

## Mobility poverty

Bonus: France

Mobility poverty overview in central and eastern europe

Project: Mobility Poverty in CEE and SE Eastern

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## research background

Mobility poverty (MP) in some countries has been relatively unexamined and no clear definitions are available at EU or national levels. However, it is a problem that is becoming more pressing as fuel prices are rising and some countries face high car dependency thus commuting to work or for daily errands can become very expensive. The most important factor that causes MP is the household’s income. But then the mobility expenses are lower if the family members have good access to public transport and can go on foot/by bicycle to do their daily errands. It seems that the low-income households in peripheral and (by public transport) less accessible areas might be the most affected and vulnerable groups.

Against this backdrop, project Mobility poverty in Central and Eastern Europe aims at reviewing the policies and assessing the state of mobility poverty in Bulgaria, Croatia, Hungary, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia. It also aims to raise awareness of policy- and decision- makers about the mobility poverty issue. The overview in selected countries will result in a 4-pager policy brief for each country. The policy briefs will be disseminated to 20-30 stakeholders in each country. These reports will be based on an accessible EU database and quality insight (e.g. interviews). These policy briefs will be a good basis for further project activities, especially stakeholder awareness and communication.

This “bonus” overview about France is a way to provide more perspective on this global study about mobility poverty.

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1/ Mobility poverty definition and indicators

**Mobility poverty definition**

The notion of **“précarité mobilité”** (“precariousness and mobility”) is getting more and more popular in France, even if it is still a very new concept that is globally always linked to its corollary: the “précarité énergétique” (energy poverty). The “précarité mobilité” has mainly been highlighted by the work led by two French NGOs: the *Fondation pour la nature et l’homme* and *Wimoov*, who produce regularly since 2019 a report entitled “**Baromètre des mobilités du quotidien**”[[1]](#footnote-1) (“Daily mobility barometer”). They demonstrate, in their 2022 report, that **13.3 million** people in France were concerned by mobility poverty.

However, this notion of “précarité mobilité” is very rarely mentioned by the French authorities, especially by the French government. In France, mobility poverty policies are essentially focused on ensuring that mobility does not prevent access to **employment**, considering that employment is the key to an effective social and political integration to society. Thus, mobility poverty is not assessed in itself and not defined as a concrete concept, the “lack of mobility” being only painted as both a source and a result of low-income and lack of knowledge. Consequently, the government only provides **supply-sides policies** that are ultimately not adapted to tackle this deep-rooted problem.

When this notion of “précarité mobilité” is mentioned in the French political field, it is mainly done by (far-)left representatives. The main example is the initiative launched by the European deputy Leïla Chaibi (LFI) who suggested the introduction of “précarité mobilité” in the **European Social Climate Fund**. She proposes a definition as followed: “A person is considered as being in a situation of “précarité mobilité” when: she has difficulties to move around to respond to her essential needs and/or her displacements put a strain on her budget”. Thus, this issue is partly tackled at the European level, but not concretely at the national level in the case of France.

Yet, transport is also the **first source of GHG emissions** in France and represented 31% of France global emissions in 2019[[2]](#footnote-2). Meaning it is both a social and environmental issue of great importance when considering the advent of a future viable society.

**Indicators of mobility poverty**

Consequently, it does not exist in France concrete mobility poverty indicators. For instance, the **INSEE** (Institut national de la statistique et des études économiques), the national institute for statistics who produces the main data about the French economy and society, does not produce specific studies on mobility poverty in France. They regularly work on the French people’s daily mobility (the last data available are those from 2019), but they do not include a subcategory about mobility poverty. Which is another proof that the notion of “précarité mobilité” is pretty new and still rarely considered in the French field of research.

The **academic studies** are still rare about mobility poverty in France, and they tend to focus on other issues related to transportation (that can actually be linked with mobility poverty), for instance the reduced services in rural areas as a consequence of decades of public policies that focused on personal cars and highways and on big cities, especially Paris. Moreover, most of them are not recent and have been made at the latest in 2019.

That is why the **“Daily mobility barometer”** produced by the *FNH* and *Wimoov* is a precursory and innovative work that is genuinely important to raise awareness in France about that crucial social and environmental topic. Their ambition to produce one report each year (2020 has not been studied due to the pandemic) will allow a more profound understanding of French people’s needs and difficulties in terms of mobility.

2/ Situation in the field of mobility poverty

Today, the most complete information we have available about mobility poverty in France is the one from the **“Daily mobility barometer”** by the *FNH* and *Wimoov*. In their 2022 report, they highlighted that more than one in four French people (27.6%) have difficulty in being mobile, namely **13.3 million people**. Different reasons can be raised: they are heavily dependent on their personal car, have a high fuel budget, must travel long distances, and often have no alternatives.

But what is even more concerning is that, among them, **more than four million have no equipment at all**: neither car nor bicycle, nor even a subscription to a public transport service. This group is mostly represented by households earning less than 1.500€ per month (16%), job seekers (18%), those without a university degree (20%) and adults without kids, meaning mostly young people (21%). Thus, this group is overrepresented by the **most fragile groups**, raising the link between poverty and difficulties in being mobile. The 9 million remaining can be concerned by **fuel insecurity** (3.6 million have high fuel budget while earning a low income and/or restrict their travels), **mobility vulnerability** (4.3 million have long distances to travel and/or aging cars and/or no alternatives and/or low income), and/or are **car-dependent** (by not considering the income, 5.3 million have high fuel costs and/or long distances to travel and/or no alternatives). Even 2.5 million French people are concerned by two or all these insecurity factors.

Moreover, the report highlights very concerning points: 28% of job seekers have already given up one job because of mobility difficulties; 42% of seniors have already given up a medical appointment for the same reason. Finally, the report demonstrated that 45% of French people have no alternatives between two modes of transport and have no choice.

This point hence explains why so many French people are **highly dependent to their personal car**. Indeed, the barometer highlights that 71% of French people use the car as their main mode of transport. Even if some of them changed their habits after covid-19 pandemic (1/4 of them), those are mainly from highest socio-professional categories, while 80% of factory workers stay car-dependent. Those from lowest socio-professional categories are also those who possess the most polluting cars: 23% of cars possessed by households earning less than 1.000€ per month are more than 15 years (cf. graphic).

However, the French government encouraged for several years now the development of **“Zones à faibles émissions” (ZFE)** (“low emission zones”) in bigger French cities, whose aim is to progressively forbid the most polluting and aging cars in these zones. It will ultimately concern half of the French population. But in early 2023, this measure is criticised by many because it has revealed itself as deeply unfair as it directly hurts the most fragile groups. Indeed, those groups do not have the financial means to invest in more recent and less polluting cars, especially in electric cars who remain unaffordable for many. They are also those who do not have the possibility to work from home during pollution peaks and those who are the most car-dependent (as seen earlier). President Macron talked about a social project that would allow people to lease electric vehicles, but the implementation of it has not been introduced yet. Thus, the ZFE, promoted as an essential measure against climate change has mainly become a source of terrible injustice.

Une image contenant graphique

Description générée automatiquement

Source : p. 22 Baromètre des mobilités du quotidien (2022)

The report also highlights the specific difficulties known by those who live in French **rural areas**. There is no alternative to the personal car in those low-density areas. In isolated municipalities, the proportion of people who say they have a choice in the mode of transport represents only 26%, whereas it can represent 80% in the biggest cities. Thus, despite the fuel prizes getting higher and higher (almost 2€/liter currently), without having alternatives, those people are condemned to still use their personal car, contributing to the reduction of their purchasing power. This is the result of public policies led in France since the Second World War that were only supply-side and focused on building new highways, high-speed lines for trains, condemning the smallest lines and reducing the offer of public transport in rural areas. Another study produced by the *AQST* (Quality of Transportation Service’s Authority) in 2019[[3]](#footnote-3), by comparing the public transportation services provided in rural areas in Germany, Spain, and France, highlighted that the French services were less efficient than the others. Indeed, its efficiency is reduced due to highly long time of connection, less frequency, less trains for small distances (less than 100 kilometers, France being more efficient for long distances with its high-speed lines), etc. Thus, being mobile in French rural areas without a personal car has become deeply challenging.

Concerning the **affordability of transport** in France, in 2021, about 12.7% of a household’s expenses were related to transportation, a rate a bit higher than the EU average of 12.1%[[4]](#footnote-4). However, this number is probably still impacted by the consequences of the 2020 pandemic, as this rate previously reached in 2019 14%, a rate that was one of the highest among EU countries.

Finally, concerning **accommodations for people with disabilities**, the research field does not focus on this specific topic. It is instead (sometimes) mentioned in studies focusing more globally on public transportation. Specific laws were promulgated in 1975 and 2005 to guarantee equal opportunities to persons with disabilities, which apply to public transportation as well. Thus, after 2005, big works were needed (to build elevators, inclined passages, tactile paving, etc.). So, the new infrastructures and modern transports include those questions since their conception, but the situation gets particularly difficult concerning old infrastructures (for ex., the Parisian underground)[[5]](#footnote-5). Thus, the accessibility to public transportation for people with disabilities in France is very complicated and remains an issue mostly ignored.

Thus, the EU-level indicator for transport poverty ranked France as the 11th out of 28 member-states in addressing transport energy poverty in 2018 (OpenExp, 2019)

3/ Mobility poverty policies and measures

As mentioned earlier, in France, mobility poverty measures are focused on ensuring that mobility does not prevent access to **employment**, as a guarantee of social and political inclusion. As such, most of the measures tackle affordability and accessibility, and are focused on young people and job seekers. Which leads to only **supply-side policies**, and not demand-side.

Those objectives are promoted by the most recent law regarding mobility in France that was promulgated in 2019: the **“Loi d’Orientation des Mobilités”** (LOM) (“Mobility Act”). The LOM has three pillars: to have easier, less expensive, and cleaner daily transportation. The different aims are to invest more and better in everyday transportation (especially in smallest railway lines), to boost the deployment of new solutions enabling everyone to be mobile (promotion of carpooling, involvement of companies about their workers daily mobility, financial aid when using carpool or bicycle, enabling a cheaper and faster driver’s license…), and to guarantee the transition to a cleaner mobility (especially by encouraging the daily use of bicycles). Then, in 2019, the government decided to strengthen its mobility solutions in the scope of their goal to improve the access to employment. It encouraged several measures such as the installation of “mobility platforms” to inform and guide job seekers, or the reinforcement of the “mobility micro-credit” to help job seekers financing a car or a two-wheeler. Finally, in early 2023, the Prime Minister Elisabeth Borne announced an additional plan of 100.000.000.000 euros allocated to mobility. The accent was made on decarbonation by reducing the use of personal cars and reinforcing the railway network and the “soft” mobilities (carpooling, bicycles…). This plan demonstrates a perfect continuity with the LOM by providing new supply-side solutions.

However, what is important to highlight is that, since 2019, never the French government mentions the concrete issue of mobility poverty. The measures they intended prove it: the notion of “précarité mobilité” is only considered by NGOs and never mentioned in itself by the national authorities. In 2023, in her long speech to announce this additional mobility plan[[6]](#footnote-6), never the Prime Minister mentions this notion. It proves, once again, that their measures are only supply-side, and not demand-side, which contribute to strengthen even more the problem of mobility poverty in France. Even if these plans are praiseworthy and necessary, they also need to directly consider the French people’s needs, which are kept quite ignored by those plans.

The **“Daily mobility barometer”** suggests numerous ideas to supplement the work previously made by the authorities. They recommend:

* To do way more to promote “soft” mobilities with financial aids, by enabling a widespread communication about them…
* To consider more the French people’s needs by guaranteeing an access to mobility to everyone, by offering a mobility space everywhere it is needed, by professionalizing the mobility sector about inclusiveness and durability…
* To strengthen the role of companies about mobility by compelling them to help financially their employees for their daily trips, to sensibilize them about sustainable mobility…
* To enable and strengthen an interministerial management of mobility aiming at creating a dedicated national policy, as this issue affects many dimensions: climate change, social questions, work, economy, solidarity, gender equality, social cohesion, rurality… Each ministry concerned by those questions should thus be involved.

**Case of good practice**

Yet, France has also been the scene of good experiences regarding mobility and public transportation. One of its most popular examples nowadays is the implementation of **free buses in the 160.000-inhabitant agglomeration of Dunkirk**, in the North department. In 2015, this city began offering a free weekend bus service in an effort to boost the local economy and allow residents to travel more freely. The initiative was incredibly successful: residents started using the bus much more frequently, 30% more on Saturdays and up to 80% more on Sundays. It saved people money and avoided the stress and time management of parking. In fact, the initiative was so successful that the city launched a comprehensive free system for the entire week. It became the first city of this scale in Europe to implement a system of free local transportation. Now, buses are seeing a 60% increase in usage on weekdays and 120% on weekends.

The mayor, Patrice Vergriete, explained this project represents both an environmental choice and a social initiative. He also explained that fares paid by users have only ever encountered for 10% of the public transport operating budget (around 50 million euros per year). The rest came from a special transport tax levied on businesses and from the general operating budget of the regional government. Thus, when implementing the free network of buses, the financial scheme has not undergone many changes.

This initiative has become very popular, both locally and nationally. Some other cities think about doing the same thing. Free public transports have also been introduced in the capital city of Estonia, Tallinn, and Luxembourg.

However, it has also raised some doubts about the effectiveness of this system, especially when thinking about implementing it in other cities. Indeed, a **report from the French Senate**[[7]](#footnote-7) concluded that this formula could not be bearable in some cities, especially in bigger ones. It would be immoderate and hazardous to implement free transportation in Paris for instance, as it is nowadays for the most part financed by its users, meaning it would lose one of its biggest sources of funding.

Thus, even if the introduction of free public transportation in some cities and areas could be very beneficial, both on social and environmental perspectives, it can also be counterproductive in other places, where the conditions to make it successful and beneficial would not be reunited. This idea should be considered cautiously by municipalities.

4/ key actors in the mobility poverty field

As mentioned earlier, the conclusion of the “Daily mobility barometer” and its recommendations provided interesting ways to go further in terms of mobility poverty in France. They mention key actors that should be deeply involved in this area:

* **The French government** who must promote new laws and public policies to encourage the implementation of “soft” mobilities and the financing of new or restored infrastructures. But, most importantly, they should raise the issue of mobility poverty as a priority and must stop focusing only on mobility related to employment. They must also collaborate with the EU and use intelligently the tool that is offered to them, the Social Climate Fund, by introducing demand-side policies that respond to French people needs.
* **The French companies** who must get more involved concerning their employee’s daily mobility between home and work, especially financially.
* **The French ministries** (many of them) who must produce a national legal framework to tackle this deep-rooted problem that is mobility poverty in France.

Moreover, France being a vast territory and being more or less decentralized on certain points, it would probably be clever to give **regions, departments, and municipalities** a core role to tackle (in terms of ultimate practice) the issue of “mobilité précarité”, still considering the necessity of providing demand-side measures in that field. Indeed, they are those who know the better what are the needs and demands of their citizens. They must be completely involved in that process.

5/ Research gaps

In terms of research, it is obvious that we are missing key points to entirely understand the matter of mobility poverty in France. More regular studies should be led that must focus only on that point. National academic research should be done, for instance by big institutes like the **INSEE** to provide, on a regular basis, global data on mobility poverty in France. It is essential that those types of institutes provide information around that topic to **raise awareness**, especially in the political field, because they are seen as trustworthy.

But we must not ignore the specific issues that are tied to the global subject of mobility poverty in France, meaning considering its **multidimensionality**. Indeed, the academic research must also focus on more specific points related to mobility poverty:

* The difficulties known by people living in **rural areas** and lack of public transportation in these areas.
* The difficulties known by the lowest professional categories and those considered as **“essential workers”**.
* The difficulties known by those who live in the so-called **“banlieues”** (suburban areas) and how they are affected by the low emissions zones (cf. the situation in Seine-Saint-Denis department).
* The specific difficulties known by **people with disabilities**, or the **seniors**, or **the young people**, who are frequently ignored.
* …

This point is genuinely important: each dimension of mobility poverty in France should be studied to provide essential information to policy makers and those who will implement practical solutions to this issue, to make sure they do not forget some groups or some key points that would lead to inefficient and unbeneficial responses.

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