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## Did the Covid-19 pandemic create poverty in France?

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### ABSTRACT

The French Statistical Institute estimates that the monetary poverty rate was stable between 2019 and 2020, while several scientific and associative contributions note significant socioeconomic difficulties among some groups during the Covid-19 pandemic. Using a secondary analysis of nine quantitative and qualitative surveys collected by the National Council for Policies to Combat Poverty and Social Exclusion (CNLE) in 2021, we show that several social groups were exposed to precariousness of varying format, chronology and mechanisms. We develop implications for poverty measures, welfare inequalities, non-governmental solidarities and temporalities of poverty policies.

### RÉSUMÉ

L'Institut national de la statistique et des études économiques mesure un taux de pauvreté monétaire stable entre 2019 et 2020, alors que plusieurs contributions scientifiques et associatives relèvent d'importantes difficultés socio-économiques au sein de certains groupes durant la pandémie de Covid-19. À l'aide d'une analyse secondaire de neuf enquêtes quantitatives et qualitatives récoltées par le Conseil national des politiques de lutte contre la pauvreté et l'exclusion sociale (CNLE) en 2021, nous montrons que plusieurs groupes sociaux ont été exposés à des fragilisations diverses dans leur format, leur chronologie et leurs mécanismes. Nous en développons des implications concernant les mesures de la pauvreté, les inégalités de protection sociale, les solidarités non-étatiques et les temporalités des politiques de pauvreté.

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## Introduction

According to the National Statistical Institute's final release, despite the health crisis induced by the Covid-19 pandemic, the income poverty rate did not increase in France between 2019 and 2020 (Garnero et Guillauneuf 2022). This trend contrasts with the poverty outbursts observed around the world during this time (Mahler, Yonzan, & Lakner 2022). Public statistics conclude that the household support measures implemented in France had protective effects. Yet, a number of scientific studies [1] and reports from non-profit associations [2] have challenged this interpretation by pointing to the significant deterioration of living conditions that several segments of the population experienced. Food aid use has risen dramatically, especially among students. Modest households with children experienced successive lockdowns in overcrowded housing. Elderly people, although overall less affected economically, were particularly isolated.

Did the Covid-19 pandemic actually create poverty in France? In a recent article (Bouchet & Duvoux 2022) [3], we question the limits of an exclusive reliance on “income poverty” to account for economic and social situations that occurred during the Covid-19 crisis (see also the recent “Débat du LIEPP” on poverty measures by Blasco & al. 2022). Relying on nine quantitative and qualitative studies, we show that several social groups were exposed to precariousness of varying formats, chronologies, and mechanisms. The coronavirus outbreak has created poverty, but also, and perhaps most importantly, it has amplified preexisting difficulties and unmasked certain structural forms of precariousness and inequality. Drawing on the main conclusions of this work, we highlight three lessons for public action and propose an avenue for reflection on the timeframe of anti-poverty efforts.

### 1. From the collection of nine studies to their secondary analysis

In January 2021, the French Prime Minister, Jean Castex, mandated the National Council on Policies Against Poverty and Social Exclusion (Conseil National des Politiques de Lutte Contre la Pauvreté et l'Exclusion Sociale (CNLE)), an advisory body with a scientific committee, to produce a study aiming at “*improving the qualitative knowledge of the evolution of poverty*” (mission letter from Jean Castex to the CNLE, January 2021). To

complete this mandate, the CNLE collected nine contributions (presented in Table 1): our statistical analyses of various sources (regular or ad hoc household surveys, social benefit scales, and a monitoring chart for welfare benefits), two studies based mainly on archives and documentary sources from associations or local authorities, a qualitative analysis of a *corpus* of telephone calls from a departmental emergency platform, a literature review focusing on youth and personal accounts collected from the CNLE Committee of Persons Concerned by Poverty. The report delivered to the Minister in May 2021, *La pauvreté démultipliée*, is composed of these nine studies (Duvoux & Lelièvre 2021), accompanied by an introduction describing their contribution to the available literature.

In the report, each of the nine studies provides an original view of poverty in the midst of the pandemic. However, the interplay between the different results and their implications for public policy was insufficiently conceptualized. The two of us, a sociologist who was not involved in the drafting of the report and a researcher who co-directed its preparation as president of the CNLE's scientific committee, combined our perspectives to perform a secondary analysis of the nine studies contained in the report. Our objective was to identify the recurring themes of the corpus with regard to three main issues:

1. Highlight the scope and limits of the income poverty indicator in capturing the socioeconomic disadvantages related to the pandemic.
2. Analyze the links between the pandemic and manifestations of poverty among different population groups; we asked for whom and in what circumstances the Covid-19 crisis has created new situations of poverty, reinforced pre-existing vulnerabilities, or simply revealed them.
3. Assess the structural effects of French pre- and post-Covid-19 policies on poverty, as well as the respective roles of the French welfare state and civil society in anti-poverty actions.

The following section presents three direct results of this analysis and emphasize their implications for public action.

[1] For instance the Coconel survey (Lambert & al. 2020) and the project “Coping with Covid-19” (Recchi et al. 2020).

[2] Such as “*L'étude flash sur les effets de la crise sanitaire (Covid 19) sur les publics reçus par les Restos du Cœur*” in February 2021 or the “*26ème rapport annuel de la Fondation Abbé Pierre sur l'état du mal-logement*” in March 2021. At the junction of the two domains, we can also cite the studies of the Observatoire du Samu Social de Paris, reviewed and synthesized by Blavier and Martinache (Blavier & Martinache 2022)

[3] Although based on a preexisting report, neither the article nor the LIEPP Policy Brief commit anyone other than its two authors.

Table 1 : Overview of the nine studies

Authors	N°	Aim	Method	Data
Michèle Lelièvre	1	Anticipating the effects of the economic downturn on households according to available national statistics	Quantitative literature review	Publications of the National Statistical Institute from spring 2020 to winter 2021
Muriel Pucci	2	Anticipating the effects of the economic downturn on households in light of the legislation	Quantitative analysis	Social legislation and economic forecast based on the April 2020 social benefit scales
Pierre Blavier	3	Measuring the determinants of entry into poverty	Quantitative	EU-SILC survey (data on France) 2005–2019
Axelle Brodriez-Dolino	4	Assessing whether COVID-19 has created “new poors”	Written sources (records)	Activity reports and internal surveys from 6 major French associations; Spring 2020 – Winter 2021
Didier Vanoni and Juliette Baronnet	5	Describing the multiple dimensions of support provided by local institutions	Written sources and qualitative study	Observations and interviews with social workers and local institution staff; Spring 2020-Winter 2021
Anne Lambert and Joanie Cayouette-Remblière	6	Analyzing the inequalities of exposure to various dimensions of COVID-19 and lockdowns	Quantitative	Coconel–Housing and Living Conditions; May 2020
Jean-François Laé	7	Analyzing community solidarity during the pandemic	Ethnography	Telephone calls from a departmental emergency platform created during the first lockdown in spring 2020
Tom Chevalier, Camille Peugny and Patricia Loncle	8	Analyzing the effects of the pandemic and lockdown on youth	Literature review	Overview of available resources and institution-centered analysis covering the 1980–2021 period
Poor people from CNLE’s committee of persons concerned	9	Assessment of their lived experiences of the pandemic	Focus group	3 hours of recorded collective interviews; Spring 2020- Winter 2021

Reading: In the next sections, the results are matched to the report’s contributions by referring in parentheses to the numbers in the table. The indication (n°3) in the text corresponds to Pierre Blavier: “Measuring the determinants of entry into poverty.”

## 2. Three lessons on Covid-19 poverty

### 2.1. Socioeconomic hardships in need of indicators

In contrast to the observation of stable income poverty, the nine studies in the corpus reveal several signs of socio-economic distress within the French population in 2020. The drops in income that are related to temporary or permanent job loss, the sharp increase in the number of people receiving minimum-level social benefits, but also markers that are not typically captured by statistical studies, such as the sudden increase in the demand for food and hygiene assistance, reflect the economic deprivation experienced by several population groups. Personal accounts from the concerned persons (n°9) provide an overview of the deteriorated situations individuals experienced, particularly in terms of budgetary pressure and housing conditions: “*With two daughters, I sleep in the living room; it’s unbearable. I cannot take it anymore* [4].” Failures of social services with the shift to remote support sometimes deepened these difficulties: “*Family allowance payments were blocked for three months, even though the regularization was done five months later. It*

*is too late, and for me, it is a form of institutional violence.*” The lack of effectiveness of the law during the pandemic reinforces a feeling of institutional distrust that has been growing in France since the 2000s and was expressed in the so-called “Yellow Vests” movement. The tensions induced by the dematerialization of administrative counters were confirmed by a summary note produced by the CNLE as part of a feasibility study for the qualitative barometer following the report on the socio-economic effects of the Covid-19 crisis [5].

Economic burdens coexist with a wider range of disadvantages documented in the studies, including feelings of isolation, increased domestic workloads for women, intra-familial tensions, and even physical violence (a result supported by the sharp rise in the number of reports of domestic violence), pessimism and anxiety about the future, and a deterioration in mental health that may go as far as suicide attempts. In this respect, the Covid-19 crisis emphasized a phenomenon already illustrated by the low sensitivity of the income poverty rate to the pressures encountered by groups in precarious or stable employment situations which were mobilized during the Yellow Vests movement (Duvoux & Papuchon 2018). More generally, the

[4] Originally in French. All translations are our own.

[5] See Isabelle Rey-Lefevre, « *Un baromètre social constate une ‘crispation’ croissante face à la numérisation des services publics* », *Le Monde*, 13 mai 2022. Results from this study and from the different waves of the qualitative barometer can be accessed on the CNLE website: <https://www.cnle.gouv.fr/barometre-qualitatif-du-cnle.html>



invisibility of inequalities stems from the characteristics and parameters of official statistical surveys (the coverage of households prevents the inclusion of many situations, including those of students, in poverty statistics). Other dimensions of poverty (ATD Quart-Monde 2019) and inequality, including ethno-racial inequality, remain elusive, despite strong evidence for their importance (Khlat et al. 2022).

Non-economic vulnerabilities often add to the financial difficulties of households; for example, poor people living in overcrowded housing cannot implement physical distancing measures to protect themselves from the virus and are, therefore, overexposed to it. However, the congruence between economic and non-economic aspects is not mechanical, as we show in the next section. These two phenomena—the accumulation and combination of socio-economic penalties—call for a diversification of indicators in anti-poverty policies.

## 2.2. Unequal protection by the welfare state for different groups

An analysis of the overlap between economic and non-economic indicators shows that the consequences of the crisis have varied in scope and format across social groups. We distinguish five patterns (Table 2).

For retired persons and recipients of minimum-level social benefits (**group 1**), transfer payments have ensured relative economic stability, while the other components of their experiences were very mixed—from extreme isolation to less stigma than usual (n°5, 6, and 9). People who were already poor with little insurance coverage or assistance benefits, such as undocumented workers or homeless people (**group 2**), faced both economic and other burdens (n°6 and 8)—their loss of resources was insufficiently met by the sole associative supports. The Covid-19 crisis has also pushed a number of low-income workers, precarious workers, and single mothers (**group 3**), whose socio-economic situations were already on edge (n°4), into poverty. It has further hit “new publics” of poverty that were barely identified by

Table 2 : Patterns of exposure to COVID-19 poverty by groups

Dimensions Groups	Economic losses	Other dimensions (social isolation; effects of degraded housing conditions)	Degree and forms of institutional support
1- Recipients of minimum-level social benefits, retired persons	- Protection by the welfare state from income losses	++ Non-monetary poverty strengthened	Weak to moderate Outreach displayed by local authorities
2- Undocumented workers/invisible populations	+ Informal work interrupted	+ Lack of institutional support	Inexistent to weak Non-profits as main actors
3- Populations already on the edge (low-income employees, precarious workers, single mothers)	+ No or insufficient protection by the welfare state	+ Low experience of institutional support	Weak State and Non-profits
4- Fringes of the labor force (students, self-employed)	+ Monetary poverty strengthened	++ Conflictual cohabitations Low experience of institutional support	Weak State and Non-profits
5- Stable wage earners	- Protection de l'État providence	+ 	Strong “Whatever it takes” policy

the associations (n°4 and 6), such as students and self-employed people (**group 4**). Thus, the pandemic has increased generational inequalities that have been growing since the 1980s— notably with regard to the age of access to employment and stable employment—as much as it has created new disadvantages, such as the risks of dropping out of school exacerbated by the shift to distance learning in high schools and higher education (n°8). Finally, only stable wage earners (**group 5**) have fully benefited from the state's “whatever it takes” policy, being largely protected from the economic effects of the crisis.

These results expose the divide between the population groups that were relatively protected from the material consequences of the crisis and those that were on the margins of state support systems (n°2 and 3). Groups 3 and 4, that is, people who entered poverty at the time of the Covid-19 outbreak, include many individuals with no social rights (such as young people under 25 years of age) and/or those with little knowledge of their rights (such as low-income workers who have never used them before). These restrictions on access to national solidarity due to legal provisions or a lack of effectiveness of the law raise the issue of strengthening social protection for groups that are currently undercovered. The characteristics of the dualized French welfare state were particularly evident during this period, with interstitial populations being left vulnerable, as opposed to other groups (Palier 2011).

### 2.3. Lack of visibility of non-state solidarities and dependencies

The shortcomings of French public action enhance the role played by non-state actors in addressing poverty. Several of the studies (n°4 and 7, in particular) emphasize the importance of non-profit associations, which have been on the frontline in receiving people affected by the crisis. The strength of community bonds (understood as the continuum of private solidarity ranging from family to neighbors and friends) is also made salient through various demonstrations of solidarity, including economic support within couples, human assistance from women to their elderly parents, and initiatives by neighbors or friends in favor of isolated persons. These observations concur with well-established findings in the social sciences regarding the value of proximity networks. In contrast, they challenge mainstream representations in France, where local solidarity is misrecognized and “communitarianism” is often discredited (Mohammed & Talpin 2018). Considering the contributions of communal ties to the mitigation of the socioeconomic consequences of the pandemic also contradicts the French “top-down” model of crisis management (Kuhlmann & al. 2021).

Our point is not to minimize the constraints that accompany these forms of solidarity. Field

studies (n°5), as well as personal accounts from CNLE's committee of concerned persons, remind us that solidarity bonds are also dependence bonds between relatives—they fuel neighborhood quarrels and expose people to family violence. Even in the absence of interpersonal tensions, the return of young people to their parents' homes disrupts their transition to adulthood, which, in Western societies, involves financial self-reliance and independent housing. Moreover, proximity networks are tenuous and need to be supported by public or associative actors. Taking into account the endogenous solidarity of populations in anti-poverty policies would allow for more complete and effective action, a fair recognition of the essential actors enhancing social cohesion, and a better consideration of the challenges encountered at their level.

### Conclusion: the complementarity between emergency and long-term policies

Our secondary analysis of the nine studies in the *La pauvreté démultipliée* report points to three areas of concern for public action: the interest in complementing the income poverty rate with other indicators to measure certain forms of socioeconomic vulnerability, the importance of improving social protection for groups with little or no coverage, and the need to think about the conception, implementation, and reception of anti-poverty policies in coordination with non-state actors. In particular, the role of local communities (families, neighbors, informal networks) in the mutual support, survival, and resilience of poor people in the face of ordinary or extraordinary hardships, such as the Covid-19 pandemic, should be considered.

More transversally, our work questions the timeframes of anti-poverty efforts. “Emergency” policies have been criticized for their short-term perspective and authoritarian methods (White 2019). Our research makes a more nuanced judgment. In the face of the Covid-19 pandemic, the social assistance provided by the State on an exceptional basis was an important lever for preserving the well-being of the wage-earning population and protecting the rights of recipients of minimum-level social benefits. Nevertheless, the case of youth, developed by one of the studies (n°8), demonstrates how apparently unusual situations (such as the spectacular pictures of students queuing for food aid) are actually part of decades-long dynamics of precariousness, representing real blind spots for public action and social citizenship (Chevalier 2018). Punctual measures alone cannot stop this problem—long-term solutions also need to be developed.

Thinking about timeframes also encourages us to consider the lasting contributions of knowledge gained during the pandemic. Despite the specific circumstances, our results are consistent with previous work on the determinants of poverty

trajectories (n°3), the protective factors, and the incomplete overlap of different poverty indicators.

Similarly, they can serve as a point of comparison for future research. Most importantly, on a processual level, the atypical conditions in 2020 motivated the use of innovative poverty assessment policies. The governmental mandate to the CNLE provided both the occasion and the means to conduct qualitative studies based on qualitative surveys that shed light on socio-economic vulnerabilities that are poorly captured by public statistics (although the National Statistical Institute has launched a survey on the use of food aid to address these gaps). It is just one illustration of how official statistics and social observation can be combined. This experience can serve as an example in the promotion of a mutually beneficial dialog between research and public action.

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- DUVOUX, Nicolas et Michèle LELIEVRE (dir.) 2021. *La pauvreté démultipliée. Dimensions, processus et réponses*, printemps 2020-printemps 2021, CNLE.
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