

Social Barometer 2008, Brussels Health and Social Observatory

CONCLUSIONS AND SUMMARY

This fourth edition of the Social Barometer tracks key poverty trends over recent years in the Brussels Region.

In terms of demographics, we note that the population of Brussels continues to grow, its international character is deepening with a marked increase in nationals from the new European Union member states and its "rejuvenation" is continuing.

It is not easy to draw conclusions on the evolution of the state of poverty. Some information indicates positive developments, e.g. falling youth unemployment, but most indicators show that poverty persists at a worrying level in the Brussels Region.

Over a quarter of Brussels residents live below the at-risk-of-poverty threshold. This high figure can be explained by the large proportion of the Brussels population in receipt of minimum or replacement income. Despite recent rises, these amounts remain below the at-risk-of-poverty threshold (set at 60% of the median national equivalised income, equal to €860 for a single person), except for the guaranteed income for the elderly and the minimum employee pension (full career).

Some 20% of the active population and 18% of young people aged 18 to 25 are in receipt of minimum or replacement income, while 28% of children are born into jobless households. These worrying indicators have remained relatively stable over recent years.

The number of recipients of social integration benefit (revenu d'intégration sociale, RIS) or equivalent continued to rise in 2007. In December 2007, 28,730 Brussels residents claimed RIS or equivalent. That represents 3% of Brussels women and 2.5% of Brussels men.

The share of the population in receipt of preferential reimbursement rates for health care has risen substantially. Part of this increase can be attributed to the new OMNIO status, which extends the right to preferential reimbursement rates to low income households. The number of persons entitled to preferential reimbursement rates because they receive assistance from the Public Social Welfare Centre (CPAS), are handicapped or older long-term unemployed also continues to rise.

The development of various categories of recipients of preferential reimbursement rates reflects real increases, but may also be linked to the slipping of the most marginalised population from one status to another, or could partly be explained by a better application of this right, e.g. for CPAS claimants.

The unemployment rate has dropped slightly, but remains very high in the Brussels region. Short-term unemployment continues to fall and, for the first time since 2003, a small drop has been recorded in long-term unemployment figures. Very long-term unemployment (5 years and more) continues to rise. Most notably in the Brussels Region, a low level of education remains a major obstacle to entering the labour market. Nationals of non-European countries are also far more often excluded from the labour market than Europeans. Among non-Europeans, one in five has been unemployed for over a year.

In terms of joining the job market, the situation for young people continues to improve. In 2007, the number of young and unemployed jobseekers under 25 years continued to fall (- 8%). But far more remains to be done, as 32% of under-25s on the job market remain unemployed. One in five young Brussels residents leaves school with at most a lower secondary school certificate and seeks no further training; this proportion has remained stable since 2003.

Housing problems remain acute for Brussels residents on low incomes and the supply of social or similar housing remains wholly inadequate with regard to demand; over 26,000 households are on the waiting list for social housing.

Social inequalities remain very marked within the Brussels Region, with major differences between municipalities. For example, the risk of dying before the age of 65 is 2.4 times higher for inhabitants of Saint-Josse-Ten-Noode than for residents of Woluwé-Saint-Pierre. The average income per capita is twice as low and the unemployment rate is 3.3 times higher in the poorest municipalities than in the wealthiest.