



# UN-HABITAT

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## Immigrants in Paris: Dreams go up in flames

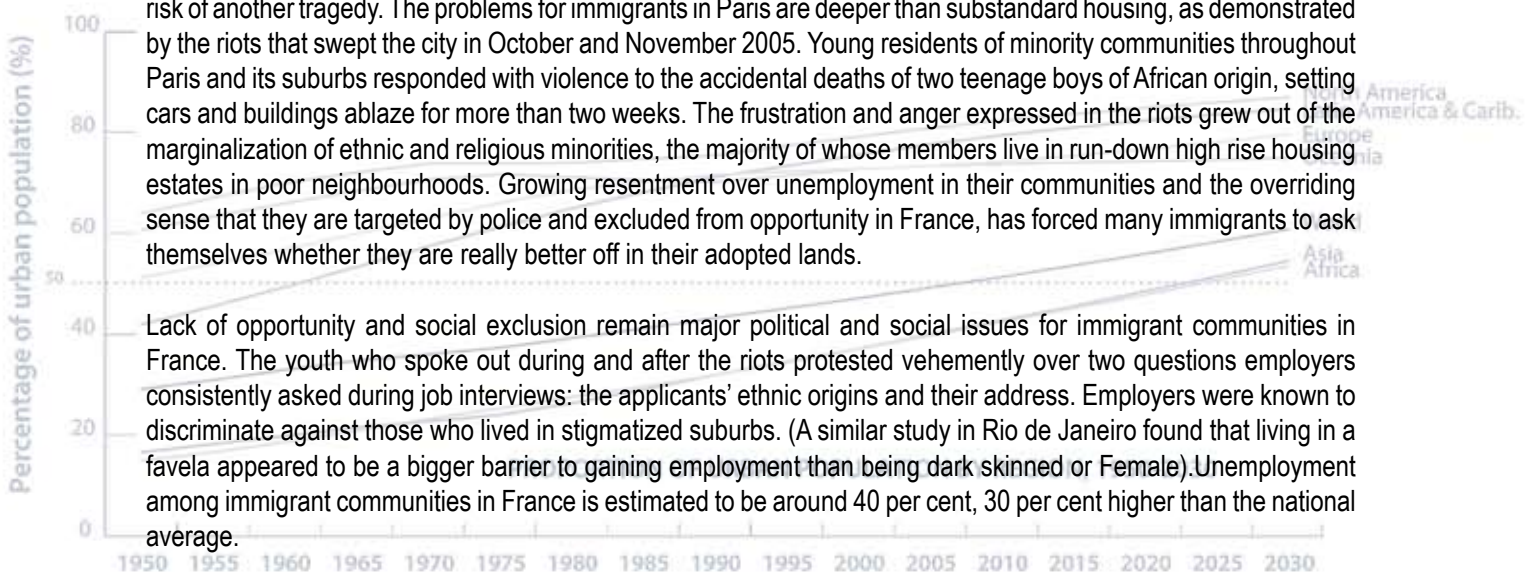
Between April and September 2005, three fires ravaged residential buildings in Paris, killing 48 African immigrants, primarily from Senegal, Côte d'Ivoire and Mali. Most of the victims were children; many were undocumented. The immigrants lived in cheap hotels and apartment houses ill-equipped for emergencies, lacking smoke detectors, fire extinguishers, emergency exits, and, in one case, even running water with which to put out the blaze. Some of the families had been placed in the substandard accommodations by social service agencies while waiting for their residency papers to be processed. Others entered the tenements on their own, squatting in the only shelter they could find.

For refugees from African slums seeking a better life in Europe, Paris offers little relief from the insecurity and destitution they experienced at home. Officials estimate that more than 200,000 people are homeless or living in temporary shelter in the city. Subsidized social housing units are scarce – in 2004, more than 100,000 families were on waiting lists for 12,000 available units. Some families languish in overcrowded and filthy provisional dwellings for 14 years or longer while they wait to be accommodated in social housing. Such long waits are not uncommon for immigrants. A government study found that nearly 30 per cent of immigrant applications had been pending for more than three years, two times the national average.

Although droit au logement, or the right to housing, is enshrined in French law, access to a decent, affordable place to live remains elusive for the lowest-income and minority residents. Legislation passed in 1991 requires that major cities dedicate 20 per cent of their housing stock to the social sector, but many contend that the law is not adequately enforced. Finding appropriate housing remains challenging even for families who can afford market rental rates. In 2002, the housing vacancy rate in Paris was 6.2 per cent, the lowest since the late 1960s. Those few units that are vacant tend to be substantially older than occupied ones. In the ageing and dilapidated buildings in which the fires occurred, only one exit was available – via the central wooden staircases, which burned quickly and left families stranded on the upper floors.

The Paris city government plans to renovate 1,000 identified substandard apartment blocks, in addition to building 60,000 units of housing each year to help quell the crisis. Tenants' advocates, however, maintain that more than 120,000 new units are needed each year. For immigrants awaiting both housing and legal resident status in the tenements of Paris, every day in a building with faulty wiring, inadequate plumbing and only one way out brings the risk of another tragedy. The problems for immigrants in Paris are deeper than substandard housing, as demonstrated by the riots that swept the city in October and November 2005. Young residents of minority communities throughout Paris and its suburbs responded with violence to the accidental deaths of two teenage boys of African origin, setting cars and buildings ablaze for more than two weeks. The frustration and anger expressed in the riots grew out of the marginalization of ethnic and religious minorities, the majority of whose members live in run-down high rise housing estates in poor neighbourhoods. Growing resentment over unemployment in their communities and the overriding sense that they are targeted by police and excluded from opportunity in France, has forced many immigrants to ask themselves whether they are really better off in their adopted lands.

Lack of opportunity and social exclusion remain major political and social issues for immigrant communities in France. The youth who spoke out during and after the riots protested vehemently over two questions employers consistently asked during job interviews: the applicants' ethnic origins and their address. Employers were known to discriminate against those who lived in stigmatized suburbs. (A similar study in Rio de Janeiro found that living in a favela appeared to be a bigger barrier to gaining employment than being dark skinned or Female). Unemployment among immigrant communities in France is estimated to be around 40 per cent, 30 per cent higher than the national average.



A recent study found that white male applicants were 5 times more likely to get job offers than those with Arab sounding names or those whose physical home address was among area postal codes that were deemed “undesirable”. The disparities in housing and employment opportunities between immigrants (most of whom are French nationals) and the local population has prompted the French government to create more health, education and employment programmes aimed at young people living marginalized, low-income neighbourhoods. Stigmatization and exclusion of neighbourhoods from the rest of society appears to have exacerbated the crisis in Paris. The French city of Marseilles for instance, was immune from the riots largely because the poor are not physically isolated within the city; there low-income and higher-income communities are more integrated.

*Sources: Ford 2005; BBC News 2005b; Bennhold 2005; Norris and Shiels 2004; Langley 2002; BBC News 2005c, TIME 2005; Perlman 2005.*

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