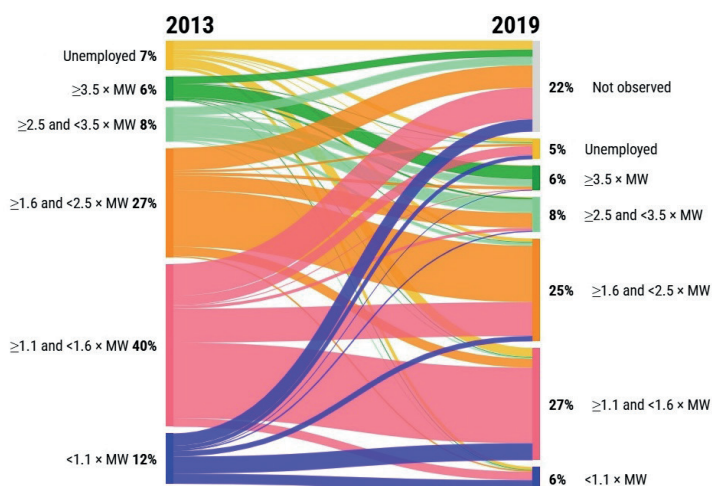


Wage Trajectories of French Minimum Wage Earners

Rania Benyamina and Chloé Stutzmann

- Study of individual wage trajectories provides a more detailed picture of wage mobility and stagnation over a long period than aggregate wage indicators.
- Analysis of wage trajectories in France between 2013 and 2019 shows that minimum wage earners, hereby defined as employees earning less than 1.1 times the French statutory minimum wage (Smic), were more likely to see their salary increase than other employees. These employees also received higher average pay rises. In particular, this is due to the fact that more young people, at the start of their careers, are minimum wage earners and then experience a rapid pay rise.
- However, wage trajectories of minimum wage earners are very diverse. Only a minority of them remain permanently close to the minimum wage. Certain categories of individuals are however more likely to remain minimum wage earners over time: women, clerical workers and service sector employees.
- Lastly, an analysis of wage trajectories during the COVID-19 pandemic between 2019 and 2021 suggests that experiencing a period of short-time work did not significantly affect the likelihood of wage progression during this period.

Wage trajectories between 2013 and 2019



Source: 2021 All Employees Panel. DG Trésor calculations.

Scope: 28,603 employees randomly selected in 2013 from all panel employees aged between 15 and 64 in 2013 ("2013 All Employees sample").

How to read this chart: In 2013, 12% of employees in the sample were paid less than 1.1 times the statutory minimum wage. Six years later in 2019, this proportion was 6%, of which half were already on the statutory minimum wage or thereabouts in 2013.

1. Between 2013 and 2019, French minimum wage earners saw their salaries rise faster than other employees

1.1 More than half of minimum wage earners in 2013 experienced a salary increase six years later

The wage trajectories of a representative sample of employees from the All Employees Panel in 2013 ("All Employees sample") were tracked over the period 2013-2019 (see Box 1). A status timeline was created for each year and for each individual in the sample, by assigning one of the following statuses:

- "Unemployed" if the individual was on unemployment benefit for most of the year (for more than 910 hours in the year, i.e. more than 6 months);
- "Not observed" if the individual was not observed during the year;
- For other individuals, one of five wage categories, based on average annual gross hourly wage expressed as a multiple of the statutory minimum wage (less than 1.1 ×, 1.1 to 1.6 ×, 1.6 to 2.5 ×, 2.5 to 3.5 × and more than 3.5 ×).

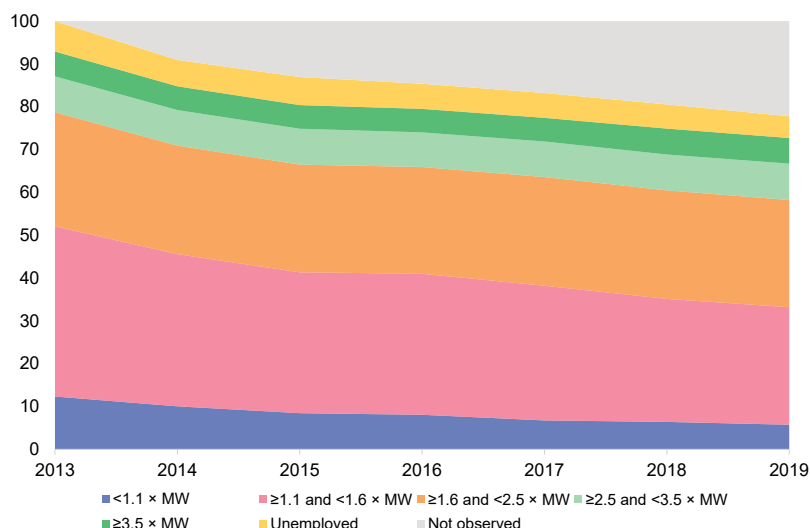
In 2013, less than one out of eight employees earned less than 1.1 × the statutory minimum wage,

accounting for 12% of the total sample including both employed and unemployed individuals that year. More than one-third of employees earned between 1.1 and 1.6 × the statutory minimum wage, and just over a quarter were paid between 1.6 and 2.5 × (see Chart 1). The share of employees in the highest-paid category was lower. Lastly, 7% of the individuals in the sample were unemployed in 2013.

Over time, a significant share of individuals falls outside the scope of observation: by 2019, 22% of the initial sample was no longer observed. Such cases can be explained by various factors (a transition into inactivity or retirement, a prolonged period of unemployment lasting more than a year, a shift to self-employment, or relocation abroad).

Aside from this attrition phenomenon, the distribution of wage status shifted progressively towards higher-income categories over the years. A significant proportion of the individuals observed thus experienced upward wage mobility, consistent with their increased professional experience. By 2019, more than one in five employees were in a higher wage bracket than in 2013.

Chart 1: Status distribution by year



Source: 2021 All Employees Panel. DG Trésor calculations.

Scope: 28,603 employees randomly selected in 2013 from the All Employees Panel, among individuals aged between 15 and 64 in 2013 ("2013 All Employees sample").

How to read this chart: MW= minimum wage. In the sample, 12% of employees were minimum wage earners in 2013. Six years later in 2019, 6% of the sample were minimum wage earners and 22% were no longer observed.

Only a minority of individuals continued to earn close to the minimum wage over the entire period considered. Half of the minimum wage earners in 2013 had moved up to a higher wage bracket by 2019 (mainly to the 1.1-1.6 × range). A quarter of them were no longer observed and almost 8% were unemployed. Lastly, just over 1% of individuals continued to earn close to the minimum wage every year throughout the study period.

However, low-salary stagnation, in terms of position on the pay scale, affects a larger proportion of employees. According to a 2024 study by the National Institute of Statistics and Economic Studies (INSEE),¹ 46% of private-sector employees who were in the 20% of lowest incomes in 2011 were still in this position in 2019. Notably, 13% of them had remained so throughout the period. Conversely, 43% had moved permanently away from low income by 2019.

1.2 Between 2013 and 2019, minimum wage earners saw their salaries rise more than other employees

Tracking the sample's wage trajectories between 2013 and 2019 shows that they were predominantly stable from one year to the next (see Table 1). More than half of individuals were still in the same wage bracket one year later. On average, minimum wage earners had a 52% chance of remaining at the same salary level the following year. However, they were also more likely to become unemployed than other wage groups.

Nevertheless, minimum wage earners in 2013 experienced the strongest wage growth over the period. Half of them saw their earnings increase by at least 36% between 2013 and 2019 (see Table 2). In comparison, employees earning between 2.5 and 3.5 × the minimum wage in 2013 had a median wage increase of only 14% over the same period.

Table 1: Status transition matrix

		Year t+1						
		<1.1 × MW	≥1.1 and <1.6 × MW	≥1.6 and <2.5 × MW	≥2.5 and <3.5 × MW	≥3.5 × MW	Unemployed	Not observed
Year t	<1.1 × MW	0.52	0.27	0.03	0.01	0.00	0.08	0.09
	≥1.1 and <1.6 × MW	0.05	0.73	0.11	0.00	0.00	0.05	0.06
	≥1.6 and <2.5 × MW	0.01	0.09	0.77	0.07	0.01	0.02	0.04
	≥2.5 and <3.5 × MW	0.00	0.01	0.11	0.70	0.11	0.01	0.05
	≥3.5 × MW	0.00	0.01	0.02	0.08	0.79	0.01	0.08
	Unemployed	0.08	0.25	0.06	0.01	0.00	0.37	0.22
	Not observed	0.03	0.07	0.02	0.00	0.00	0.05	0.81

Source: 2021 All Employees Panel. DG Trésor calculations.

Scope: 28,603 employees randomly selected in 2013 from the All Employees Panel, among individuals aged between 15 and 64 in 2013 ("2013 All Employees sample").

How to read this chart: MW = minimum wage. Between 2013 and 2019, for an employee earning less than 1.1 × the statutory minimum wage in year t, the average probability of remaining in this wage bracket the following year is 52%.

The wage brackets shown are not the same size. The probabilities of moving to a higher salary level do not take into account salary increases within wage brackets (e.g. an employee moving from 1.1 to 1.3 × the statutory minimum wage). As no individual was unobserved in 2013, the average probability of moving from unobserved status (in year t) to another status (in year t+1) is calculated over the period 2014-2019.

(1) INSEE (2024), "Dans le secteur privé, la moitié des salariés qui avaient un bas revenu salarial en 2011 sont dans la même situation 8 ans plus tard", Emploi, Chômage et Revenus du travail, 2024 edition (in French only).

Table 2: Median wage increase between 2013 and 2019, according to wage bracket in 2013

<1.1 × MW	≥1.1 and <1.6 × MW	≥1.6 and <2.5 × MW	≥2.5 and <3.5 × MW	≥3.5 × MW	Unemployed
36%	16%	14%	14%	14%	9%

Source: 2021 All Employees Panel. DG Trésor calculations.

Scope: 22,167 employees whose salary was observed in 2013 and 2019 from a sample of 28,603 employees randomly selected in 2013 from the All Employees Panel, among individuals aged between 15 and 64 in 2013 ("2013 All Employees sample").

How to read this chart: MW = minimum wage. Half of the individuals earning less than 1.1 × the statutory minimum wage in 2013 saw their salaries rise by at least 36% between 2013 and 2019.

Box 1: Data and methodology

Data and definition of labour market statuses

This study is based on data from the All Employees Panel from the National Institute of Statistics and Economic Studies (INSEE) over the period 2013 to 2021. The database is a representative sample of all employees (excluding agricultural workers), i.e. employees working in the private sector, for government-owned companies, for the civil service and those employed by private individuals. The panel was established by combining data from the annual social data declaration (DADS), the single staff reporting statement (DSN)^a and government payroll files. Those on unemployment benefit appear in the panel if they had at least one period of employment in the previous year. The panel represents a sample of around one-twelfth of all employees. Several situations may lead some individuals to fall out of the scope: a transition into inactivity or retirement, a prolonged period of unemployment lasting more than a year, a shift to self-employment, or relocation abroad. Hence, any income that may be received outside the scope is not accounted for.

Out of more than three million employees in the All Employees Panel in 2013, an initial sub-sample of around 30,000 employees (called the 2013 All Employees sample) is randomly drawn in 2013. The individuals in the sample were categorised according to their average annual gross hourly wage expressed as a multiple of the statutory minimum wage. This sample is representative of all individuals aged 15 to 64 in the All Employees Panel in 2013, in terms of age, gender and average annual gross hourly wage.

The average annual gross hourly wage is calculated as the total gross wage received by an individual divided by the number of hours worked during the year. To take account of periods of unemployment and unobserved periods, an "Unemployed" status is assigned to individuals who were mostly on unemployment benefit during the year (more than six months, i.e. 910 hours in the year) and "Unobserved" status to those who were completely unobserved during the year. For other individuals, five salary categories were created, based on their average gross hourly wage expressed as a multiple of the statutory minimum wage: less than 1.1 ×; at least 1.1 and strictly less than 1.6 ×; at least 1.6 and strictly less than 2.5 ×; at least 2.5 and strictly less than 3.5 ×; and more than or equal to 3.5 ×. The "less than 1.1 ×" status corresponds to individuals defined as minimum wage earners.

A second sub-sample of approximately 30,000 employees ("minimum wage earners sample") was then randomly drawn from the 360,000 employees in the All Employees Panel paid less than 1.1 × the statutory minimum wage in 2013. This sample is representative of all individuals aged 15 to 64 in the All Employees Panel who were minimum wage earners in 2013, in terms of age, gender and average annual gross hourly wage. This is the reference sample for analysing wage trajectories of minimum wage earners. The employees in this second sub-sample were categorised into the same statuses as the first sub-sample.

a. Single staff reporting statements (DSNs) centralise employers' monthly administrative statements for their employees. They provide data on the type of job and the remuneration received by each employee. Since 2016, DSNs have replaced annual social data declarations (DADSs).

Methodology used

This work is based on a method known as sequential analysis, enabling the study of longitudinal data, i.e. observations of the same group of individuals over time. This type of method generally aims to identify recurring patterns in sequences of events, and to gain a better understanding of their causes and consequences.

After creating a status timeline, by assigning each individual a status on the labour market for each year (see above), the wage trajectory sequences were compared using Optimal Matching.^b This allows similar trajectories to be identified.

Lastly, the trajectories were grouped using a classification algorithm called “ascending hierarchical classification”. This method involves gradually merging them into a smaller and smaller number of clusters. Ward’s method was used to form homogeneous clusters by minimising the differences (variance) within each cluster and maximising those between clusters. The optimum number of clusters was determined by analysing the variance within the clusters at each stage: the aim was to optimise the consistency of the clusters while limiting their number.

b. This method measures the difference between two trajectories by counting the minimum number of changes (adding, deleting or replacing an event) required to transform one sequence into another.

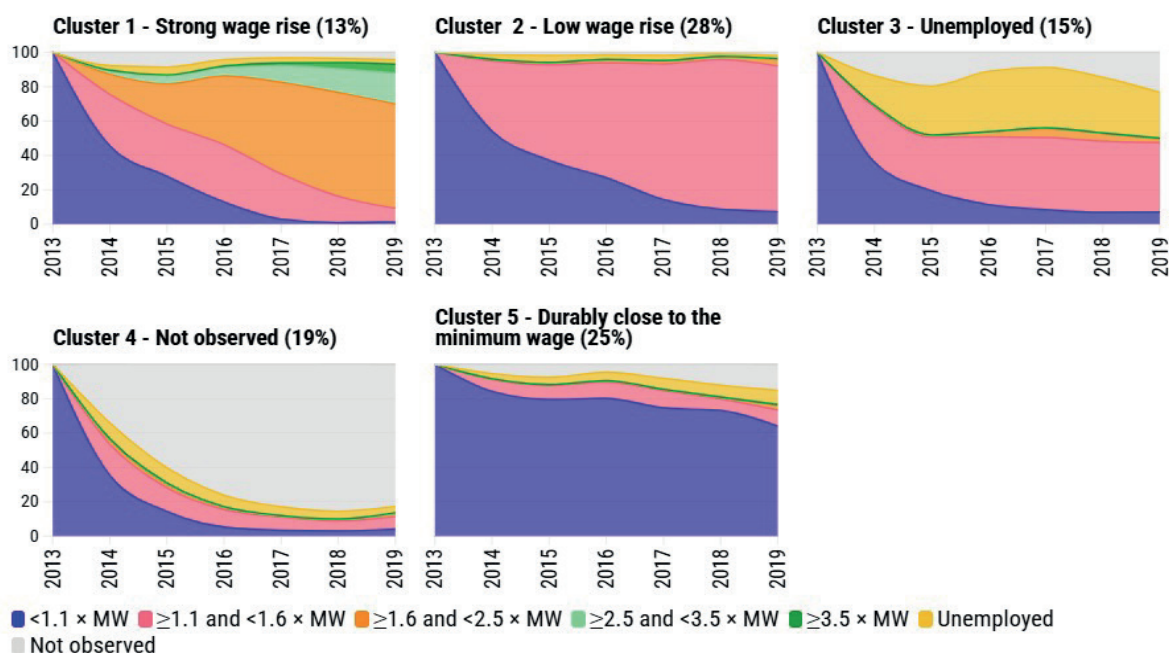
2. Which individuals continue to earn close to the minimum wage over time?

2.1 Minimum wage earners in 2013 had diverse trajectories

Wage trajectories of minimum wage earners in 2013 are diverse: some experienced rapid upward wage mobility, while others remained at that level for a longer period, and still others experienced several episodes

of unemployment over the period observed. Certain individual characteristics are more strongly associated with specific trajectories. Using a clustering algorithm to group employees into relatively homogenous clusters, five main trajectory types were identified among minimum wage earners (see Chart 2).

Chart 2: Distribution of status by year for each cluster



Source: 2021 All Employees Panel. DG Trésor calculations.

Scope: 29,997 employees randomly selected in 2013 from the All Employees Panel, among individuals aged 15 to 64 who earned less than 1.1 × the statutory minimum wage in 2013 (“minimum wage earners sample”).

How to read this chart: MW = minimum wage. Among the cluster of long term minimum wage earners, 84% were still earning close to the minimum wage the following year in 2014. Six years later, in 2019, 64% were still minimum wage earners.

A large proportion of the minimum wage earners in 2013 experienced upward wage mobility (41%). Among these, two groups can be distinguished. The first group (13%) experienced a sharp rise in salary, with more than 8 out of 10 individuals earning at least $1.6 \times$ the statutory minimum wage by 2019. This group mainly comprises young people, executives and full-time workers. A second group (28%) experienced a lower wage progression, with almost 70% being paid between 1.1 and $1.6 \times$ the statutory minimum wage for four years or more out of the seven years observed. Women, manual workers and clerical staff are over-represented in this group.

One cluster is characterised by having experienced one or more episodes of unemployment during the period (15%). Within this cluster, more than three-quarters of employees spent at least one year unemployed, and 11% were unemployed for four years or more between 2014 and 2019. Apart from these periods of unemployment, 89% of them were paid between 1.1 and $1.6 \times$ the statutory minimum wage for at least one year, and 18% for at least four years. Employees aged 55 to 64, clerical staff, part-time employees and employees in the retail sector are more likely to belong to this cluster than other workers.

Another cluster was characterised by long periods of non-observation (19%). Around a quarter of these employees were senior workers (aged 55-64) who presumably left the labour market: all other things being equal, they are eight times more likely to belong to this cluster than an employee aged 25-54. Men, clerical staff, employees in the agricultural and construction sectors and part-time employees are also more likely to belong to this cluster than other employees.

Lastly, a group of minimum wage earners in 2013 remained durably at this level throughout the period (25%). Among this cluster, more than nine out of ten individuals remained close to the minimum wage for four years or more.

2.2 Certain individual characteristics are associated with a greater likelihood of remaining close to the minimum wage in the long term

All other things being equal, women, clerical staff and service sector employees are more likely to belong to this fifth cluster, i.e. to remain durably close to the statutory minimum wage in the long term (see Table 3):

- Women are 1.2 times more likely than men to find themselves in the cluster of long term minimum wage earners.
- Clerical staff and manual workers are more than twice as likely to be in this situation than “other” socio-professional categories, and almost six times more likely than executives.
- Employees in the service sector are 2.2 times more likely than those in industry and 1.6 times more likely than those in retail to remain close to the statutory minimum wage in the long term.

These results are consistent with a study by the French Ministry of Labour’s Directorate for Research, Studies and Statistics (DARES) and DG Trésor (2018)² on wage trajectories between 2005 and 2013.

(2) Four socio-professional categories were used for this study: clerical staff, executives, manual workers and others (an aggregate category that includes farmers, craftspersons, shopkeepers and intermediate professions such as teachers, technicians and supervisors).

Table 3: Binomial logistic regression of the probability of belonging to a wage trajectory cluster for minimum wage earners in 2013

Characteristic	Cluster 1	Cluster 2	Cluster 3	Cluster 4	Cluster 5
	Strong wage rise	Low wage rise	Unemployed	Not observed	Durably close to the minimum wage
Constant	0.13***	0.47***	0.18***	0.17***	0.40***
Gender					
Male	<i>Ref.</i>	<i>Ref.</i>	<i>Ref.</i>	<i>Ref.</i>	<i>Ref.</i>
Female	0.71***	1.15***	0.98	0.79***	1.17***
Age range					
25-54	<i>Ref.</i>	<i>Ref.</i>	<i>Ref.</i>	<i>Ref.</i>	<i>Ref.</i>
15-24	2.33***	1.05***	1.13***	0.64***	0.58***
55-64	0.39***	0.27***	1.37***	8.02***	0.84***
Socio-professional category					
Clerical staff	<i>Ref.</i>	<i>Ref.</i>	<i>Ref.</i>	<i>Ref.</i>	<i>Ref.</i>
Executives	17.33***	0.15***	0.32***	0.61***	0.18***
Manual workers	0.49***	1.19***	1.05*	0.99	1.06***
Other	3.41***	0.81***	0.74***	0.83***	0.48***
Sector of activity					
Services	<i>Ref.</i>	<i>Ref.</i>	<i>Ref.</i>	<i>Ref.</i>	<i>Ref.</i>
Agriculture	1.01	1.10*	0.98	1.78***	0.69***
Industry	2.15***	1.20***	1.00	0.88**	0.46***
Construction	1.47***	1.17***	0.94	1.17**	0.67***
Retail	1.05*	1.42***	1.19***	0.77***	0.64***
Working hours					
Full-time contract	<i>Ref.</i>	<i>Ref.</i>	<i>Ref.</i>	<i>Ref.</i>	<i>Ref.</i>
Part-time contract	0.55***	0.95***	1.32***	1.77***	0.91***
Seniority (in years)	0.98***	1.03***	0.86***	0.86***	1.06***
Change of job					
No change of job	<i>Ref.</i>	<i>Ref.</i>	<i>Ref.</i>	<i>Ref.</i>	<i>Ref.</i>
At least one change of job	1.05*	1.01	0.93***	0.52***	1.27***

Source: 2021 All Employees Panel. DG Trésor calculations.

Scope: 29,997 employees randomly selected in 2013 from the All Employees Panel, among individuals aged 15 to 64 who earned less than 1.1 × the statutory minimum wage in 2013 ("minimum wage earners sample").

How to read this chart: The "Other" socio-professional category includes farmers, craftsmen, shopkeepers and the intermediate professions.

The coefficients are given as odds ratios and correspond to the probability of belonging to the cluster compared with the reference category. An odds ratio greater than 1 thus indicates a higher probability, given the characteristic studied, of belonging to the cluster compared with the reference characteristic (all other things being equal). In other words, a woman is 1.17 times more likely than a man to belong to the cluster of "long term minimum wage earners".

***Coefficient significant at the 0.1% level, **coefficient significant at the 1% level, *coefficient significant at the 5% level.

2.3 Other factors, in particular the economic context, can influence the probability of remaining close to the statutory minimum wage

During the 2008 financial crisis, the prospect of minimum wage earners moving up the pay scale or staying in work deteriorated (DARES and DG Trésor, 2018).³ Using data on employees from 2005 to 2013, the DARES and DG Trésor study shows that the probability of a minimum wage earner being unemployed five quarters later increased more sharply than for other employees during the 2008 crisis (up by 2.5 percentage points for minimum wage earners, compared with a 0.9 point increase for all employees). In addition, minimum wage earners who did not experience a period of unemployment during the crisis saw their salary prospects deteriorate: the probability of them earning more than 1.05 × the statutory minimum wage five quarters later fell from 43% before the crisis to 39% thereafter. However, a study on labour market insertion of employees during the crisis (INSEE, 2021), suggests that in the longer term, an unfavourable economic climate at the time of entering the labour market does not have a lasting negative impact on salary.⁴ suggests that in the longer term, an unfavourable economic climate at the time of entering the labour market does not have a lasting negative impact on salary.

An initial analysis of wage trajectories during the COVID-19 pandemic shows no impact from short-time working (see Box 2). Resorting to short-time work during the pandemic may have limited its negative effects on wage trajectories, particularly for minimum wage earners. On the other hand, a higher proportion of employees subject to short-time work arrangements in 2020 found themselves unemployed the following year, compared with employees who continued to work full time in 2020. However, these preliminary

observations need to be confirmed using data covering a longer period, to check for sectoral effects and to analyse subsequent wage trajectories for employees who became unemployed after a period of short-time work.

In addition, the economic literature highlights a persistence effect among minimum wage earners. Thus, the longer an employee remains at this pay level, the more likely it is that this situation will persist over time (DARES, 2019).⁵ According to DARES, on average between 1995 and 2015, two-thirds of periods during which employees were paid at the minimum wage level lasted no more than one year, and less than 10% lasted more than three years. However, the probability of remaining close to the minimum wage increases with the time spent at this pay level. An employee who has been earning the statutory minimum wage or close to it for three years has a one in two chance of being paid at a higher wage level the following year, but this probability falls to one in three after five years at the same pay level.

Lastly, a comparison of the wage trajectories of several generations of employees confirms the importance of the economic context and qualifications on salary levels (INSEE, 2021).⁶ According to INSEE, the average level of education and different economic contexts (slowdown in economic growth, changes in structural unemployment) may have had an effect on employees' careers and wage trajectories. For employees born between 1940 and 1980, salaries rose by an average of 1% to 2% a year in real terms over their entire career. On the other hand, the chances of moving up the salary scale over the course of a career are generally low, and have changed little over time. An individual's position on the salary scale for their generation (expressed in deciles, from 1 to 10) at the end of their career is often close to their position when they first entered the labour market.

(3) DARES and DG Trésor (2018), op. cit.

(4) INSEE (2021), "Wages of the Employees Born between 1940 and 1980: Differentiated Impacts of the Economic Situation and Qualification on Wage Trajectories", *INSEE Références*, p. 47.

(5) DARES (2019), "La conjoncture du marché du travail au 4e trimestre 2018, Focus: les salariés rémunérés au salaire minimum: une minorité le reste durablement", from the Smic expert group report of 29 November 2018 (in French only).

(6) INSEE (2021), op. cit.

Box 2: Wage trajectories during the COVID-19 pandemic (2019-2021)

To study wage trajectories during the COVID-19 pandemic, a third sub-sample of approximately 30,000 employees ("2019 All Employees sample") was drawn at random from all employees in 2019.

This sample is representative of all individuals aged 15 to 64 in the All Employees Panel in 2019, in terms of age, gender and average annual gross hourly wage. The employees in this sub-sample were categorised using the same statuses as for the other two sub-samples. An additional status ("Short-time work") was then assigned to individuals who had spent more than a quarter of the year in short-time work. In this box, employees in short-time work refer to individuals with short-time work status.

For this sample in 2019, the breakdown of employees by status is quite similar to that of the 2013 All Employees sample: 13% were earning less than $1.1 \times$ the statutory minimum wage, 39% were paid between 1.1 and $1.6 \times$, and 26% between 1.6 and $2.5 \times$.

In 2020, 6% of employees in the sample were in short-time work, i.e. for more than a quarter of the year.

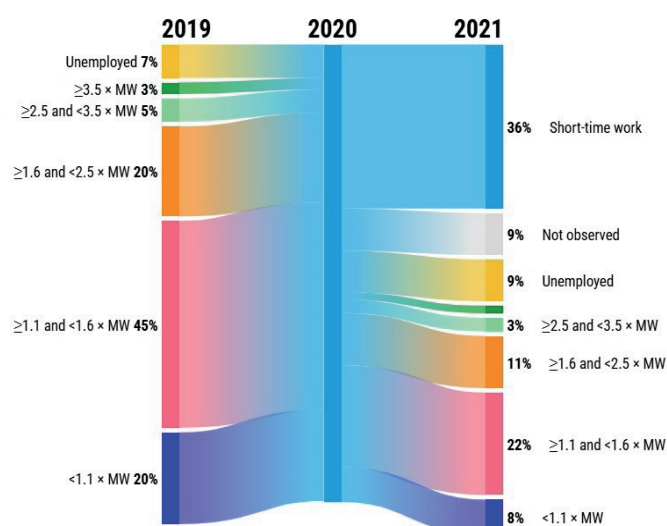
Almost two-thirds of employees in short-time work in 2020 were no longer in this situation the following year. Hence, only 36% of employees in short-time work the previous year were still in this situation in 2021. In total, 3% of employees in the sample were still in short-time work in 2021.

Between 2020 and 2021, the average probability of short-time working was higher for employees at the lower end of the pay scale in 2019. For a minimum wage earner in 2019, the average probability of short-time working in 2020 and/or 2021 was twice as high as for an employee earning between 1.6 and $2.5 \times$ the statutory minimum wage in 2019, and three times higher than for an employee earning between 2.5 and $3.5 \times$ the statutory minimum wage in 2019.

These differences can be explained in particular by the greater impact of the pandemic on low-paid workers, who were over-represented in the sectors most affected by the pandemic (e.g. catering, household services) and in jobs where working from home was difficult or impossible.^a

However, the likelihood of wage progression did not seem to be affected by a period of short-time work. Among individuals in the sample who were not unemployed in 2019 and who were in short-time work in 2020, more than 60% were no longer in this situation the following year. Among the latter, 17% of those who ceased short-time work in 2021 saw an increase in salary compared with 2019, a proportion equivalent to that of employees in the sample who were not in short-time work in 2020 (16%). On the other hand, the risk of becoming unemployed appeared to be greater for those ceasing short-time work: among employees who were not unemployed in 2019, who were in short-time work in 2020 and who were no longer in this situation in 2021, a higher proportion found themselves unemployed in 2021 (12% compared with 4% for employees who were not unemployed in 2019 and who were not in short-time work in 2020).

Chart 3: Trajectories between 2019 and 2021 for employees in short-time work in 2020



Source: 2021 All Employees Panel. DG Trésor calculations.

Scope: 1,789 employees in short-time work in 2020, among the 29,749 employees randomly selected in 2019 from all panel employees aged 15 to 64 in 2019 ("2019 All Employees sample").

How to read this chart: 20% of employees in short-time work in 2020 were minimum wage earners the previous year, and 36% of employees in short-time work in 2020 were still in this situation in 2021.

a. INSEE (2021), "Avec le dispositif de chômage partiel, les revenus professionnels des salariés n'ont, en moyenne, pas baissé en 2020", Emploi, chômage, revenus du travail, INSEE Références, p. 22, 2021 edition (in French only).

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