Measuring non-take-up of social benefits in France: focus on the RSA and the PA

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I. Introduction

The non-take-up of social benefits has become an important issue that most public policy makers are trying to address. Since people who are entitled to receive social benefits does not automatically take them, the non-take-up questions the efficiency of a social policy and the access to social rights. Ultimately, it interrogates the determinants of the demand of public policy that emerged to address poverty and exclusion.

France is particularly concerned by this issue taking into account the complexity of its social protection system and the multiplicity of the social benefits (Palier, 2005). This complexity is stemmed from the successive devices that were created in order to develop the social protection, which is the creation of multiple covers against the risk to loose employment, which appear in the guise of the different branch of Sécurité Sociale. At the end of the cycle of durable growing of wealth from as of the 1970's, the social policy targets the "new risks of poverty" that is the long-term unemployment and the reconfiguration of the solidarity, as an illustration the increasing part of single parent families in the total population. However, the complexity is also close to the development of new measures directed towards fragile population that were not the main targets such as the dependant people or the people under inabilities. The tangle of different social rights and their different eligibility thresholds are therefore the first obstacles to applying for aid, when a person in a fragile situation no longer knows who to turn to for care.

Therefore, measuring the non-take-up phenomenon and its causes is more than essential in order to improve the effectiveness and the relevance of poverty reduction policies with facilitating the access to the social benefits to all persons that are entitled to them. In particular, the "*Revenu de solidarité active*"

(RSA) and the "*Prime d'activité*" (PA) are concerned by this phenomenon whereas they are targeted to reduce poverty.

The Revenu de solidarité active (RSA) is a differential allowance designed to supplement a family's initial resources in order to reach a guaranteed income threshold (or lump-sum "amount"). At the time of its application in June 2009, the RSA merged two devices, the single parent allowance (API) and the minimum guaranteed income (RMI), which make up the "base" for beneficiaries. The RSA innovates in two ways: on the one hand, by developing an "activity" component intended to provide an income supplement for the working poor; on the other hand, by strengthening the methods of social and professional support for people experiencing poverty. In 2010, the RSA was extended to young people from 18 to 25, with a condition of working hours.

In the architecture of social benefits, the RSA remains the "last safety net", after all other redistribution mechanisms have been exhausted, and in particular, after unemployment benefits have been withdrawn. Its scale depends on the resources of the adults in a family: therefore, it is not an individual benefit. The RSA is differential because its amount depends on the difference between the "lump sum" and the sum of the household's resources (work, assets, and other social benefits).

The activity dimension of the RSA is fully in line with the notion of "activation" specific to schemes aiming to "make work pay", following the recommendations of the Lisbon Strategy of 2000 which aims at rebuilding the European social model (Barbier, 2012; Eydoux, 2012). Two mechanisms indicate this: the contractualisation between the beneficiary and a referent social worker, initially created within the framework of the RMI, by listing the objectives that must be achieved by the recipient in terms of social and professional inclusion (training, active job search, etc.); the temporality of reevaluating the resources of the recipients, defined on a quarterly basis, by forcing the recipients to keep the accounts of their family.

The RSA is a tax-financed device. The funds are allocated by the State to the departments. By agreement, the family branch of social security is responsible for paying the benefit. The support procedures are shared between the placement operator of the public employment service, the social services of the departments and the family allowance funds. In 2018, approximately 2 million families will be receiving this benefit, and the number of families covered by this benefit has been steadily increasing since its creation (see figure 1 in the appendix).

The prime d'activité (PA) is a work income supplement that became effective in January 2016. It replaces an old tax credit scheme, the employment bonus (PPE) and the RSA activité in order to address the shortcomings of these two schemes (Sirugue, 2013): time lag between individual situation and payment of the benefit as well as the effect of poverty traps for the one; high non-take-up and low amount for the other. These observations led to the creation of an income support benefit for the working poor that takes into account family composition. As the RSA, benefit entitlements are assessed quarterly.

The amount of the premium is based on a lump sum from which 61% of the household's earned income, other household resources and an individual bonus are subtracted. All persons who have reached the age of majority and are in employment are eligible. The lump sum amount of the PA is equal to 551.51 euros for a single person without children. This amount varies according to family composition. It may be temporarily increased in the case of a single parent with one or more children. The State finances the benefit through the general social contribution (CSG) and the family allowance funds assess the eligibility conditions for the payment of the benefit. At the end of 2018, approximately 4 million households were receiving the activity bonus.

In the social benefit scheme, when a household applies for RSA, it is equivalent to an application for PA. However, the reverse is not automatic. This symbiosis is an important argument for studying the determinants of non-take-up of these two income support schemes.

The non-take-up issue has aroused the interest of economists in France since the early nineteen-twenties but there was a lack of reliable quantitative studies and relevant data on this phenomenon, which provided mixed results, and a wide range of estimations (Math, 1996; van Oorschot, 1996; van Oorschot and Math, 1996; Simon, 2000; Reinstadler, 2000; Terracol, 2002).

In particular, for RSA, only one survey addressing the non-take-up issue was conducted in 2010-2011 by the Direction de l'animation de la recherche, des études et des statistiques (DARES) of the Minister of Labor with the aim to study this phenomenon and its impact on the labour market. The first « reliable » estimated non-take-up rate for the "base" RSA provided by this survey is about 36% and that for the "activity" RSA is about 65%. The main type of non-take-up is rather the lack of awareness (Domingo and Pucci, 2011; 2014).

A big issue arising from this survey is the fact that it is limited only to people living in ordinary households, which do not include mobile home or collective house. Moreover, its implementation is costly because of the difficulty of targeting and sampling and the fragility of the eligibility test since the calculation of the entitlement to the RSA requires a knowledge of infra-annual income and an information on the resources of the « social household » and its family configuration. Consequently, this survey was not reconducted during the past ten years and the studies dealing with the non-up are scarce.

Although these limits, there were some researches that exploited this survey in order to investigate the determinants of the non-take-up. For instance, Chareyron (2018) found that the non-take-up to the RSA concerns mainly those with low incomes and high RSA entitlements.

Furthermore, Chareyron and Domingues (2018) use a survey among homeless people and show that the non-take-up to the RSA is lower for this population than that computed among ordinary households. Chareyron and Anne (2017) showed a positive significant impact of the proximity to public transport on the knowledge of the benefit.

Following those early researches and because the data usually used for the measurement became dated, there was a public need to develop a method that allow to estimate in a regular basis the non-take-up of social benefits in France. Our main aim is to answer the question that is in which way is it possible to quantify the non-take-up of the RSA and the PA on a regularly and contemporary basis? Once one allows quantifying the non-take-up, in which way is it possible to analyse its determinants as well as assess the effect size of a public policy on its magnitude?

We try to address those questions in a research project funded by the French inter-ministerial delegation of preventing and fighting poverty, conducted in the French Ministry of Social Solidarity and Health, and co-managed by the ERUDITE laboratory (UPEC) and the national family allowances fund (CNAF).

We structure our technical note in the following manner. First, we describe the technical strategy in which we present the main tools used in order to measure the non-take-up namely the data (the tax and social security income survey (ERFS)) as well as the microsimulation model INES, which is the public tool to evaluate the socio-fiscal reform in France, based on the ERFS. Moreover, we present the limits and the issues from which suffer these two tools. Finally, we expose the forthcoming works in order to overcome these limits and to provide a reliable measure of non-take-up.

II.   Technical strategy

1.   The tax and social security income survey (ERFS)

The Tax and Social Income Survey (ERFS) is the main source of data for producing statistics and conducting studies on the income, standard of living and poverty of households residing in ordinary housing in metropolitan France.

It is not strictly speaking a survey, since part of the data relating to income and social benefits is not collected by survey but by using administrative sources for a representative sample of the entire population. Since the creation of the ERFS in 1956, INSEE has successively modified its mode of production. Now, the latest production methodology follows four stages.

➢ *Methodology*

The first step consists of a statistical matching, for the same year N, between a tax data component and an individual information base, in particular to take account of family composition and activity status in determining the standard of living.

The first data set contains, on the one hand, the income tax file which lists all income declared by persons liable to tax whether they are employed, self-employed, retired or inactive and, on the other hand, the

files relating to the housing tax, which is a local tax depending on the characteristics of the main or secondary dwelling, to which owners, tenants or free of charge occupants are subject.

The second data component corresponds to the Labor Force Survey (LFS) for the fourth quarter of year N. The LFS is a sample survey, in other words, a representative sample of the population is interviewed six times every quarter. Although the survey is primarily used to quantify the number of persons in employment as defined by the ILO, its iteration in the fourth quarter of year N falls within the scope of the ERFS because it is the sample that offers the best match rate with tax files. As an illustration, the original sample for the EFRS 2017 is composed of almost 116,900 individuals for about 53,000 households.

The principle of matching between these two datasets is to try to retrieve the tax returns of the individuals constituting the households surveyed in the LFS. Matching with the personal income tax file is called statistical matching because it is performed on anonymous data at the individual level (i.e., without the use of surnames). Matching is based on criteria common to both data components: first name; date of birth; sex; address (municipality and department of residence). Information on the marital status of the respondent's spouse may also be used. Then, for the individuals found, the data on income are extracted from the file containing all the taxation elements of the tax household.

These data are then combined with the benefits paid to each recipient in year N by the National Family Allowances Fund (Cnaf) and the National Fund of the Agricultural Social Mutual Insurance Fund (Ccmsa), and the pensions established and paid in December N by the National Old Age Insurance Fund (Cnav). The family allowance funds manage the payment of nearly 93% of the benefits taken into account in the ERFS. The data of individuals that have been matched with the tax files are completed with the information available for each taxpayer and his/her spouse: usual name and/or name of birth (encrypted information), first name, date of birth and tax address for taxation purposes. In the first quarter of year N+2, the CNAF retransmits to INSEE all the benefits paid to recipients on this list during year N. Some households not found in the tax sources are found in the CNAF file. In this database, they are integrated into the ERFS sample and considered as respondents to the ERFS. They will then be part of the non-response treatments in the fourth stage of production. Thus, for each individual, we observe a benefit amount paid at least once in the year for all known social benefits: family benefit; housing allowance; disability and handicap support; RSA; PA; minimum retirement pension.

In a third step, information on income and benefits not provided by the tax and social security source is filled in by imputations made by INSEE.

Finally, the ERFS is subject to corrections for non-response and an adjustment in order to be representative at the level of metropolitan France. Indeed, for some matched individuals, the declarations are not systematically found. As soon as a tax return is found for a LFS household (this is the case for approximately 97% of EEC households), the household is considered as a "respondent" to the ERFS.

Individuals in the household may not be located. These represent what is known as partial non-response. For these households, missing reports are reconstructed.

> ➢ *Scope of the dataset*

The scope of the survey is therefore that of individuals from so-called "ordinary" households residing in metropolitan France. Persons living in collective housing (retirement homes, religious communities, university halls of residence, prisons, etc.) as well as persons living in precarious housing (workers' hostels, hotels, etc.) and homeless persons are therefore excluded.

The ERFS is representative of metropolitan households (approximately 97% of the total metropolitan population) and the household is its statistical unit (and not the individual or tax household). More accurately, the sample for the Tax and Social Income survey *stricto sensu* is made up of households responding to the Employment survey and for whom at least one tax return or social file (file in one of the social organizations) was found.

> ➢ *Advantages and limits*

The way the ERFS is produced helps to make this data source a first working basis for calculating the non-take-up of a given social benefit because the matching with social data sources makes it possible to establish the number of beneficiaries.

In addition, traditional criteria for eligibility for a social benefit, such as the level of resources and family composition, are also available in the ERFS.

Finally, the questions asked by the LFS make it possible to recompose the annual activity calendar of the respondents, which makes it possible to assess each individual's position with regard to employment in each month of the year.

On the other hand, the strength of the ERFS is also its weakness. Typically, two years are required to complete all matches from the different data sources, which implies producing a measure of non-use with a lag of two years.

In addition, the scope of the sample is restricted to persons residing in ordinary housing, which *de facto* reduces the share of persons potentially eligible and potentially resorting to social minima.

Let us add, despite the richness of the activity calendar contained in the ERFS, resources are counted at the annual level. As a result, the data source does not allow for all the infra-annual variability of resources that would make it possible to refine the eligibility criteria for benefits whose entitlements are assessed several times during the year, which is the case in particular for the RSA and the PA.

In order to weigh up the strengths and weaknesses of the ERFS in measuring non-take-up, we carried out an initial comparison between the number of RSA and PA beneficiaries recorded by the ERFS and the number actually observed by the Cnaf, the organization that pays these benefits. By limiting ourselves to common fields of comparison (definition of the boundaries of families in the sense of the benefit, ordinary housing), we diagnosed that the number of beneficiaries was under-represented by the ERFS, on the range of 400,000 social households for RSA and 350,000 social households for PA. In addition, single individuals without children receiving RSA and PA are under-represented while couples with and without children are over-represented. However, the labor income and replacement income distributions of PA recipients in the ERFS and administrative data are confounded. This is also the case when considering these same distributions for RSA, except in the case of zero income: the RSA beneficiary share of this bracket is under-represented in the ERFS.

These numerous biases in the measurement of take-up, whether upward or downward, do not allow providing a reliable measure of non-take-up. Among the different alternative ways of measuring non-take-up, we resort to a microsimulation model. The INES model, developed by INSEE, DREES and CNAF, is designed for this purpose, and its supply is already based on the ERFS. Its main advantage resides in the fact that it simulates the eligibility of most French social benefits.

2. Microsimulation model INES

Because the measurement of non-up of social benefits from the ERFS presents some limits, the preferred method consists in estimating the take-up rate of a given benefit by relating, in the same field, the beneficiary population, as identified by the paying agencies, to the eligible population, simulated using the INES microsimulation model. This model, managed jointly by the "*Institut national de la statistique et des études économiques*" (Insee), Drees and Cnaf, simulates, based on the socio-fiscal legislation, most of the social benefits and direct taxation. It is based on the tax and social security income survey (ERFS).

➤ *Methodology*

According to the availability of the data, the INES model is based on an ERFS with a time difference of two years. Thus the legislation of a year N is applied to the ERFS of a year N-2, « aged » by two years and adjusted, based on aggregated information from other sources (census, finance survey, …), to reflect the structure and income of the population in the year N. The INES model has several advantages over an estimate based on surveys that were positive arguments used in other research programme (e.g. Bargain et al. 2012): it is cheaper, it reduces the processing time and it increases the durability of the

monitoring. Moreover, Ines could also simulate the impact of fiscal and social reforms on wealth indicators and ultimately on the non-take-up behaviour.

Therefore, many steps are followed in INES in order to simulate most taxes and social benefits:

- A first step is the "data aging", which considers the changes in population characteristics by modifying the weightings using "margin calibration". Moreover, differentiated rates of change are applied to each type of income according to its nature (earned income, wealth, replacement income), using all available economic information. For example, wages are adjusted using the "*Labour force activity and employment conditions*" (Acemo) survey, which takes into account the socio-professional category and sector of activity of each employee.

- The second step consists on simulating social and fiscal levies: social security contributions, income taxes, family and other social benefits, according to family configuration (identification of social households adapted to each benefit and construction of resources data that will be used to simulate eligibility), and N-2 income (in general).

- The simulation of the RSA and the PA comes at the end of the process because the resources taken into account for the calculation of entitlements include a good part of the benefits simulated beforehand; it requires the following steps:

  o Construction of "social household": allocation of a PA or RSA "social household" identifier.

  o Quarterly earnings simulation thanks to the activity calendar of the LFS. This step is essential to simulate the eligibility for RSA or PA since the benefits are reassessed every three months.

  o Construction of resource data at "social household" level.

  o Simulation of legislation and determination of eligibility.

  o Drawing beneficiaries from among the eligible, based on quarterly targets provided by the Cnaf. Precisely, the draw is made only for PA considering the fact that "social households" eligible for the PA are automatically considered as beneficiaries if they have already been drawn in the previous quarter (regardless of their status with respect to the RSA). Moreover, the probability of take-up for an eligible social household increases with the simulated amount of entitlement. For the RSA, it is assumed that those who do not use PA do not use RSA. For the other eligible to the RSA, they are automatically assumed to be beneficiary.

    ▪ Nevertheless, these assumptions are under revision by the Ines team and would be updated soon.

➢ *Elements of comparison to attest the power of simulation*

As we made for ERFS, we also compared the data from INES to that from CNAF in order to investigate the gaps between the two data sources in terms of headcount and financial mass of the beneficiaries of RSA and PA following many configurations (family configuration, income level, annual amount of benefit, age and employment status). This comparison allows determining the discrepancies that potentially are due either from the representativeness of the ERFS (on which Ines is based), the consistency of the fields, the eligibility simulation process in Ines or the quality of the probabilistic draw of take-up among the eligible persons.

➢ For PA, we find that Ines underestimates single-parent families and overestimates couples without children and with one child. For RSA, it underestimates single individuals and single-parent families, and overestimates couples with and without children.

➢ Compared to the exhaustive administrative data of the family branch, Ines underestimates the proportion of PA recipients who receive less than 600 euros per year, and overestimates the proportion of recipients with higher amounts.

➢ For the RSA, Ines overestimates the number of beneficiaries receiving RSA amounts up to 3,000 euros per year and underestimates the number of beneficiaries receiving more than 3,000 euros. This is also the case in particular for the bracket between 5,400 and 6,000 euros per year, which corresponds to the maximum amount that a single person without resources and receiving housing benefit can receive over the whole year 2017.

➢ On the other hand, the income distribution of PA beneficiaries in INES seems to be poorly simulated compared to those in CNAF. This may refer to a problem in simulating eligible households or to the take-up assumptions applied in Ines (or both).

As a whole, we detect that the microsimulation model needs to be more calibrated in order to reproduce the corresponding characteristics of the beneficiaries as well as the eligible population. The main explanation of this discrepancy is the fact that Ines does not provide a take-up simulation for the RSA. Nevertheless, this work is under progress.

3. Non take-up in ERFS

In our project, we would like to realise a diagnosis that consists on computing a non-take-up rate of RSA and PA from the ERFS itself using the program in INES that allows to simulate the quarterly earnings and that used to simulate the eligibility to RSA and PA in order to make up for the missing information on the infra-annual income. This work could be done since the last available version of 2017 until that of 2011 in order to compare the non-take-up rate with that computed in 2011 from the Dares survey (Domingo & Pucci, 2014) and also to have an overview of its evolution over time.

The advantage of this computation is to use only some programs from INES mainly that for the eligibility computation and the estimation of quarterly earnings since the benefits are reassessed every three months and the beneficiary population is already known in the ERFS. Moreover, we would compute the non-take-up rate at the same year of the ERFS, so that we would not resort to "aging" the data. The aim from this diagnosis is to limit the points of uncertainty identified in INES. Besides, the estimate could be biased by the lack of infra-annual resources.

- ✓ Advantage: The beneficiary population is already known in the ERFS (we would not resort to estimate it). Only the eligibility is simulated using INES (quarterly earnings program and legislation simulation for eligibility).
- ✓ Disadvantage: The aim of this project is to develop a **contemporary** measure of non-take-up (the ERFS is available at N-2 of each year N). Moreover, we would like also to simulate the **contemporary** legislation in order to evaluate public policies and this is possible only using the micro-simulation model INES.

III. Work in progress

1. Alternative diagnosis

Once these diagnosis are made, further analyses are necessary in order to determine the sources of discrepancies obtained from the comparison between the different data sources mainly in INES model. Since we cannot modify directly the production of the ERFS, we could only suggest some possible improvements in the weighting procedure in order to have a better representativeness of social benefits' beneficiaries and also people living in ordinary households.

Initially, the idea was to apply only the quarterly earnings simulation programme in the ERFS 2017 to determine eligibility for RSA and PA in the ERFS 2017 and to compute a non-take-up rate of RSA and PA from the ERFS itself. However, a further idea is to apply the non-take-up draw module in order to obtain the "simulated" take-up in the ERFS 2017. This work would help us to compare several elements:

- ➢ Eligible ERFS 2017 VS eligible INES 2017, which allows to question about the "aging" and quarterly earnings simulation procedures.
- ➢ "Simulated" ERFS 2017 vs. "real" ERFS 2017 recipients: This comparison would make it possible to question the non-take-up drawdown programme and the simulation of the quarterly earnings.

In parallel with these activities, the idea is to dig into the "aging" income programs in INES, because they raise several hypotheses in the simulation. To move in this direction, the idea is to exploit the panel dimension of the ERFS (that came directly from the trimestral dimension of the LFS) by considering

households that respond over two consecutive years : in this case households that respond twice in Q4 of the year N-1 and N.

The "aging" programs would be applied to the N-1 year data to age the information over a single year and then compare the "simulated" information with the "actual" information for the year N.

2. Improvement of microsimulation

Once the last diagnosis cited are made, we are potentially able to determine which programs are suffering from imprecision and focus on them in order to bring some improvements.

In any case, the non-take-up draw programme is under consideration by the team working on the microsimulation model INES at the DREES with developing a non-take-up drawdown programme for the RSA. Further improvements would be to modify the quarterly targets provided by the Cnaf with refining them according to the family structure.

IV. Conclusion

This technical note allows us to conclude about the possibility to develop a regular and contemporary non-take-up measure of French social benefits from the available tools: administrative data (ERFS) and micro-simulation model Ines. However, the discrepancies found with the exhaustive data of the benefits' recipients (CNAF data) show that there are still some issues to address in order to obtain a reliable measure of non-take-up. Nevertheless, even if we succeed to produce a reliable indicator of non-take-up of social benefits, it would still be affected by inevitable statistical issues related to the ERFS survey process and some assumptions used in Ines.

One possible recommendation for official statistics would be to expertise in new data such as the monthly resource data (MRB) in order to control for the infra-annual variation in the ERFS and then to incorporate changes from this new kind of data in the ERFS. This new administrative source is the result of an improved gathering process of the income declarations on a monthly basis in the public and private sectors since 2017 in France.

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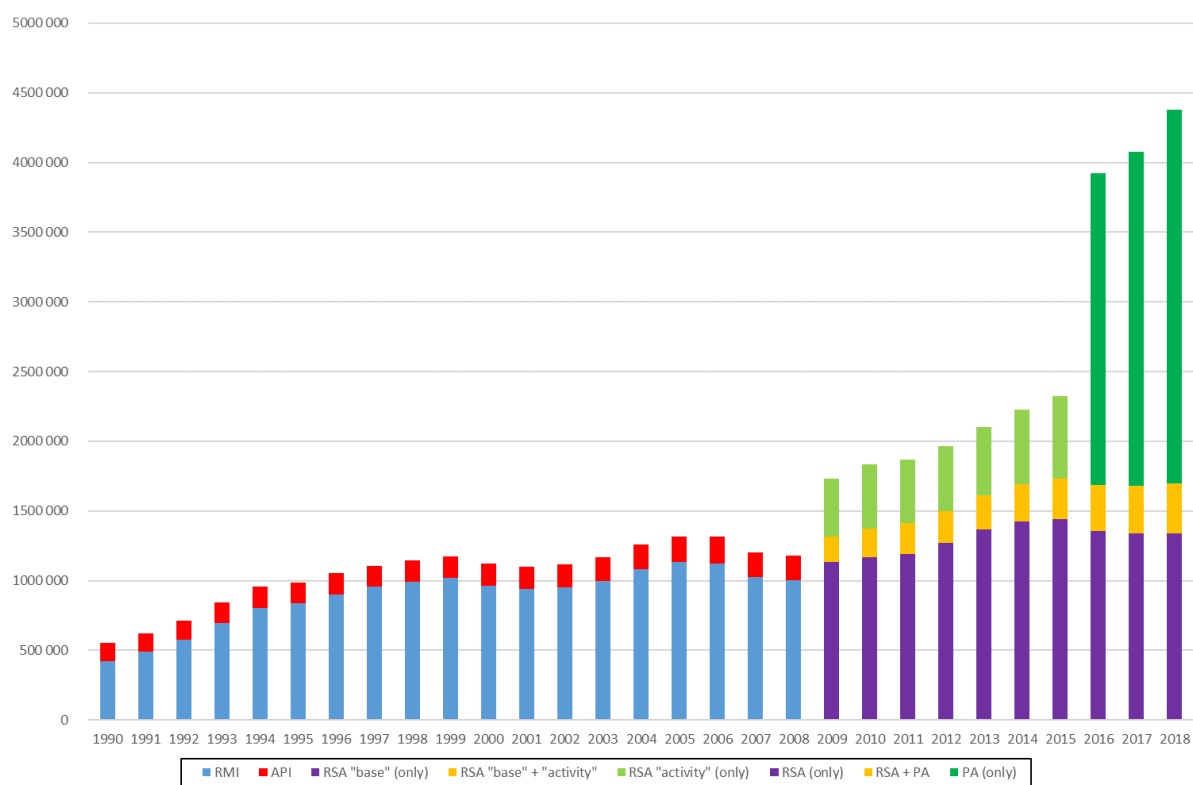
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Appendix

Figure A1: Number of beneficiaries of main minimal social benefits in France 1990-2018

Note : Metropolitan France.
Source : Drees. http://www.data.drees.sante.gouv.fr/
In 2016, the statistics service of the family branch in social security change its production process. It caused a rupture in the serial time data.