

The report on the state of poverty in Brussels 2010

Social Barometer – Summary and conclusions

Brussels is characterised by a significant concentration of poverty in the highly populated districts of central Brussels, known as the “croissant pauvre”, in particular lower Saint-Gilles, Cureghem, the Marolles and the south of the pentagon, lower Molenbeek, Laeken, lower Schaerbeek and Saint-Josse-ten-Noode. This area is inhabited by numerous families with young children. It has unemployment levels of over 25%, rising to more than 40% among young people. The proportion of households receiving CPAS welfare benefits is up to 5 times higher than in the rest of the region. In some districts, up to one in two children lives in a household with no earned income.

These districts have a continuous influx of the poorest groups of the population, consisting above all of migrants, legal or illegal. Some of them remain only temporarily, until they can afford to move to a more prosperous district or even outside the Brussels region, as is also the case of the middle classes. But that is not possible for everyone.

Most poverty indicators for the Brussels Region remain in the red. Several indicators even point to a deterioration in the situation. The impact of the recession is evident in the unemployment and CPAS statistics. It is also reflected in the number of mortgage and consumer credit arrears.

Much of the population in Brussels lives in financial hardship. More than one in four inhabitants in Brussels has to manage with an income below the at-risk-of-poverty threshold (€899 a month for a single person). Brussels is the region with the highest percentage of its population below the at-risk-of-poverty threshold.

Even if employment does not always protect inhabitants sufficiently against the risk of poverty and social exclusion, the main cause of the high financial insecurity of the population in Brussels is the low employment rate. The employment rate in Brussels remains below that of the country as a whole and that of Flanders, as well as being below the European target. Access to employment is more difficult for low-skilled workers and non-European nationals in Brussels.

The number of inhabitants of Brussels who do not have any earned income is very high and continues to grow. The number of recipients of welfare benefits or income support increased in all age groups between 2008 and 2010.

Since the enactment of the law on social integration in October 2002, the number of households in Brussels dependent on CPAS welfare benefits has grown continuously. At the end of December 2009, this concerned more than 32,000 households. The proportion of the population receiving CPAS benefits is three times higher in the Brussels Region than the rest of the country. The proportion of the population affected varies according to the age group. Of the active population (aged 18 to 64), 4.6 % receive CPAS welfare benefits. This proportion is particularly high among young people aged between 18 and 24 (8.7%) in Brussels. This over-representation of young people among welfare recipients exists in all Brussels municipalities, in other large cities and across the country as a whole. In 2009, 2,345 young adults in Brussels, 2.5 % of those aged 18–24, received CPAS support to enable them to continue their studies on a full-time basis.

102,147 inhabitants of Brussels were receiving unemployment benefits in January 2010. Unemployment levels in the Brussels Region are double the Belgian levels. Almost a third of young people in Brussels (aged 15–24) who are available for work are unemployed. In addition, the Brussels Region has the highest growth rate for job-seekers. The number of job-seekers is increasing in all age categories, but has grown the most markedly among people aged over 50 and men. The increase for inhabitants of Brussels aged under 40 has put an end to the decline recorded between 2006 and 2008.

The increase in the number of very long-term unemployed people (more than five years) is worrying (+ 6.6% between 2008 and 2009). This affected 20,000 people in 2009.

Child poverty is a result of parents on very low incomes. More than a third of children in Brussels grow up in households without any earned income, which is twice the national average. 28% of newly born children in Brussels are born into a household without any earned income.

The indicators also reveal the impoverishment of elderly people. Despite the fall in the number of people aged over 65 in the population in Brussels, there has been an increase in the number of people receiving the guaranteed income for elderly people (GRAPA). There were 13,258 recipients in January 2010 (8.7% of those aged 65 or over).

Benefits are too low and do not provide sufficient financial protection to enable people to live in dignity. In the Brussels Region, the high cost of housing accounts for an excessive proportion of the income of the poorest families, often more than half of their benefits. As a result they do not have enough money left over to cover other living expenses. It is therefore not surprising that the waiting list for social housing continues to grow.

The significant social inequalities within the region are becoming even more marked. The inequalities between the Brussels Region and its suburbs are also very marked. The gap between the incomes of the poorest households and the richest households is growing throughout the country as a whole, but is particularly high in the Brussels Region.

Social inequalities have an obvious impact on the health of the Brussels population. Several indicators reveal the social health inequalities between rich and poor inhabitants, as well as between the most educated and the lowest-skilled inhabitants. The differences affect all aspects of health, including among others perceived health, the frequency of mental health problems, obesity and diabetes. Inequalities in mortality are perceptible from birth. The life expectancy of inhabitants of wealthy communes is more than 3 years longer than that of inhabitants of poor municipalities.

More than a quarter of households in Brussels and almost 40% of low-income households declared that they had had to delay or go without health care for financial reasons. Fortunately, more households are now familiar with and are increasingly using the OMNIO system, which improves access to healthcare for low-income households.

Education could play a key role in a preventive policy to tackle poverty. The problem of educational underachievement and the low level of education of a significant part of young people in Brussels is particularly worrying: half of boys in the first year of high school are at least one year behind and the proportion of young people leaving school with at best a lower secondary school certificate is far higher in Brussels than in the rest of the country. It is very difficult for these young people with very few qualifications to access the job market.

Despite significant progress, facilitated by the data of the *Crossroads Bank for Social Security*, work on preparing assessment reports on poverty and its evolution in the Brussels Region is hampered by the fact that certain data concerning important aspects of poverty are unavailable, for example exhaustive data on housing or the level of education among adults. The lack of population figures in the national register after 2008 has also complicated the analysis of the evolution of poverty.

The observations of this sixth edition of the Brussels Social Barometer do not differ significantly from earlier ones but are nevertheless a cause for concern. We hope that it will be possible to use this barometer as a decision-making support tool. This annual barometer is drawn up at the request of the Brussels Parliament, to support its debates on the fight against poverty in the Brussels Region. The challenges are huge.