including their costs and how they allocate slots, could be better managed to ensure more equal access to these services.

Fifth, there is a tension between maintaining or increasing quality standards in daycare centers in a context where ECEC labor shortages are becoming increasingly an issue. Several initiatives have been put in place to address both labor shortages and quality of the ECEC sector, especially in the private sector. For example, a National Assembly inquiry in 2024 on the economic model of the collective childcare providers, as well as the quality of the services they provide, produced four key recommendations mostly centering around more regular and effective inspections and the work conditions of staff workers. In 2021, a new set of non-binding guidelines (*Charte de l'accueil du jeune enfant*) put forward best practices both for improving work conditions and quality care in collective formal care settings. However, in practice there has been little in response to these initiatives, and on the contrary, in areas with particularly large staff shortages, providers have been allowed to relax rules about the qualifications required by staff for the 2023-2026 period.

Finally, the increasing demand for flexible childcare by more precariously employed parents is not being met by classic municipal daycares, which are more affordable but have little flexibility

in its offer, leaving this sector of the population underserved. Currently, municipal daycares are aimed at parents who work “regular” hours; policies could consider how to encourage these providers, which are more trusted by parents and more financially accessible, to offer more flexible services.

These final points are particularly salient when looking forward. On the one hand, sociodemographic trends and changes to the labor market, concerning in particular the less advantaged segment of the population, imply a greater demand for more flexible, irregular childcare, at atypical hours, which is currently not being met. Indeed, if anything, as regulated childminders is an ageing group, and there is a lack of interest in younger people in this sector given pay and work conditions, even childminding, which is currently the pillar of early care in France, might struggle to keep pace with demand. On the other hand, inequalities in child development, educational achievement, and health are increasingly being documented in France, and seem to strengthen over time (DEPP, 2024b). Collective daycare does seem to be providing care that nurtures child development (Berger, Panico, Solaz, 2021), yet more advantaged families access this type of care more.

A final cautionary tale. France has in recent years increasingly and explicitly introduced programs aimed at redressing unequal access to ECEC for children below the age of 3 through a new set of measures focused on opening more daycare slots in disadvantaged areas. However, these attempts have so far failed to make an impact, largely because the targets for opening new slots are far from being met. As of the end of 2021, the last time a national evaluation was carried out, only 29% of the promised new 30 000 slots had been created (France Stratégie, 2022), mostly in municipalities with already relatively high coverage rates and more financial potential (Cour des Comptes, 2024). The new Objectives and Management plan for the Family branch of the Social Security again calls for the provision of 30,000 new childcare slots between 2023 and 2027, through similar initiatives such as local incentives to create new slots, and financial support for parents. Key concerns, such as staff shortages, low pay, and the high cost of providing appropriate services to more disadvantaged populations, are not explicitly addressed. No evaluation of this plan is yet available.

More generally, quantifying and evaluating the early childhood education and care offer in France is complex due to the lack of national data. The 2022 report from the evaluation commission for the anti-poverty strategy also highlights a lack of indicators to fully evaluate the “early childhood” measures taken in France over the last few years (France Stratégie, 2022), reflecting the complex central-local interactions that do not allow for national-level indicators to be easily calculated. As a result, national policies are piloted with little evidence of their impact.

Although several steps have been taken over time, there is still some distance ahead on the road to (quasi-)universal ECEC coverage with good quality provision. Addressing the challenges of unequal access to high-quality ECEC services represents a major policy objective for France.

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Appendix 1. Examples of ECEC attribution criteria and their weighting

Scoring grids

Paris 20th

RATE SCHEDULE 20th CITY HALL		
	Criteria	points
Activity status	Single-parent working family	25
	Couple with 2 working members	18
	Single-parent family	15
	Couple where one of the 2 members is working	7
	Couple where neither member is working	4
	Parisian professions: Security/Security (public service); Health (doctors and nurses) hospital staff); Early childhood (City of Paris and associations); Cleaning	15
Net monthly household income	Less than €1,200	25
	from €1,201 to €3,500	22
	From €3,501 to €5,000	17
	From €5,001 to €7,000	14
	over €7,000	6
Family and health situation	housing difficulties (hotel accommodation, over-occupation)	15
	disabled children	15
	Parents with disabilities or serious illnesses	15
	Multiple births	15
	Breakdown of childcare arrangements (moving of a child already admitted to a Paris crèche/resignation of a childminder or parental auxiliary)	15
	Transferring an admitted child from one district to another	15
	Parents studying or in training	15
	parents' shifting schedules	5
	minor parent	15
	siblings admitted to the nursery	2
Age of request	Between 6 and 9 months	5
	Between 9 and 11 months	10
	Between 11 and 13 months	15
	More than 13 months	20

Paris 18th

Rating grid for the 18th arrondissement:

ACTIVITY							
Couple whose 2 members are active	Couple with one working member	Couple with no member at activity	Single-parent working family	Single-parent family			
4	2	1	5	2			
INCOME							
0 à 1000€	1001 à 2500€	2501 à 4000€	4001 à 5500€	5501 à 7000€	7001€ and more		
2	3	2,5	2	1,5	1		
FAMILY SITUATION							
Minor parent	Substandard housing Social hotel accommodation	Children with disabilities	Disability of a family member (parent or sibling)	Multiple births Adoption	Oldest child already admitted to crèche on day of planned admission for the child	Break in childcare arrangements (Moving of a child already admitted to a crèche) à Paris / Resignation of a childminder or parental auxiliary / Cessation of activity of a assistante maternelle)	Early childhood professional parent for the City of Paris
2	1,5	2,5	1,5	2	1	2	1

Toulouse (Medium Size Agglomeration in the Southwest of France)

Category	Criteria	Points	
Family Situation	Working couple or single-parent family	10	
	Non-working single-parent family	6	
	Couple with one working member	5	
	Couple with two non-working members	3	
	Multiple births: twins, triplets, etc.	2	
	Two children to be cared for: same date of entry, different ages	2	
	Siblings fostered simultaneously for 6 months	1	
	No place available for first child(ren)	1	
	First child	1	
	Return to Employment	A parent is supported by the PLIE, Mission locale, AVIP, etc.	2
Parent seeking employment with Pôle-emploi		1	
Parent returning to work, on presentation of supporting documents		2	
Specific Situations and Disabilities	Child with a disability or chronic illness	4	
	A sibling with a disability	3	
	One parent has a disability (cannot be combined with child disability)	2	
	Cases of violence, shelter, death, hospitalization, incarceration, etc.	2	
	Family accompanied by PMI or ASE	2	
	Family in housing difficulty: in a hotel, overcrowded, etc.	1	
	Allophone child (not speaking French)	1	
	Minor parent	1	
	Other Criteria	Age of application	1
		Temporary care only: break in care arrangements, with proof less than three months old	2

Admission criteria without scoring grid - Paris 19th

In Paris 19th, another neighborhood of Paris, the website simply states that “Decisions are made on the basis of family and social circumstances, and with due regard to social diversity.

The following criteria are examined:

- Homes where both parents work
- Single-parent families
- Parents on the road to integration
- Children with disabilities
- Adopted children
- Multiple births
- Early pregnancy
- Reporting children at risk
- Student couples
- Continuity of childcare for families moving into the 19th arrondissement

No criterion gives automatic right to a place.”



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