

Article about children of immigrants' in France written by Celestine Bohlen and published in The New York Times on January 25, 2016.

Study Finds Children of Immigrants Embracing 'Frenchness'

The children of immigrants are doing their part to become French. The challenge for French society is to let them finish the job.

That was the conclusion of a long-awaited, 615-page report released this month by the National Institute of Demographic Studies about how immigrants and their descendants are integrating into French society.

On a positive note, contrary to popular assumptions, researchers found that a majority of those whose parents came to mainland France after World War II, mostly from former French colonies, embrace their French identity.

Less encouraging were findings that show many of these second-generation French are blocked by barriers — in education, housing and employment — that point to persistent discrimination against the so-called visible minorities, mainly those of African origin.

“In a nutshell, they consider themselves French, but they feel they are not perceived as such, which creates a dissonance between identity and acceptance as a full member of the citizenry,” said Patrick Simon, a demographer and one of the coordinators of the study, “Trajectories and Origins.”

Based on interviews with 22,000 people between the ages of 18 and 60 conducted in 2008 and 2009, the survey extrapolated that 20 percent of that age group in France are immigrants and their children.

The study skirted repeated legal and political obstacles thrown in its path, notably a Constitution-based ban on the collection of information about ethnicity, race and religion. To find proof of family origins, researchers had to get court approval in order to scour thousands of birth certificates.

Now, the study holds the potential to become a landmark — the only similar survey was conducted in 1992 — provided that French officials and institutions take its findings into account.

Mr. Simon has his doubts. “I am not sure our policy makers will build on these findings,” he said.

In the year since Prime Minister Manuel Valls identified a “territorial, social, ethnic apartheid” in France, only three minor measures have been adopted under the label of antidiscrimination, and none address the problem directly.

"I don't see concretely that anything has changed in antidiscrimination measures," Mr. Simon said.

Among the study's most troubling findings was the lack of social mobility among the children of non-European immigrants.

"In fact, they experience more unemployment and discrimination than the first generation," Mr. Simon said. "That was a surprise."

The study revealed a pattern of discrimination, invisible and unplanned, that shifts the second generation onto a specific track, stranding them in low-paying jobs and in de facto ghettos.

"There is no official racial segregation, no redlining in France," Mr. Simon said. "But there are filtering practices, and socioeconomic forces that end up producing the same kind of segregation and discrimination. I was surprised to see how pervasive they are."

Without access to broader racial and ethnic statistics, the researchers had to measure discrimination by collecting individual observations. From these, they concluded that 56 percent of children of sub-Saharan families and 48 percent of those of North African origin said they felt they were not perceived as French, compared with 15 percent of the children of recent European immigrants.

Despite the sense of rejection, an overwhelming majority of those in the second generation of all origins feel French.

Many identify themselves as both French and as something else, either the original nationality of their parents or a broader ethnic group. But, according to the study, these multiple identities were not mutually exclusive.

That finding runs contrary to French fears of "communautarisme," a term that conjures up the specter of groups that cling to separate identities and reject "Frenchness."

Plural identities are an indisputable component of any multicultural society. To deny that fact, Mr. Simon said, only blocks the integration that France hopes to achieve.