

The New Caledonia Exception: Revisiting the Question of Why New Caledonians Do Not Migrate to Metropolitan France

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Abstract/Executive summary:

This report builds on an earlier 1994 analysis by Poirine to identify reasons why New Caledonians rarely migrate towards Metropolitan France despite their right to free entry and employment as French nationals. This research expands on the few French- and English-language articles which study New Caledonian migration to the Metropole by attempting to further explain the economic, social, and cultural deterrents to emigration. Using existing French statistical studies and census results, this research bases its findings off of the estimation that only 17,575 New Caledonian natives were living in Metropolitan France as of 2020, and that, since 1999, they have accounted for only around 0.02% of the Metropolitan population. Relative to the presence of migrants originating from French DROM-COMs like Martinique, Guadeloupe, and Reunion, as well as from other French ex-colonies, this figure does indeed demonstrate a low migration rate. Unfortunately, the available data only counts Metropolitan residents native to New Caledonia, and does not specifically track citizens of New Caledonia, or the country's indigenous Kanak population. This report explains the low migration by pointing to factors of local wages matching overseas wages due to booming public and private sectors, educational inequality leading to a lack of mobile skills for many New Caledonians, internal migration as an alternative to external migration, New Caledonia's geographic distance from Metropolitan France, the Metropole's 'low-skilled' migration needs already being supplied by other historic migrant communities, a lack of New Caledonian diaspora to provide support for newer migrants, and continued cultural tensions between Metropolitan France and, in particular, New Caledonia's Kanak population.

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Introduction

As French nationals, all New Caledonian citizens hold French passports, and are thus permitted to freely circulate and reside within French territories, a phenomenon which is not uncommon among other Pacific Island nations.¹ Citizens of Cook Islands and Niue, for example, possess New Zealand citizenship by birth, and commonly migrate in order to participate in the New Zealand labour market.² In fact, in 2018, 80,000 Cook Islanders were recorded as living in New Zealand, 12,000 of which were first generation migrants.³ A similar arrangement exists for the Federated States of Micronesia, the Marshall Islands, and Palau; under the Compact of Free Association, citizens of these countries may live and work in the United States without a visa or green-card. They do not carry American passports, but they are not considered as 'immigrants', and have full work rights; as a result, each of these countries has experienced very high rates of migration towards the US.⁴ Numerous further parallels can be drawn between the cases of the Cook Islands, the US Compact countries, and New Caledonia in terms of their relationships with their respective "Metropolises". For example, both New Zealand and France employ a typical division of responsibilities between metropolitan control of defence and foreign affairs and islander sovereignty over internal affairs.⁵ Similar policies characterise the US's Compact of Free Association.⁶

Considering these similarities, it would be reasonable to assume that the migration patterns between New Caledonia and Metropolitan France would be comparable to those of their New Zealander and American counterparts, that New Caledonians would take advantage of their right to free circulation and move to the Hexagon*. In reality, however, there is little trace of a large New Caledonian migrant community in Metropolitan France. This raises the question of why New Caledonia's case constitutes such an exception compared to its Pacific counterparts. In 1994, Bernard Poirine addressed this anomaly and explained the low migration from New Caledonia to Metropolitan France in terms of the large rents flowing into New Caledonia, making out-migration less attractive. While Poirine's analysis is convincing, it is thirty years old, and there has been little if any examination of this question since then, despite certain changes to New Caledonia's status as a French collectivity and its economy.

This report will aim to first demonstrate that the migration pathway from New Caledonia to Metropolitan France is indeed still disproportionately small, insofar as the available data can suggest. Once this fact has been reasonably established, this report will then go on to identify the causes of this low migration rate, including issues linked to expected overseas and local income, geographic distance, internal migration patterns, lack of skills, lack of diaspora, cultural antipathy, cultural disadvantage, the specificities of mobility passports, and the New Caledonian economy in general. Overall, the analysis upholds Poirine's original research, while suggesting that the economic factors he emphasises, while important, are likely not the only ones at play.

Before getting underway, however, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of the available data provided by French and New Caledonian statistical institutions on this subject, and to understand the cultural and historical context which underlies the issue of New Caledonian migration.

An ex-colony of France, New Caledonia is today classified as a *sui generis* French collectivity.⁷ Other collectivities include French Polynesia, Saint Barthelemy, Saint Martin, Saint Pierre and Miquelon, and Wallis and Futuna, while Guadeloupe, French Guiana, Martinique, Mayotte, and Reunion are classified as overseas departments and regions; together, these states are widely referred to as the DROM-COMs.⁸ The specific legislation of the 1998 Nouméa Accord, an agreement with the French government to grant more sovereignty to their ex-colony, sets New Caledonia apart from other collectivities in terms of government structure and identity. For one, New Caledonians have 'triple citizenship': New

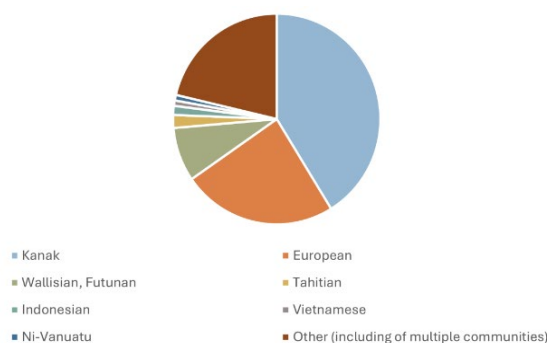


Figure 1 - Communities of origin of New Caledonians according to ISEE's 2019 population census.

*Metropolitan France.

¹ Jacques Ziller, "L'Union européenne et l'outre-mer," *Pouvoirs* n° 113, no. 2 (2005): 153,

<https://doi.org/10.3917/pouv.113.0125>, <https://droit.cairn.info/revue-pouvoirs-2005-2-page-125?lang=fr>.

² Eberhard Weber, "Trade agreements, labour mobility and climate change in the Pacific Islands," *Regional Environmental Change* 17, no. 4 (2017/04/01 2017): 1093, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10113-016-1047-7>, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10113-016-1047-7>.

³ Carl Walrond, "Cook Islanders," in *The Encyclopedia of New Zealand* (TeAra.govt.nz, 2024).

⁴ Weber, "Trade agreements, labour mobility and climate change in the Pacific Islands," 1092-93.

⁵ Satish Chand, "Labour mobility for sustainable livelihoods in Pacific Island states," *Pacific economic bulletin* 20, no. 3 (2005): 6-15.

⁶ Emily Mitchell-Eaton, "Compact of Free Association (COFA) Status: An Imperial Policy on the Move," *Asian-Pacific Law & Policy Journal* 24 (2023): 4-5.

⁷ Valérie Goesel-Le Bihan, "La Nouvelle-Calédonie et l'accord de Nouméa, un processus inédit de décolonisation," *Annuaire français de droit international* 44, no. 1 (1998): 24-25.

⁸ Jean-Christophe Gay, "L'outre-mer en marge, les marges de l'outre-mer," *Bulletin de l'association de géographes français. Géographies* 94, no. 94-3 (2017).

Caledonian, French, and European.⁹ Within its population of 290,000 people, the indigenous Kanaks make up around 41% of the total, while Europeans make up 24%, and 'mixed-race' people make up 11%; Wallisians and Futunans also constitute a large proportion of the population, as their people have been migrating en masse towards New Caledonia since the end of the second World War.¹⁰ Due to the country's history as a settler colony, New Caledonia is still largely influenced, demographically, linguistically, and culturally, by its French population, especially in Nouméa and other parts of the Southern Province.¹¹

Data collection and interpretation.

Within both the English- and French-language literature, there is limited discussion of New Caledonian migration towards Metropolitan France. A few articles, like Vincent Geronimi and Audrey Aknin's study of "Sustainability and migrations in insular economies", do discuss the increasingly common process of New Caledonians leaving to pursue higher education in Metropolitan France.¹² A small number of other articles address migration more broadly. In 1994, Poirine published an article entitled "Rent, Emigration and Unemployment in Small Islands: The MIRAB Model and the French Overseas Departments and Territories", which provides a valuable economic analysis of why the French Pacific, including New Caledonia, has historically constituted an exception to the typical migration trends of small Pacific island nations.¹³

From a more quantitative approach, on behalf of the Centre for Research in Economics and Statistics at the French National Institute of Statistics and Economic Studies (INSEE) in 2011, Jean-Francois Royer published a study of migration from New Caledonia between 1989 and 2009, which used French census data to quantify the number of people living in Metropolitan France who reported residing in New Caledonia five years prior. For example, in 2008, 2,293 natives and 5,028 non-natives reported having lived in New Caledonia five years earlier; in 2006, that number was 1,772 for natives and 5,004 for non-natives.¹⁴ Royer also employed a different method, comparing net migration from New Caledonia over a given period to the number of natives and non-natives who left New Caledonia over a comparable period: between 2003/4 and 2008/9, for example, 7,413 natives left the country, and 2,293 were recorded as entering the Metropole, while in the same period 12,111 non-natives left and 5,028 of them entered the Metropole.¹⁵

There are two clear issues with this data in regard to the current research topic: first, the analysis ends in 2009, making it less relevant to the current moment, and second, it concerns 'natives' and 'non-natives', two population categories which do not necessarily reflect 'New Caledonians' as a whole. The second limitation is one which is present in all studies employing census data.

A much more recent relevant study is one conducted by Caroline Blondy, Jean-Christophe Gay, and Laura Schuft, published in January of 2025. The study examines the spatial distribution of French Oceanians (New Caledonia, Wallis and Futuna, French Polynesia) in Metropolitan France.¹⁶ Using census data, the authors quantify the number of people born in New Caledonia living in Metropolitan France as 17,575 people in 2020.¹⁷

While the New Caledonian Institute of Statistics and Economic Studies (ISEE) does record emigration and internal migration patterns, it cannot necessarily track emigrant destinations.¹⁸ The French INSEE's data, though, can be used to track the origins (birthplaces and prior residences) of migrant residents in the Metropole. Unfortunately, INSEE's data on immigration does not track ex-residents of New Caledonia, which is considered in this case as a territory of France rather than

⁹ Ziller, "L'Union européenne et l'outre-mer," 153.; Florent Venayre, "La Polynésie française est-elle dans ou hors la République?," *Textes & Contextes*, no. 19-1 (2024): 4.

¹⁰ "Une mosaïque pluriethnique," New Caledonia Institute of Statistics and Economic Studies (ISEE), 2019, <https://www.isee.nc/population/recensement/communautes>; Jean-Louis Rallu, "Les Wallisiens a Wallis et Futuna et en Nouvelle-Calédonie," *Population (French Edition)* 37, no. 1 (1982): 167, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1532491>, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1532491>.

¹¹ Jean Houbert, "Settlers and natives in decolonization: The case of New Caledonia," *The Round Table* 74, no. 295 (1985): 220-22.

¹² Vincent Geronimi and Audrey Aknin, "Soutenabilité et migrations dans les économies insulaires : quels enjeux pour la Nouvelle-Calédonie ?," *Mondes en développement* n° 172, no. 4 (2015): 74, <https://doi.org/10.3917/med.172.0067>, <https://shs.cairn.info/revue-mondes-en-developpement-2015-4-page-67?lang=fr>.

¹³ Bernard Poirine, "Rent, emigration and unemployment in small islands: The MIRAB model and the French overseas departments and territories," *World Development* 22, no. 12 (1994/12/01/ 1994), [https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1016/0305-750X\(94\)90188-0](https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1016/0305-750X(94)90188-0), <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/0305750X94901880>.

¹⁴ Jean-Francois Royer, *Les flux migratoires externes de la Nouvelle-Calédonie de 1989 à 2009 (Rapport de mission)*, 18 (Direction des Statistiques Démographiques et Sociales, 2011).

¹⁵ Idem, 23.

¹⁶ Caroline Blondy, Jean-Christophe Gay, and Laura Schuft, "Les logiques spatiales de l'installation des Océaniens en France hexagonale," (2025).

¹⁷ Idem, 5.

¹⁸ P Rivoilan, "La croissance démographique fléchit nettement en Nouvelle-Calédonie entre 2014 et 2019," *Âge* 90, no. 95 (2019); Royer, *Les flux migratoires (Rapport de mission)*, 23.

a foreign country.¹⁹ Conversely, though, its data on internal migration (for example, its data regarding commune of residence one year prior) is often limited to communes of Metropolitan France, or, at best, Metropolitan France, the DROMs, and certain overseas collectivities not including New Caledonia.²⁰ Because INSEE is responsible for the collection of demographic data in the DROMs, their demographic studies tend to focus more often on Reunion, Guadeloupe, French Guiana, Martinique and Mayotte, while New Caledonia relies on its own statistical agency.²¹

Despite these challenges, relevant data is sometimes available. A 1999 study into family history conducted by the National Institute of Demographic Studies (INED) found that 160 out of 1,031,328 Metropolitan surveyed residents were born in New Caledonia; the study includes details on 1999 census respondents as well as their family members and cohabitants.²² INED has also published two studies on “Trajectories and Origins” of residents in Metropolitan France, the first in 2008, and the second in 2019-2020. As the surveyed population for these studies was much lower, however, very few respondents recorded being born (or having family members who were born) in New Caledonia. In 2008, only 5 out of 51,908 Metropolitan residents were found to be New Caledonian natives.²³ The small number of respondents in this case decreases the reliability of the data. In 2020, that sample was somewhat better, at 34 out of 63,398 residents.²⁴ While these studies do mainly record birthplace, they also mention previous places of residence. Even in those categories, though, response rates for New Caledonia remain very low.²⁵

INSEE defines an immigrant as a person residing in France not born within its territories and not of French nationality.²⁶ This definition excludes New Caledonian migrants, who are of French nationality automatically. But while New Caledonia is not a nation in its own right, migrating from New Caledonia to Metropolitan France is still in many ways a movement from one ‘country’ to another, a concept which is reflected by New Caledonia’s complicated semi-autonomous status and particular brand of citizenship. Due to the conditions of the Nouméa Accord, French nationals migrating to New Caledonia can only gain citizenship if they arrived prior to 1998 and have resided in New Caledonia for a minimum of ten years.²⁷ Otherwise, at least one parent must be New Caledonian in order for their child to gain citizenship. Citizenship cannot be gained simply by being born on New Caledonian soil.²⁸ This exclusivity, while contentious, prevents Kanak-led electoral rolls and job markets from becoming oversaturated by recent European migrants; the same advantage could likely apply to demographic analysis.²⁹ It could be interesting to collect data on Kanaks and more established, pre-Accord settlers, who might have different behaviours compared to first- and second-generation migrants.³⁰ On the other hand, Royer’s and the French census’ approach is admittedly

¹⁹ "L'immigration en France, données du recensement 2021," French Ministry of the Interior, 2021, <https://www.immigration.interieur.gouv.fr/Info-ressources/Etudes-et-statistiques/Les-chiffres-de-l-immigration-en-France/Presence-etrangere-en-France>.

²⁰ "Lieux de résidence antérieure en 2020 - Recensement de la population - Base des tableaux détaillés," National Institute for Statistics and Economic Studies (INSEE), 2023, <https://www.insee.fr/fr/statistiques/7632388?sommaire=7632456&q=lieux+de+residence+anterieure>; "Le peuplement de Paris. Origine régionale. Composition sociale. Attitudes et motivations. (1961)," National Institute of Demographic Studies (INED), National Institute of Statistics and Economic Studies (INSEE), 1961, <https://data.ined.fr/index.php/catalog/13>.

²¹ "Migrations - Famille - Vieillesse dans les départements d'outremer (2009-2010) - Description générale," National Institute of Demographic Studies (INED), National Institute of Statistics and Economic Studies (INSEE), 2010, <https://data.progedo.fr/studies/doi/10.48756/ined-IE0237-1486>; "Migrations - Famille - Vieillesse - Mayotte (2015-2016) - Description générale," National Institute of Demographic Studies (INED), National Institute of Statistics and Economic Studies (INSEE), 2016, <https://data.progedo.fr/studies/doi/10.48756/ined-IE0248-3138>; "Enquête sur les migrations des personnes nées ou résidant dans les départements d'outre-mer - 1991-1992 (Description générale)," National Institute of Demographic Studies (INED), 1992, <https://www.casd.eu/source/enquete-sur-les-migrations-des-personnes-nees-ou-residant-dans-les-departements-doutre-mer/>.

²² Francine Cassan et al., "Enquête Etude de l'histoire familiale - 1999," (France: produced by the National Institute of Demographic Studies (INED), National Institute of Statistics and Economic Studies (INSEE), distributed by PROGEDO-ADISP, 1999), 429, doi:10.13144/lil-0173.

²³ Elisabeth Algava et al., "Trajectoires et origines (2008), Enquête sur la diversité des populations en France," (France: produced by the National Institute of Demographic Studies (INED), National Institute of Statistics and Economic Studies (INSEE), distributed by PROGEDO-ADISP, 2008-2009), 2466-69, doi:10.13144/lil-0494.

²⁴ "Trajectoires et origines 2, enquête sur la diversité des populations en France - 2019-2020," France : produced by the National Institute of Demographic Studies (INED), National Institute of Statistics and Economic Studies (INSEE), distributed by PROGEDO-ADISP, 2020, 1226, doi:10.13144/lil-1575.

²⁵ Idem, 1101-05.

²⁶ "L'essentiel sur... les immigrés et les étrangers," National Institute of Statistics and Economic Studies (INSEE), 2024, <https://www.insee.fr/fr/statistiques/3633212>.

²⁷ Scott Robertson, "The Citizenship Dilemma in Decolonising New Caledonia," in *Geographies of New Caledonia-Kanaky: Environments, Politics and Cultures*, ed. Matthias Kowasch and Simon P. J. Batterbury (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2024), 264-65.

²⁸ Etienne Cornut, "New Caledonian nationality and citizenship according to the outcome of the Noumea Accord," *Understanding New Caledonia* (2021): 262.

²⁹ Robertson, "The Citizenship Dilemma in Decolonising New Caledonia," 265-67.

³⁰ Petra W. de Jong and Helga A. G. and de Valk, "Emigration of the Western European second generation: is having immigrant parents a predictor of international migration?," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 49, no. 17 (2023/10/22 2023): 4244-45, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2023.2165486>; J. Van Hook and W. Zhang, "Who Stays? Who Goes?"

a more stable one, especially considering the current political context in New Caledonia, which could lead to a change in citizenship requirements in the future.³¹ Another option would be to study this topic in function of individual ethnic groups, thus separating Kanak migration patterns from European-French patterns. Unfortunately, this would be very difficult in the context of migration to the Metropole, as statistical institutions in France are generally banned from recording data linked to race and ethnicity. In fact, New Caledonia's statistical institutions are the only ones in France that are legally allowed to record ethnic data.³²

Quantifying the migration.

Based on the data Blondy, Gay, and Schuft were able to collect from the results of the 2020 census, 17,575 people living in Metropolitan France were born in New Caledonia, a number which accounts for around 0.027% of a total population of over 65 million people.³³ This number may be compared to the data from the 1999 INED study on family history, which found that 160 out of 1,031,328 residents of Metropolitan France and their cohabitants recorded being born in New Caledonia, so around 0.016%, or 9,680 out of 60.1 million (France's 1999 population).³⁴ Based on this data, there appears to be an increase of 0.011 percentage points between the proportion of New Caledonian-born residents in 1999 and the proportion in 2020, and an overall increase of 7 895 people over two decades, or an average net migration of 394.75 people per year.

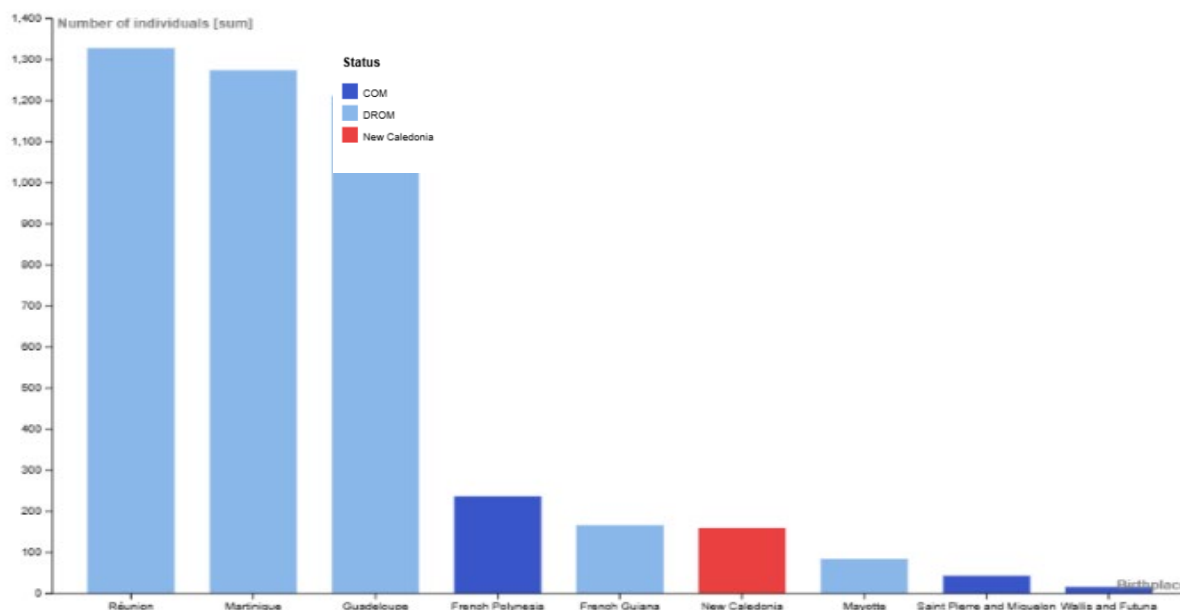


Figure 2 - Number of people living in Metropolitan France in 1999 who were born in France's DROM-COMs according to INED's 1999 Family History Study. Distributed by PROGEDO-ADISP. doi:10.13144/lil-0173.

This number can in turn be compared to Royer's migratory figures. Royer's annual census survey (EAR) data shows the flow of native New Caledonians living in Metropolitan France who report having resided in New Caledonia five years prior to the census, over overlapping five-year periods.³⁵ By dividing each of the annual census results by five, and comparing them to each other, it is possible to find an approximate average for the yearly net migration between 1999 and 2008, which amounts to around 387.32 people. This figure appears to be in line with the figure calculated using the 1999 INED study and 2020 census data. While the 2020 figure does count the number of native New Caledonians residing in Metropolitan France, the number of New Caledonian citizens residing there would likely be lower, in line with the conditions of the Nouméa Accord.

Selective Emigration Among the Foreign-Born," *Popul Res Policy Rev* 30, no. 1 (Feb 1 2011): 1-2, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11113-010-9183-0>.

³¹ Nadège Meyer, "Crise en Nouvelle-Calédonie: à la recherche d'une méthode pour la «mission de médiation et de travail»,» *La Revue des droits de l'homme, Revue du Centre de recherches et d'études sur les droits fondamentaux* (2025): 2.

³² Alexis Spire and Dominique Merllié, "La question des origines dans les statistiques en France. Les enjeux d'une controverse," *Le Mouvement social*, no. 188 (1999): 119, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3779961>, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3779961> ; Patrick Simon, "Nationalité et origine dans la statistique française. Les catégories ambiguës," *Population (French Edition)* 53, no. 3 (1998): 543-64, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1534261>, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1534261>.

³³ Blondy, Gay, and Schuft, "Les logiques spatiales de l'installation des Océaniens en France hexagonale," 5.

³⁴ Cassan et al., "Enquête Etude de l'histoire familiale - 1999," 429.

³⁵ Jean-François Royer, "Les Flux migratoires externes de la Nouvelle-Calédonie de 1989 à 2009, Rapport de mission," (Centre de recherche en économie et statistique (CREST), INSEE, 2011), 18.

Indeed, Blondy, Gay, and Schuft also note the low proportion of Kanak people among New Caledonian migrants in the Metropole compared to ethnically European New Caledonians.³⁶

This data is most interesting when compared to the data from other French territories. The number of French Polynesians residing in the Hexagon is, at 17,186, comparable to the number of New Caledonians, while the number of Wallisians and Futunans is significantly lower at only 800 people. Blondy's study theorises that this can be explained by the historically high rate of migration from Wallis and Futuna to New Caledonia, which may lead to many New Caledonia-born Wallisians and Futunans being absorbed into the New Caledonian data.³⁷ Another important point of comparison is the DROMs. In 1999, according to the INED family history study, out of 1,031,328 Metropolitan residents, 1,328 were born in Reunion, 1,274 in Martinique, 1,211 in Guadeloupe, and 166 in French Guiana.³⁸ Even when the countries' population differences are taken into account, the contrast remains notable. In 1999, both Martinique and Guadeloupe respectively had under twice the population of New Caledonia, and over seven times the migrant presence in the Metropole. Reunion had a population three times larger, but eight times the number of migrants.³⁹ There are, nevertheless, outliers to this trend: Mayotte, for example, is more proportionally similar to New Caledonia than to the other DROMs.⁴⁰ In 2008, INSEE found that one in four native Guadeloupians/Martinicans lived in Metropolitan France, alongside one in seven Reunion-born people.⁴¹ While the data from the 2008 Trajectories and Origins study is too limited to provide a sturdy point of comparison, it is safe to assume that New Caledonians do not attain these levels of migration. According to the 2020 Trajectories and Origins study, only 34 of 63,398 residents were born in New Caledonia, while ten times that number were born in Guadeloupe, Martinique, and Reunion respectively, four times that in Mayotte, and three times that in French Guiana.⁴² Again, differences in total population alone cannot account for the contrast between New Caledonia and the DROMs.

Explaining the low migration rates

Many small Pacific island economies, like Cook Islands, function in accordance with Geoff Bertram and Ray Watters' 1985 MIRAB model, which places international migration, remittances, aid, and bureaucracy at the centre of economic growth within these nations.⁴³ The MIRAB model predicts that the Pacific island nations will generally experience high rates of emigration towards larger metropolises, whose economies will tend to import labour as populations grow in the Pacific, thus increasing the flow of remittances, while the Pacific MIRAB economies' own domestic production remains low; such is New Zealand's role in relation to Cook Islands.⁴⁴ This outflow of labour comes as a result of predicted overseas wages exceeding local equilibrium wages.⁴⁵ While some scholars have labelled New Caledonia's as a MIRAB-type economy, the low rate of external migration and remittances makes this model less fitting, even despite the large inflows of aid from France and the important role of bureaucracy.⁴⁶

In 1994, Poirine began to address this discrepancy in the cases of New Caledonia and the other French overseas departments and territories (soon to become the DROM-COMs). He qualified French Polynesia, for example, as an 'ARAB' economy, centred around Atomic Rent (from immigration borne from nuclear testing in the Pacific in the second half of the 20th century), as well as Aid and Bureaucracy. Meanwhile, New Caledonia recorded net immigration from France and neighbouring Pacific countries rather than emigration, as a result of its strong nickel mining industry and French financial support.⁴⁷ A booming public and private sector within these economies could disincentivise international migration even for the unemployed, as the local wage would approach, or even surpass, the expected overseas wage for an averagely skilled worker.⁴⁸ New Caledonia's economy, which is largely based on its nickel mining industry, tourism, and French support, is notable for its high GDP per capita, its high growth in GDP over past decades, its historically low inflation rates, and, as of 2017, its low unemployment, making the collectivity an 'exception' among the other French DROM-COMs.⁴⁹ Indeed, French minimum wage guarantees have ensured that New Caledonians can now receive over 70% of the Metropolitan equivalent

³⁶ Blondy, Gay, and Schuft, "Les logiques", 18-19.

³⁷ Idem, 5.

³⁸ Cassan et al., 429.

³⁹ "2024 Revision of World Population Prospects," United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs Population Division, 2024, <https://population.un.org/wpp/>.

⁴⁰ Cassan et al., 429.

⁴¹ Sarah Abdouni and Édouard Fabre, "365 000 Domiens vivent en métropole," (2012).

<https://www.insee.fr/fr/statistiques/7632388?sommaire=7632456&q=lieux+de+residence+anterieure>.

⁴² "Trajectoires et origines 2, enquête sur la diversité des populations en France - 2019-2020," 1226.

⁴³ I Geoffrey Bertram and Ray F Watters, "The MIRAB economy in South Pacific microstates," *Pacific viewpoint* 26, no. 3 (1985).

⁴⁴ Poirine, "Rent, emigration and unemployment in small islands: The MIRAB model and the French overseas departments and territories," 1997; Ashley Oberst and Jerome L McElroy, "Contrasting socio-economic and demographic profiles of two, small island, economic species: MIRAB versus PROFIT/SITE," *Island Studies Journal* 2, no. 2 (2007): 163.

⁴⁵ Poirine, "Rent, emigration and unemployment", 2000.

⁴⁶ Oberst and McElroy, "Contrasting socio-economic and demographic profiles of two, small island, economic species: MIRAB versus PROFIT/SITE," 168.

⁴⁷ Poirine, "Rent, emigration and unemployment", 1998.

⁴⁸ Idem, 2001.

⁴⁹ Samuel Gorohouana, "Quelle économie pour la Nouvelle-Calédonie après la période référendaire?" (paper presented at the *Actes du colloque international des 15 et 16 septembre 2017*, à l'Université de la Nouvelle-Calédonie, 2019), 163.

minimum wage, without having to absorb the costs of emigration.⁵⁰ Civil servants' wages are also significantly higher in New Caledonia than in the Metropole, on average.⁵¹ In the private sector, incomes have historically been boosted to a relatively high average level by the booming nickel mining industry, further narrowing the gap between overseas and local wages.⁵² Conversely, as Poirine has noted, the Caribbean French departments of Martinique and Guadeloupe did check the boxes of high emigration and remittances, thus more readily exemplifying the MIRAB model in accordance with the INED data outlined above, while Reunion's status appeared to be much more variable.⁵³ Of course, in the years since Poirine's article was first published, there have been certain variations in income and migration patterns within the DROM-COMs and Metropolitan France.

In many ways beyond average income, New Caledonian economic opportunities remain limited. Over the past decade, the nickel industry's production has slowed, leaving a dent in overall growth.⁵⁴ The collectivity also suffers from low consumption, low competitiveness, limited access to services and technology, and inequalities in access to education and employment.⁵⁵ Compared to non-natives, native New Caledonians are less likely to be employed, and Kanaks even less so.⁵⁶ Similar patterns exist for secondary and tertiary education.⁵⁷ Additionally, ratings for 'sanitary comfort', 'internet access', and 'air conditioning access' are all lower in the Loyalty Islands and Northern Province of New Caledonia, communes which have high Kanak presence compared to the South.⁵⁸ On the one hand, this economic inequality could impact the ability of New Caledonians, and especially Kanaks, to afford the long trip to Metropolitan France. Indeed, geographic distance can be an important financial roadblock to migration, hence why the French government has introduced initiatives like the PME (to reimburse travel costs for New Caledonian migrants).⁵⁹ On the other hand, it can be argued that this economic disadvantage and the related quality of life levels should be a motivating factor for migration towards a more economically dynamic area. While Metropolitan France does offer such areas, New Caledonians tend to migrate internally, towards mining towns, or towards Nouméa and its surrounding agglomeration.⁶⁰ As the cost of accommodation in Nouméa has increased in recent years, new trends have emerged, with more Nouméans moving out to the surrounding communes of Dumbéa and Mont-Dore.⁶¹

As of 2024, two major New Caledonian nickel mines have been handicapped by overseas competition and political turmoil, with the Koniambo mine closing down and the Prony Resources mine at standstill.⁶² Hypothetically, this shock to the New Caledonian economy will also have an important effect of migration patterns, perhaps in the form of increased migration to major cities, but possibly also in the form of migration back towards the North and the Loyalty Islands and the traditional sector.

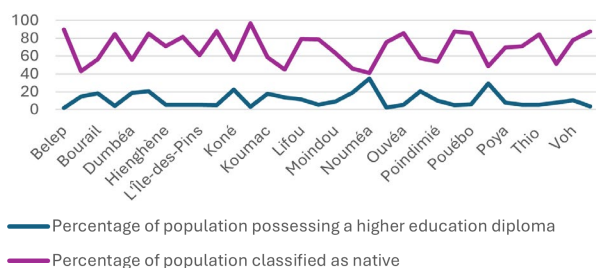


Figure 3 - Relationship between higher education achievement and being native to New Caledonia, in function of commune, according to ISEE's 2019 population census.

⁵⁰ Catherine Ris, Alain Trannoy, and Étienne Wasmer, "The New Caledonian Economy Beyond Nickel," *Notes du conseil d'analyse économique* No 39, no. 3 (2017): 11, <https://shs.cairn.info/journal-notes-du-conseil-d-analyse-economique-2017-3-page-1?lang=en>.

⁵¹ "Très chers fonctionnaires," *Actu.NC* (2025). <https://actu.nc/2025/04/09/tres-chers-fonctionnaires/>.

⁵² Ris, Trannoy, and Wasmer, "The New Caledonian Economy Beyond Nickel," 1.

⁵³ Poirine, "Rent, emigration and unemployment", 1998.

⁵⁴ Ris, Trannoy, and Wasmer, "The New Caledonian Economy Beyond Nickel," 1.

⁵⁵ Idem, 1-7 ; Rivoilan, "La croissance démographique fléchit nettement en Nouvelle-Calédonie entre 2014 et 2019," 6-7.

⁵⁶ Amélie Chung and Kathleen Wright, "Migrations et emploi en Nouvelle-Calédonie," *Revue d'Économie Régionale & Urbaine* Avril, no. 2 (2025), <https://doi.org/10.3917/reru.252.0303>, <https://shs.cairn.info/revue-d-economie-regionale-et-urbaine-2025-2-page-303?lang=fr> ; Catherine Ris, "Les inégalités ethniques dans l'accès à l'emploi en Nouvelle-Calédonie," *Economie et statistique* 464, no. 1 (2013): 66.

⁵⁷ Rivoilan, "La croissance démographique", 6.

⁵⁸ Idem, 7.

⁵⁹ "Le Passeport Mobilité Etudes - PME."

⁶⁰ Rivoilan, 4.

⁶¹ Idem, 4-5.

⁶² Cooper Williams and Yasmine Wright Gittins, "Nickel, paradise and 'emancipation'," *ABC news* 2025, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2025-04-11/new-caledonia-koniambo-nickel-mine-shutdown/105151562>.; Guillaume Stechmann, "New Caledonian nickel on a razor edge," (2024). <https://etudes-economiques.credit-agricole.com/Publication/2024-novembre/new-caledonian-nickel-on-a-razor-edge#:~:text=the%20value%20chain-,To%20further%20exacerbate%20the%20crisis%2C%20the%20May%202024%20riots%20also,annus%20horribilis%20for%20the%20industry>.

Education inequality in New Caledonia may have an important impact on the skill acquisition, and, by extension, mobility of its native population. The 2019 New Caledonian census showed a strong negative correlation between the number of residents possessing a higher education degree by commune and the number of people in that commune classified as 'native'.⁶³ The census also showed that less than 10% of Kanaks achieved a bachelor's degree or preparatory school certificate, compared to around 35% of non-Kanaks. Additionally, less than 20% of those born in Metropolitan France had no high-school diploma, while over 30% of those born in New Caledonia did.⁶⁴ As of 2025, the sectors in Metropolitan France with the highest labour demand and shortages are in information technology, healthcare, construction (builders, electricians, and plumbers), and engineering.⁶⁵ These sectors require 'high-skilled' workers; but the education inequality experienced by native New Caledonians, and especially by the Kanak population, has resulted in slower skill acquisition. Those without the education level required to fulfil the French labour demand face bleaker economic prospects in the Hexagon, and so migration becomes less attractive, particularly in comparison to the expected local wage. Of course, initiatives like the Education Mobility Passport (PME), a French government initiative which compensates the travel costs of students from the COMs seeking to pursue education opportunities in the Hexagon, should allow otherwise disadvantaged New Caledonians to gain the necessary skills for better employment opportunities in Metropolitan France.⁶⁶ In actuality, though, a condition of the PME financial aid package is that the student must return to New Caledonia after the completion of their university program, likely in order to encourage the development of skilled sectors in the New Caledonian economy.⁶⁷

A lack of investment in mobility more generally also plays a role in the lack of migration. While Australia has been considering including New Caledonia in its Pacific Australia Labour Mobility scheme, France has no programs in place to further encourage 'low-skill' labour mobility to the Metropole.⁶⁸ This is not to say that France has not historically been a popular destination for migrants: as of 2018, close to 10% of France's population was made up of immigrants, a large part of whom migrated prior to 1998.⁶⁹ Ex-colonies like Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia have always accounted for much of this immigration, especially in 'low-skilled' sectors.⁷⁰ Domians from Reunion, Martinique, and Guadeloupe also historically migrated in order to satisfy the Metropole's demand for 'low-skilled' labour.⁷¹ Between 1975 and 2018, however, the number of immigrants with higher education diplomas has risen from 3% to 28%, as labour demand by sector has shifted.⁷² With France's 'low-skilled' sectors already saturated by the migrants of previous decades, demand for New Caledonian labour has diminished.

Another possible cause for the low migration rates relates to diaspora. Dominique Gross and Nicolas Schmitt argue that, for 'low-skilled' migrants in particular, the presence of existing cultural networks in the host country is an important motivating factor.⁷³ Existing networks facilitate migrants' entry to the labour market, as well as offering social support and access to cultural linkages.⁷⁴ This is the goal of institutions like the Maison de la Nouvelle Calédonie à Paris, which aims to support New Caledonians living in Paris, and promote their culture in the Metropole.⁷⁵ But historically low levels of New Caledonian migration have led to a smaller diaspora, and less opportunities for cultural networking, thus making migration more socially and economically challenging. In the opposing cases of Reunion, Martinique, and Guadeloupe, historical pro-migration initiatives created the basis for diasporas which still attract migrants today. In the 1960s, France's government established a Bureau for the Development of Migrations in the DOMs, which aimed to reduce unemployment in the DOMs while also supplementing labour in the Hexagon. The bureau incentivised the migration of thousands of workers from Reunion, Martinique, and Guadeloupe towards Metropolitan France.⁷⁶ This program would have formed important cultural networks for future migrants, an effect which New Caledonia remains excluded from.

⁶³ "New Caledonia Population and Housing Census," (New Caledonia National Institute of Economic Studies, 2019).

⁶⁴ Rivoilan, 6.

⁶⁵ "Labour Market Information: France," EURES (EUROPEAN EMPLOYMENT SERVICES), 2025, https://eures.europa.eu/living-and-working/labour-market-information-europe/labour-market-information-france_en.

⁶⁶ "Le Passeport Mobilité Etudes - PME." <https://www.nouvelle-caledonie.gouv.fr/Demarches/Aide-aux-transport-continue-territoriale/Continue-Territoriale/Le-Passeport-Mobilite-Etudes-PME>.

⁶⁷ "Le Passeport Mobilité Etudes - PME."

⁶⁸ "Pacific Australia Labour Mobility (PALM) scheme."

<https://noumea.consulate.gov.au/nmea/PALM.html#:~:text=Through%20the%20PALM%20scheme%2C%20eligible%20businesses%20can,years%20in%20unskilled%2C%20low%2Dskilled%20and%20semi%2Dskilled%20positions.&text=The%20Australian%20Government%20is%20working%20with%20the,Caledonia's%20potential%20entry%20to%20the%20PALM%20scheme>.

⁶⁹ "Tableaux de l'économie française - Étrangers – Immigrés," National Institute of Statistics and Economic Studies (INSEE), 2020, <https://www.insee.fr/fr/statistiques/4277645?sommaire=4318291> ; "Tableaux de l'économie française - Étrangers – Immigrés," National Institute of Statistics and Economic Studies (INSEE), 2019, <https://www.insee.fr/fr/statistiques/3676614?sommaire=3696937>.

⁷⁰ "L'essentiel sur... les immigrants et les étrangers."

⁷¹ Monique Milia, "Histoire d'une politique d'émigration organisée pour les départements d'outre-mer. 1952-1963," *Pouvoirs dans la Caraïbe. Revue du CRPLC*, no. Spécial (1997): 150-54.

⁷² "Tableaux de l'économie française - Étrangers – Immigrés."

⁷³ Dominique M Gross and Nicolas Schmitt, *Why do low-and high-skill workers migrate?: flow evidence from France*, CESifo working paper (2006), 1-6.

⁷⁴ Idem, 4.

⁷⁵ "Nos Missions," Maison de la Nouvelle Calédonie à Paris, 2009, <https://www.mncparis.fr/la-maison/nos-missions>.

⁷⁶ Milia, "Histoire d'une politique d'émigration organisée pour les départements d'outre-mer. 1952-1963," 150-54.

Broader cultural disadvantage also plays a role for New Caledonians, and for Kanaks in particular. In their article, Blondy, Gay, and Schuft discuss the low visibility of Kanak migrants compared to their French Polynesian counterparts. Colonial history continues to impact French perceptions of these two ethnic groups, with Polynesians seen in a more 'positive' light, while historically negative perceptions of the Kanak peoples continue to influence their lives in the Metropole. Beyond the discomfort of experiencing racial prejudice, this cultural disadvantage also constitutes an economic disadvantage: while French Polynesians are able to 'monetise' their culture (performing traditional dances, selling art...), Kanak culture remains less desirable to European buyers.⁷⁷

Colonial legacy as a whole likely has a large influence on migration, as New Caledonians often still hold strong cultural antipathy towards France. This is reflected by the continued popularity of the independentist movement, especially in recent months.⁷⁸ Despite a slim majority of voters choosing to remain French in the 2018 and 2020 independence referendums – and a large majority in 2022 due to a Kanak boycott -- discontent with the French administration is clearly growing.⁷⁹ In 2024, the French loosening of the citizenship requirements outlined in the Nouméa Accord led to riots across the country, in a display of continued tensions between Metropole and ex-colony.⁸⁰ Such tensions may discourage migration, especially among Kanaks.

The cultural and historical relationships between Metropolitan France and New Caledonia are integral to this research, not just in terms of the motivating factors behind migration, but also regarding the challenges within the data itself. For one, whether French statistical bodies choose to include or exclude New Caledonia from a particular study is a tangible effect of the particular level of autonomy possessed by the country. It is, in many ways, not quite a country in and of itself, but also not quite 'French' in the way that Metropolitan departments or even the DROMs are. The French doctrine of a "common destiny" might discourage the study of New Caledonian migration as a movement on an 'international' scale, but New Caledonia's own level of autonomy must also make the 'internal migration' classification seem ill-fitting. In New Caledonia's multicultural context, there are many downsides to this doctrine, especially in regard to historical remembrance, Kanak sovereignty, and the acknowledgement of continuing ethnic inequalities⁸¹. The French reluctance to document ethnicity in its censuses is just as symptomatic of this ideology.⁸²

Despite challenges for migrants, there are still several major factors which motivate some New Caledonians to emigrate to Metropolitan France. The first notable motivator is higher education; New Caledonia has only one local university, and, in 2021, a third of New Caledonian undergraduate students (2,460 out of 7,360 total) pursued their education overseas, many being financially supported by the PME initiative.⁸³ As in French Polynesia, students often consider that Metropolitan universities will provide a more valuable education than local ones.⁸⁴

Another important instigator of migration to Metropolitan France is the Army. Blondy, Gay, and Schuft note that natives of the DROM-COMs, and Oceanians especially, are more likely than Metropolitan-born people to join the Army.⁸⁵ Indeed, the article illustrates the links between the most common areas where French Oceanians choose to settle, and the presence of military bases and training centres.⁸⁶ Like education, this aspect mainly attracts young New Caledonians, who seek opportunities for earning money, attaining qualifications, and traveling.⁸⁷ Health is an additional motivating factor for New Caledonians choosing to move towards Metropolitan France; certain specialty services have tended to only be available in the Metropole, or in other countries, like Australia.⁸⁸ New Caledonia's (and, more broadly, French Oceania's) LGBT+ community are particularly inclined towards migration; certain members of the community choose to move to the Metropole

⁷⁷ Blondy, Gay, and Schuft, 18-19.

⁷⁸ Jacqueline Dahlem, "Nouvelle-Calédonie, Pays Kanak: un récit, deux histoires," (1997); John Connell, "The 2020 New Caledonia Referendum: The Slow March to Independence?," *The Journal of Pacific History* 56, no. 2 (2021/04/03 2021): 144-45, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00223344.2021.1912584>.

⁷⁹ Connell, "The 2020 New Caledonia Referendum: The Slow March to Independence?," 144-45; Denise Fisher, "France and New Caledonia: Three Independence Referendums and an Impasse," *ANU Centre for European Studies Occasional Paper Series* (2022): 32-33.

⁸⁰ Julien Mazzoni, "Old tensions in New Caledonia: curfews and colonialism resurface on anniversary of French takeover," *The Guardian* (theguardian.com) 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/sep/24/new-caledonia-unrest-france-september-24>.

⁸¹ Pierre-Yves Le Meur, "Le destin commun en Nouvelle-Calédonie : entre projet national, patrimoine minier et désarticulations historiques," *Mouvements* n° 91, no. 3 (2017): 35-36, <https://doi.org/10.3917/mouv.091.0035>, <https://shs.cairn.info/revue-mouvements-2017-3-page-35?lang=fr>.

⁸² Spire and Merlié, "La question des origines dans les statistiques en France. Les enjeux d'une controverse," 119.

⁸³ Benjamin Néa, "La migration étudiante de la première élite kanak post-coloniale," *Journal of international Mobility* 12, no. 1 (2024): 116-17.

⁸⁴ Hugo Bréant, "Devenir étudiant·e dans un territoire d'outre-mer: les mécanismes de la démocratisation ségrégative de l'enseignement supérieur en Polynésie française," *Lien social et Politiques*, no. 89 (2022): 161.

⁸⁵ Blondy, Gay, and Schuft, 9-10.

⁸⁶ Idem, 12-13.

⁸⁷ Idem, 9.

⁸⁸ Chantal Barbe, "Les évacuations sanitaires dans le Pacifique. Le cas de la Nouvelle-Calédonie," *Hermès, La Revue* n° 65, no. 1 (2013): 146-47, <https://doi.org/10.4267/2042/51512>, <https://shs.cairn.info/revue-hermes-la-revue-2013-1-page-144?lang=fr>.

in search of a more accepting society and access to gender-affirming care.⁸⁹ It is important to note that not all migrants who fall into these categories are likely to stay in France indefinitely, or even for more than the few years necessary to complete a degree or a treatment plan. Indeed, health- and education-motivated migrants are often more likely to return to New Caledonia.

Conclusion and future implications

With the available data, this report has been able to conclude that migration from New Caledonia to Metropolitan France is indeed relatively low compared to other DROM-COMs and ex-colonies. It has also been able to identify several possible causes behind this phenomenon. For one, New Caledonia's remoteness and, as noted by Poirine, high level of domestic income have made internal migration more feasible than migration to the Metropole for many. Educational inequality and a lack of skills within a large part of the population have also made migration less viable, particularly as France's 'unskilled' migration needs have already largely been supplied by other historic migrant communities. Lack of historic migration has also led to a missing diaspora, thus limiting opportunities for social and economic support for migrants in the Metropole. Cultural antipathy linked to France's colonial legacy also plays a role in discouraging migration. All this explains why countries like Cook Islands and the Compact States, with their proximity to their host countries, incentives for 'low-skilled' migration, and large diasporas, exhibit such different migration patterns compared to New Caledonia.

In regard to France's statistical institutions, it is clear that more should be done to make information available on the subject of New Caledonian citizens and Kanak people in the Hexagon. The migration patterns of these groups are currently understudied as a result of France's approach to census-taking, which does not sufficiently take into account the particularities of New Caledonia and its population. With more information on this subject, it will be possible to better understand why New Caledonia appears to be an exception among its Pacific neighbours and French counterparts, and thus understand the patterns of migration in the Pacific more broadly.

While explanations are available as to why New Caledonian migration is so low, and while Poirine's 1994 analysis is validated by this new re-examination, changing circumstances make it difficult to know whether trends will continue or not, especially considering today's turbulent political context. As Poirine noted back in 1994, the 1985 Kanak unrest had a significant impact on the functioning of the New Caledonian nickel-based economy, and thus its net migration; similar outcomes can be expected as a result of more recent political tensions.⁹⁰ The 2024 riots, for example, have led to what certain demographers consider to be a mass exodus from New Caledonia, with some estimating that over 10,000 people have left the country.⁹¹ Net migration in New Caledonia has been steadily declining over the last decade, and the recent crisis has affected safety, as well as economic growth as the mining and tourism industries fall.⁹² It is, however, still difficult to know how many of those who have left will return to New Caledonia, and how many of those emigrants who do not return will make their way to Metropolitan France. As the data is based on airport departures and arrivals, it is also difficult to know how many of those leaving are native-born. As a result of the unrest, the New Caledonian census which was scheduled for 2024 has been pushed back to 2025.⁹³ Hopefully, the results of this census will soon provide a better idea of the current trends in regard to external and internal migration.

⁸⁹ Blondy, Gay, and Schuft, 19.

⁹⁰ Poirine, "Rent, emigration and unemployment", 1998.

⁹¹ "Over 10,000 Left New Caledonia," *Islands Business Magazine*, 2025, <https://islandsbusiness.com/news-break/over-10000-left-new-caledonia/>.

⁹² Nic Maclellan, "Voting with their feet: demographic shifts in New Caledonia," *DevPolicy Blog*, 2024.

⁹³ "Recensement 2025 : Aujourd'hui, je compte pour demain !," New Caledonia National Institute for Economic Studies (ISEE), 2025, <https://www.isee.nc/population/recensement>.

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