

Should family benefits be cut? Should they be taxed?

By [Henri Sterdyniak](#)

The government has set a target of balancing the public accounts by 2017, which would require cutting public spending by about 60 billion euros. The Prime Minister, Jean-Marc Ayrault, has given Bernard Fragonard, President of the Haut Conseil à la Famille, France's advisory body on the family, a deadline of end March to propose ways to restructure family policy so as to balance the budget for the family accounts by 2016. Aid to families thus has to be cut, by 2.5 billion euros (6.25% of family benefits), *i.e.* the equivalent of the 2012 deficit for the CNAF, the French national family allowances fund. Is this justified from an economic perspective and a social perspective?

The CNAF accounts have been hit by the recession, as the amount of social security contributions and CSG tax that it receives has gone down. Based on an estimate that total payroll is 5% below its normal level, the loss of revenue for the CNAF can be estimated at 2.5 billion euros. The CNAF deficit as a whole is thus cyclical. Arguing that the way to cut the deficit is by reducing benefits undermines the stabilizing role of public finances. Consider a fall in private demand of 1% of GDP; assuming a multiplier equal to 1, GDP also shrinks by 1%; the deficit in the public finances will then increase by 0.5%. If you want to avoid this deficit, then government spending would need to be cut by 0.5% of GDP, which would then reduce GDP, and consequently tax revenue, thereby requiring further reductions. *Ex post*, public spending would fall by 1% and GDP by 2%. Fiscal policy would then be playing a destabilizing role. The CNAF therefore needs to be managed based on looking at its structural dimension, which was in fact balanced in 2012. On the economic front, in a

situation of a deep depression, when consumption and activity are stagnant, nothing can justify undermining the purchasing power of families [\[i\]](#).

Moreover, successive governments have gradually made the CNAF responsible for both pension benefits for stay-at-home parents (4.4 billion euros in 2012) and increases in family pensions (4.5 billion in 2012). Thus, of the CNAF's 54 billion euros in funds, nearly 9 billion is being diverted into the pension scheme and does not directly benefit children.



This diversion has been possible because family benefits have risen only slightly in the past, as they are generally indexed to prices, not wages. Worse, in some years, benefits have not even risen at the same pace as inflation. Finally, from 1984 to 2012, the monthly basis for calculating the family allowance (the BMAF) lost 5.7% in absolute purchasing power (column 1 of the table), but 25% in purchasing power relative to median household income (column 2). Should we perpetuate and even widen this growing gap?

Young people under age 20 represent 25% of the population. Using the INSEE's equivalence scale, 12.5% of household income should be provided by the family benefits that go to families with children in order to ensure that they have the same standard of living as people without children. Yet the totality of family benefits represents only 4.2% of household income [\[ii\]](#).

The RSA income support is significantly lower than the pension minimum under the pretext of encouraging RSA beneficiaries to work, but this is hurting the living standards of children, who usually live with people in the workforce, not with pensioners. The creation of the RSA *activité* [the income supplement for the working poor] could have provided significant additional resources for many families of low-wage

workers, but it is poorly designed: many potential beneficiaries don't even apply for it. Moreover, it does not benefit the unemployed (and thus their children). In 2010, the poverty rate of children (at the 60% threshold) was 19.8%, compared with 14.1% for the population as a whole. At the 50% threshold, it was 11.1%, against 7.8% for the general population. This means that 2.7 million children are below the 60% poverty line, with 1.5 million even below the 50% line.

A family with three children has a lower standard of living than a childless couple earning the same wages: by 16% at the level of two times the minimum wage, and by 30% at the level of five times the minimum wage. Family allowances have become very low for the middle classes; the family quotient simply takes into account the reduction in living standards caused by the presence of children, but it does not provide specific assistance to families. Aid to children is not excessive at any level of income. In 2010, the average standard of living was 10% lower for children than for the average population. The opposite should be the case, since children need a decent standard of living to develop their full potential, and parents who raise their children play a fundamental social role, in addition to their role in the workforce.

Should the family allowance be taxed? This would mean ignoring that the amount is already very low compared to the cost of children. Median income per consumption unit was around 1 660 euros in 2012; the average cost of a child, who represents 0.3 consumption unit, is thus about 500 euros. Yet the allowance amounts to 64 euros per child for a family with two children and 97 euros per child for a family with three children. The allowance would thus have to be at least multiplied by 5 before taxing it became a legitimate question.

Making progress toward the goals on French family policy proclaimed in the Social Security Financing Act (LFSS) [\[iiii\]](#) – reducing disparities in living standards due to family

structure, lifting all children out of poverty, increasing the number of places in childcare – would require devoting greater resources to family policy. This is a burden that should be borne by all taxpayers, not just by middle-class families, who are not the ones most favoured under the existing system.

Cutting the amount that the nation spends on its children by 2.5 billion euros would be a mistake in terms of both macroeconomic policy and social policy. As Charles Gide observed, “Of all the investments a country can make, it is the education of the children that is the most profitable.”

[\[i\]](#) For a similar argument, see Gérard Cornilleau, 2013, “Should spending on unemployment benefits be cut?”, *OFCE blog*, 6 February.

[\[ii\]](#) See Henri Sterdyniak, 2011, “Faut-il remettre en cause la politique familiale française”, *Revue de l’OFCE*, no. 116.

[\[iii\]](#) See the PLFSS, 2013, *Programme de qualité et d’efficience, Famille*.