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France 2004: Life expectancy tops 80 years

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Length of life is continuing to increase in France. It made a leap forward in 2004 compared with 2003, the year of the heatwave, but also compared with 2002, a normal year. By setting the advances of the past few years against a long-term trend starting in the mid-eighteenth century, Gilles Pison explains the reasons for the impressive extension of life expectancy in two centuries and the specific increase in 2004.

The population of France on 1 January 2005 was estimated at 62.4 million, breaking down as 60.6 million in metropolitan France and 1.8 million in the overseas departments and territories [1]. In metropolitan France, the population increased by 361,000 in 2004 (+0.6%), the highest annual increase in 30 years. This rise can be attributed to a substantial drop in the number of deaths, combined with a steady number of births and a slight increase in net migration (Table page 3). The population figures are based on the results of the 2004 census, which prompted INSEE to revise the population upward slightly. The correction for 2003 is +0.5% with respect to last year's estimate (1).

◆ As many births in 2004 as in 2003

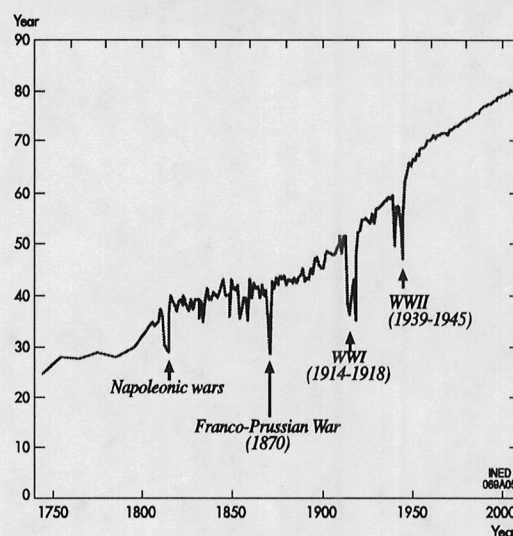
The total fertility rate for 2004 – 1.90 children per woman – is very close to that for 2003 (1.88). The slight increase in the fertility rate offset the slightly lower number of women of child-bearing age, resulting in a stable number of births: 765,000 in 2004 in metropolitan France, compared with 762,000 in 2003.

Women are continuing to postpone childbearing until a later and later age, a trend which has been observed for more than 25 years. The average age of women who

gave birth in 2004 was 29.6 years. This age has risen steadily from 26.5 years in 1977. While women's fertility after age 30 has been rising since the 1970s, fertility before 30 has been stable for about 10 years.

An examination of fertility by birth cohort shows that women born in 1954, who turned 50 in 2004 and

Figure 1 - Life expectancy at birth in France: 1740-2004



Sources: Blayo [4]; Vallin and Meslé [3]; Richet-Mastain et al. [1].

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(1) The population adjustments made by INSEE on the basis of the census will be examined in the next issue of *Population & Societies*.