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The social risks of early school leaving : towards a localised prevention policy ?

The point at which a young person drops out of education is generally the moment when longstanding disaffection suddenly emerges into the full light of day. While it is always difficult to put an end to early school leaving, might not action to reduce exposure to the risk of dropping out have some effect ? Such action on a young person's environment should be taken in conjunction with the individual monitoring that is often recommended.

prevention
early school leaving
schooling region
work policy territory
individuals without
qualifications

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Early school leavers form a hard core of young people whose lack of qualifications makes it difficult for them to integrate into society or the labour market. This makes early school leaving one of the key issues in education policy.

However, there is still room for progress in preventing this risk. Efforts to improve policy in this area could take account of these young people's individual characteristics; they are, for example, relatively immobile geographically and concentrated in certain areas. We know how young people without qualifications are distributed geographically. Picardy, Champagne-Ardenne, Burgundy and, further to the south, Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur and Languedoc-Roussillon are the regions with high concentrations of these young people. Nevertheless, disparities can be observed even within the same region, with areas of educational success existing alongside areas of failure (Map 1).

This would suggest that policies designed to combat early school leaving should adopt a localised approach and be implemented across regions at a level closer to the target groups, with the aim of influencing the causal factors. This is all the more essential since the factors that encourage early school leaving depend in part on the context in which young people live,

a context that can be identified by the prevailing living conditions (cf. box page 4).

Five territorial configurations determining educational success

These risk factors combine to produce five broad types of territories whose cartography overlaps to a considerable degree with that of young people without qualifications (Map 2).

Two groups of territories require public action as a matter of priority. The first is characterised by a context best described as '**Precarious family life and employment**'. Such territories are located in the industrial and peri-urban areas of northern France, Picardy, Lorraine and eastern France as far as Montbéliard and Oyonnax. They have the highest share of young people aged between 15 and 24 who are no longer in education or training but have no qualifications: 33% compared with an average of 25% for France as a whole. These areas have several factors that put them at a disadvantage, including high shares of adults without qualifications and of unemployed people, single-parent families, large families and families in social housing. These families have a level of cultural capital that does not encourage socialisation with the ●●●

●●● world of education or access to books and newspapers; they are generally unaccustomed to using the written word.

Under these circumstances, many children are unlikely to receive assistance with their homework, the importance of which is well recognised, particularly for children in single-parent families, and even more so when those families are large.

The second group of territories combines **'Cultural weakness and precarious employment'**. It is composed mainly of isolated or rural towns and villages in Aquitaine, Pays de Loire and Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur, where levels of qualification are low and go hand in hand with very precarious employment and high unemployment. Income levels are also a disadvantaging factor as is, to an even greater extent, parents' lack of cultural capital. At 29%, the average rate per canton of 15 to 24 year olds without qualifications compared with young people of the same age not in education is also very high.

These two types of territories encompass 1,261 cantons, one third of the total number of cantons in metropolitan France, and contain no less than half of the population aged 15 and over. They should be given priority, since the young people at risk of early school leaving do not have the advantage of a social, economic and geographic environment likely to compensate for their unfavourable personal circumstances.

Other areas could also be regarded as priorities, albeit to a lesser extent. The share of young people without qualifications is lower here, although still worrying (21-25 %), but individual circumstances are not favourable in all respects. For example, those territories whose profile might be described as

'Economic security and cultural support' tend to score positively in the economic, family and cultural dimensions. Often located in residential urban or peri-urban areas, these cantons are populated by middle-class families living in and around cities such as Caen, Nantes, Toulouse, Avignon, Lyon, Besançon and Mulhouse. They satisfy all the criteria, albeit only modestly: the share of young people not in education and without qualifications is the lowest of all the groups of territories. Another example is the territories whose profile can be summarised as **'Economic security but precarious family life'**. They are about average in terms of the share of young people aged between 15 and 24 without qualifications and also have the lowest share of people aged 60 and over. The families that live in these areas are frequently on the outskirts of urban centres, particularly in the Île-de-France, apart from a few cantons in the Rhône-Alpes region. They have sufficient cultural capital, such as educational qualifications and resources facilitating access to cultural knowledge and practices. They also enjoy economic security in terms of income and employment. On the other hand, family circumstances and living conditions are somewhat more challenging.

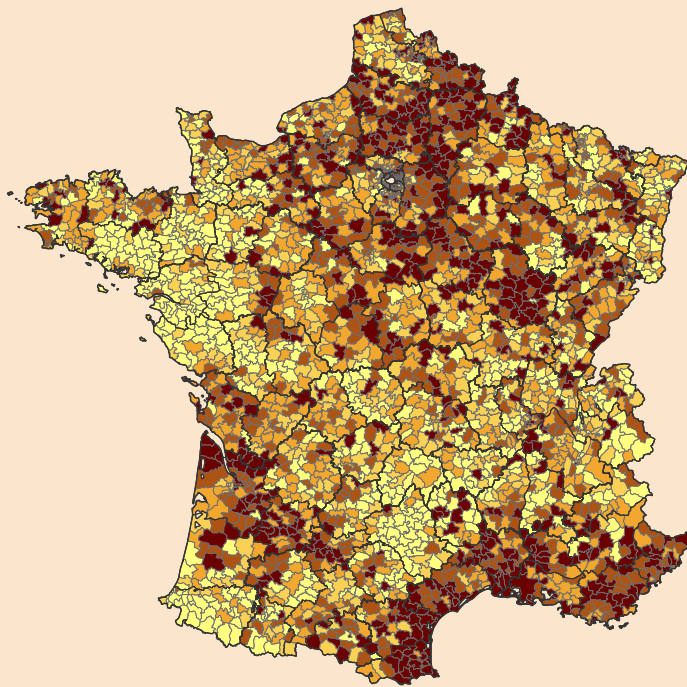
Our last type of territory, the **'ageing rural environment'**, stands somewhat apart from the rest and is characterised by a glaring paradox. Incomes are low, as is the share of stable, permanent jobs, but the share of young people not in education and without qualifications is one of the lowest, at 22%. The share of young people leaving the education system with the lowest levels of qualification (CAP/BEP) is also higher than elsewhere. We are dealing here with an ageing population in a rural environment. This type of territory encompasses a large number of cantons (1,038) but only 11 % of young people aged 15 and over live here. These cantons are located in the ●●●

Typology of areas at risk of early school leaving and socio-demographic characteristics

Number of profile	Name of profile	Number of cantons	Average population density : number of inh./km ²	Population aged 15 and over	% of unqualified indiv. among 15-24 y/o not in education/training	% of over-60s in population	Median income per canton in euros
1	'Precarious family life and employment'	353	524	8,8M	33%	19%	18 187
2	'Cultural weakness and precarious employment'	908	109	12,4M	29%	23%	18 592
3	'Economic security and cultural support'	908	79	6,3M	21%	21%	22 090
4	'Economic security but precarious family life'	482	276	8,0M	25%	18%	24 064
5	'Ageing rural environment'	1038	31	4,4M	22%	28%	17 238
Total		3 689	103	39,9M	25%	21%	19 215

Source : INSEE recensement 2006. Calculs : Céreq.

Map 1 • Share of young people without qualifications among 15-24 year olds not in education/training

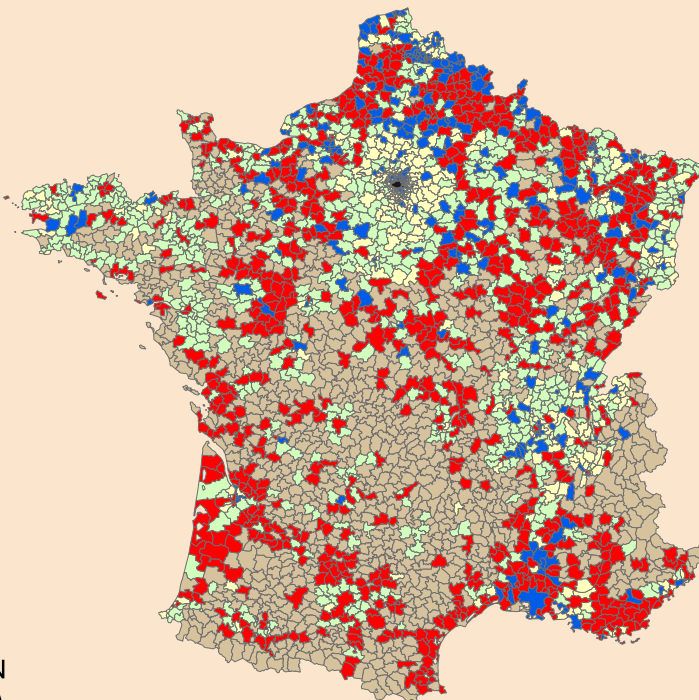


- < 19 % (N = 760)
- between 19 and 22 % (N = 581)
- between 22 and 26 % (N = 793)
- between 26 and 31 % (N = 830)
- > 31 % (N = 721)

□ Paris and the Île-de-France are virtually unreadable because of the scale used and the boundary lines between areas.

Source : INSEE recensement 2006. Calculs : Céreq.

Map 2 • Areas at risk of early school leaving (ascending hierarchical classification of living conditions at canton level)



- Profile 1 : Precarious family life and employment (N = 353)
- Profile 2 : Cultural weakness and precarious employment (N = 908)
- Profile 3 : Economic security and cultural support (N = 908)
- Profile 4 : Economic security but precarious family life (N = 479)
- Profile 5 : Ageing rural environment (N = 1 038)

■ Paris and Ile-de-France are virtually unreadable because of the scale used and the boundary lines between areas. The canton of Paris is included in Type 2 'Cultural fragility and precarious employment' because of its high unemployment rate, although the share of individuals without qualifications is lower than average. The Parisian suburbs are divided mainly between Type 1 'Precarious family life and employment to the North and East and Type 4 'Economic security but precarious family life' to the South and West.

Source : INSEE recensement 2006. Calculs : Céreq.

mountainous regions of France, stretching from the Alps to the Pyrenees via the Massif Central and the Morvan, and on the country's western periphery, from the English Channel to Ile-et-Vilaine, as well as in the Charentais.

Extended education policies ?

Territories of the **'Precarious family life and employment'** and **'Cultural weakness and precarious employment'** types are the ones most obviously concerned by an educational policy extended to encompass the social, family and cultural environment. It can be assumed that families are particularly dependent on social security benefits and that the discontinuity of such benefits may have harmful effects. With regard to families, individualised measures may prove to be necessary during certain latent periods when there is only one parent, usually the mother, or when the children in a large family cannot physically be monitored daily at home. On the cultural level, efforts to make books and newspapers accessible could be intensified as part of the Education Success Plans, not just in urban areas but also in peri-urban and rural areas where actually travelling to libraries can be difficult.

On the other hand, the most appropriate action in the case of the territories whose profile can be summarised as **'Economic security and cultural support'** would be to develop extra-curricular activities. The middle-class parents who live in these areas, however modest their means may be, are generally regarded as more receptive to the demands of the education system and find it easier to communicate with staff. The limited transport provision in rural areas, which sometimes means that children are away from home for very long periods during the day, could in certain cases be reorganised through consultation between the Conseil Général (departmental council), transport companies and schools.

The territories that fit the **'Economic security but precarious family life'** profile do not require economic support so much as assistance in making good shortages of time and facilities for supervising pupils at risk. The best solution in this case would undoubtedly be to extend the provision of supervised study times in schools in a way that meets each establishment's needs.

The choice of indicators of living conditions

Parents' employment situation⁽¹⁾ is a proven but only partial explanatory factor for inequalities. As a result, indicators of living conditions taken from the 2006 Population Census were tested in three areas likely to impact on possible early school leaving.

Among the living conditions most affected by employment situations, the indicators chosen were average income per household, calculated at commune level and aggregated to the canton level, the share of unemployed individuals among the population aged between 15 and 64 and the share of wage-earners in permanent jobs.

In the case of family circumstances, the indicators chosen were the share of single-parent families, the share of large families (those with 4 or more children under 25) and the share of households living in social housing.

Finally, as far as strictly cultural conditions are concerned, the share of unqualified individuals in the 45-54 age group gives an indication of the support with school work young people are likely to get from their parents.

While these seven indicators are fairly familiar taken separately, calculation of their respective weights led us to devise an ascending hierarchical classification that provided the basis for a typology. The cartography of the share of young people (15-24 year olds) without qualifications (Map 1) is fairly similar in its geography to that of the five types of canton (Map 2). Thus there is a link, if not a complete correspondence then at least a higher risk of early school leaving when certain living conditions converge.

(1) Parents' occupation was not included because it overwhelms the other variables.

Ultimately, early school leaving is the result of several factors that accumulate and combine in various ways depending on the labour market, marital status and family structure, the parent's familiarity with educational norms, housing and the general living conditions that predominate in the local area. Consequently, an action programme aimed more at influencing living environments than individuals themselves could adopt one of two approaches. In the first, different educational, social and cultural policies would be devised to combat early school leaving depending on the local risks that are identified. In the second, each area of public action would be given a precise target for its contribution to the fight against early school leaving. While action on living conditions falls more within the scope of employment policy, attempts to improve family circumstances would depend on support from social, family and housing policy; for their part, cultural conditions could benefit from targeted initiatives developed as part of school-based and extra-curricular educational policies and municipal cultural policies. ■

Further reading

Caro P., Rouault R. (2010), *Atlas des fractures scolaires*, Autrement.

GSE Articles, «Sortis sans qualification», <http://www.cereq.fr/index.php/articles/GSE-Articles>.

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