

Social barometer 2007

Report of the poverty situation - Brussels

October 2007

Summary

With this third edition of the Social barometer we can trace a number of influences on the way poverty has developed in the Brussels region over the past few years.

From a demographic point of view we see that the number of inhabitants of Brussels continues to rise, particularly because of international migration and a high birth rate. Although the distribution of the population hardly changes from one year to another, a slight increase in the number of single-parent families has been recorded, representing 11% of households in 2006, totalling 53,655 families.

Three Brussels residents out of ten live below the poverty threshold. This Belgian threshold, set at 60% of the median income of the country, climbed by 13.5% between the 2004 and 2005 SILC (Income and Living Conditions) surveys, which reflects the significant rise in median income for the country as a whole. Social integration benefits, unemployment benefits, income replacement benefits for the disabled and retirement pensions for paid workers have risen by only 2%, with independent pensions rising by 6%. This gap renders the already delicate position of everybody living on a minimum or replacement income even more fragile.

It is difficult to draw conclusions about the way poverty is set to develop. The various developments according to benefit-type are also affected by administrative measures and activation policies which sometimes result in a creep of at-risk population groups from one status to another.

The number of beneficiaries of social integration benefits (RIS) or the equivalent rose in the first half of 2006. In April 2006 27,000 Brussels residents were receiving RIS or the equivalent.

In general, the proportion of the population in receipt of additional health care benefits (BIM) has remained steady and may even have fallen slightly. Nevertheless, some categories of BIM beneficiaries have been on the rise since 2003, such as disability pension recipients or over 65 years of age being long-term unemployed, while other categories became stable or fell slightly, particularly beneficiaries over 65 years of age.

The unemployment rate remains very high in the Brussels region. While short-term unemployment is falling, long-term unemployment continues to climb, with the rise being more significant for women than men. Poor educational levels remain a very important obstacle to entry into the job market, particularly in the Brussels region. Persons originating from non-European countries are also much more likely to be excluded from the job market than Europeans. Among non-Europeans one person in five has been unemployed for over a year.

In terms of entry into the job market the youth situation has improved somewhat. In 2006 the number of unemployed job-seekers under twenty-five years of age fell for the first time since 2002. Much more progress is needed, however, since a third of the active population under twenty-five is unemployed. Almost one young Brussels resident in five leaves school with at the most a lower-secondary school leaving certificate and then takes up no further training. This proportion has remained steady since 2003.

Poverty among the young and families with children remains a cause for concern. Almost one child in three (32%) lives in a household without paid employment. This proportion has remained steady since 2002. The concentration of poor families with children is not specific to the Brussels region but is to be found at varying levels in all large Belgian cities (for example, the proportion of children living in a household without an income from work varies from 20% in Ghent to 42% in Charleroi).

The housing problem scenario is becoming increasingly critical for Brussels residents on low incomes in the wake of rent increases and the inadequate supply of municipal housing. In the private sector a single person living on social integration benefit has to spend 62% on average of his or her income to rent a one-room flat without basic amenities (that is, without a toilet and bathroom or shower). The

number of municipal housing units has not increased and the number of households on the waiting list for municipal housing is climbing, reaching 25,029 households on January 1 2007.

For more information:

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You can download the complete document, though only in Dutch or French, from the Observatory website (www.observatbru.be).