Do second home owners only play a secondary role in coastal territories?
A case study in Charente-Maritime (France)

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to enlighten the role second home owners can play within the dynamic of touristic coastal territories. Under the rising globalization, coastal zones are generally concerned with an important economic and demographic attractiveness. Second homes play a major part in this coastal pressure, first of all because of their number. In many cities, not only second homes form an important part of the housing stock, but they also represent numerous touristic accommodations and contribute to the local economy. Second homes owners are a hybrid population: somewhere between inhabitants and tourists, they are an example of new arts of dwelling and the mobility in our modern societies. They are also a subject of
considerable debate and controversy. We assume that, far from being “secondary”, this population takes a full part in their territories dynamics, especially in coastal and touristic zones.

Our research group has conducted a methodological reflection in order to launch a pioneering study about second homes owners’ habits in Charente-Maritime. France being the first destination of international tourism, Charente-Maritime is the second touristic region in the country in terms of visits. As tourism represents the first economy in Charente-Maritime, the study leans on a significant partnership between La Rochelle University and local institutional and economic stakeholders. Thanks to this study, an important database has been built, and will be broadened in 2014 as the survey extends to all territories of Charente-Maritime. This paper presents some of first results.

Keywords
Second Home Owners, Tourism, Coastal Zone, Attractiveness, Arts Of Dwelling, France

1. Introduction

In a context of globalization, coastlines are mostly characterised by their high economic and demographic attractiveness. Among the populations present, second home owners occupy a particular place and belong to an emerging category namely multiresidents (McIntyre N., Williams D.R., McHugh K.E., 2006), among whom they are distinct insofar as their mobility is linked to leisure (Hesse & Scheiner, 2007, quoted by Duchêne-Lacroix, 2013: 156).

Although they fully participate in the residential and tourist attractiveness of coastal areas (more than a million second homes on the French coast), they are also the subject of considerable debate and controversy. Often associated with a pejorative image of "closed shutters" or "empty beds" and deemed guilty of unfairly competing with commercial accommodation, this is a population which is both residential and tourist (Sacareau, Vacher, Vye, 2010), an expression of the new arts of dwelling in our contemporary societies (Stock, 2006). Via his status as home owner, the secondary resident “lives, resides and is rooted in a place” (Dubost, 1998: 12) but is also a "passer-through who resides and a resident who passes through" (Urbain 2002: 516) defined by his spatial mobility between here and elsewhere. This duality lies at the origin of questions about the impact of this population's presence on territories: are they a "blessing" or a "curse" (Coppock, 1977) to the extent that they bring change such as rising house prices, gentrification, tensions with the "local" populations? (Dubost, 1995; Müller D.K. & Hoogendoorn G., 2013; Paris, 2009; Brida et al., 2011; Gallent et al., 2005). These tensions with local populations would also appear to be generated by two opposing visions of regional development, one specific to permanent residents who are more favourable to economic development, another specific to second home owners, who prefer the status quo and are defenders of preservation within an idealised environment (Müller, 2002; Overvag & Berg, 2011). Stigmatisation can also be fuelled by the notion that the second home is a distinctive sign of elite populations (Pinçon & Pinçon-Charlot, 1989) whose acquisition strategies sometimes permit tax evasion (Paris, 2011). Faced with this somewhat accusative discourse, a more harmonious relationship between secondary residents and host territories can be demonstrated (Hall & Müller, 2004; Roca, 2013; Müller & Hoogendoorn, 2013) emphasising the recurrence of occupancy and loyalty towards the territory (Urbain, 2002). Furthermore, "local populations" and "secondary residents" are not categories which are always in opposition since, faced with regional development, they can join forces as part of a NIMBY mindset (Farstad & Rye, 2013). Moreover, even if second home owners belong to social groups which are higher up the scale than the national average (Atout France, 2010), we are witnessing a democartisation of the acquisition of second homes (Módenes & López-Colás, 2007). However, this opposition must be qualified to the extent that most studies covering attachment in the places concern rural areas (Clout, 1971; Hoggart & Buller, 2006).
1995; Perrot & La Soudière, 1998; Urbain, 2002), whose residential and tourist attractiveness is less marked than on the coasts. Coastal gentrification is as much related to the increase in permanent residents (Buhot, 2009; Marjavaara, 2007) as the arrival of secondary residents, some of whom may become permanent residents in the future (Duhamel, 2000; Cribier, 1994; Bésingrand, 2005). Finally, regarding the economic impact, second home owners are considered to be populations which make a significant contribution to the in-place economy of the territories (Davezies 2009).

We therefore hypothesise that, far from being "secondary", this category of players fully participates in the dynamics of coastal and tourist territories. Are they really less rooted in a place than a principal resident when they are by definition owners, which is far from being the case for all of the year-round residents? Is this particular act of putting down roots reflected in a specific investment in the territory of the second home? By accommodating their entourage, is it not the case that the second home owner is also playing a role in the attractiveness and promotion of the tourist destination?

To answer these questions, we will build on the results of a survey conducted by the University of La Rochelle in partnership with local institutions and businesses in 10 communes along the Charente coastline (figure 1). Firstly, we will describe the context of this study, the methodology used and the scientific value of the main themes selected. In a second step, we will present and interpret the initial findings in order to assess in what way second home owners are effectively full participants in coastal tourist areas.

2. Methodology

Despite a sharp revival in interest since the late 1990s, especially in the English-language literature (Hall & Müller, 2004; McIntyre, Williams, McHugh, 2006; Roca, 2013), the relationship between owners of second homes and their host territory remains poorly understood (Duchêne-Lacroix, 2013 Bonnin & Villanova, 1999). This is particularly true for the relationship with the environment, which for some peculiar reason has been little studied (Müller & Hoogendoorn, 2013). The rare French-language studies have primarily been conducted in the context of international tourism mobility (Duhamel, 2000) or concerning a particular category of the population, especially the retired (Cribier, 1994). The few recent studies on the French coast tend to focus on property (Aguer & Vergeau, 2009; Lefèvre & Frayssinet, 2011) or on the analysis of regional disparities in this phenomenon (Zaninetti in Roca, 2013). The same goes for grey literature whose approach remains more quantitative (CRT Nord-Pas-de-Calais, 2011; Atout France, 2010; CDT Ardèche, 2006, CCI Alençon, 2010). Although a number of surveys covering multiresidency are underway such as the Family and Housing survey conducted by INSEE and INED in 2011, these are not focused on second home owners nor on coastal areas. Yet, only surveys of owners can provide a detailed and nuanced interpretation of their uses and their representations (Roca, 2013). However, these surveys or interviews are difficult to conduct because of this population’s intermittent presence in the territory, which may limit the size of the sample (Brida et al., 2011). The study launched in Charente-Maritime in 2012 and completed in 2013 endeavoured to rise to the challenge.

2.1 Context of the study

This study builds on previous research conducted at the “departmental” level. In 2008, use of FILOCOM data was initiated by Charente-Maritime Tourism (CMT) in partnership with INSEE and the Poitou-Charentes Region. It resulted in the publication in 2009 of factsheets presenting the situation of second homes in the French word for “Municipality”.

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2 CRT= Comité Régional du Tourisme (Regional Tourism Committee). CDT= Comité Départemental du Tourisme (Tourism Committee at the “Departement” level). CCI=Chambre de Commerce et d’Industrie (Trade And Industry Chamber).


4 The Departement is the third level of French Territorial Administration (Level 1= State, Level 2 =Region).

5 FILOCOM : Fichier des Logements par COMmune (Housing files for each municipalities)

department and in the region. This study focused on the second home as a property and its characteristics (location, number, changes, profile). It shows that the base of second homes in the department has expanded faster than the national average, underlining the attractiveness of certain areas such as the Île de Ré, the Marennes-Oléron sector and the Royan area where the proportion of second homes in the housing stock is significant at 54%, 47% and 43% respectively. This increase was still visible between 2007 and 2010 - Figure 1. Indeed, there was a rise from 73,000 second homes in the department in 2007, i.e. 21% of the total housing stock, to 89,000 second homes (24% of the total housing stock).

Figure 1 - The presence of second homes on the Charente coast (France) in 2010

This preliminary study therefore justified our choice of field. However, although this research highlighted the significant presence of second homes in the provision of tourist accommodation, it did not enable the scale of this practice in the local tourism system to be highlighted. In fact, the study did not detail the profile of owners nor the uses they make of their property (occupancy, lending, leasing, tourism practices, etc.). Yet these data provide an insight into the tourism systems and the activities of players who drive them. It is also possible to assess the role of second home owners in the in-place economy and to tailor the policies or actions of regional development and so better meet the needs of this population, especially in terms of services or activities.
The study was therefore born out of a convergence of interests between institutional players, local authorities and researchers at the University of La Rochelle (ULR). In 2012, the University of La Rochelle teamed up with Charente-Maritime Tourisme (CMT), the Chambre de Commerce et d’Industrie of La Rochelle (CCILR) and that of Rochefort-Saintonge (CCIRS) to investigate second home owners and uses of their property. In fact, owners are the people who theoretically know most about use of their property by themselves but also by others (lending or leasing).

The themes selected, in agreement with the various partners, were as follows:

- perception of quality of life (value assigned to the property and satisfaction gained);
- practices and consumption of the owner (occupancy, activities performed, expenditure);
- description of the property (location, sleeping capacity);
- socio-economic profile of owners, with particular attention paid to their motivation in becoming owner of this property.

2.2 Giving secondary residents a voice: a methodological challenge to be met

The first phase of the survey entailed contacting the owners by post, while asking them for their telephone number for participation in the second phase. To ensure its effectiveness, the postal survey could not have too many questions; the telephone survey aimed to flesh out the responses obtained by post, addressing more sensitive or more complex issues.

Contacting owners by post raises at least two questions: the choice of address (the secondary or principal home?) and the period when the letter is sent out, bearing in mind that the aim is to ensure the best possible rate of return for the survey. The choice of principal home seemed more relevant to the extent that the Atout France study revealed a figure of 30 nights of occupancy on average by the owner. For practical reasons and representativeness, only owners whose principal home is located in France were surveyed. They represent the majority of the target population and in 2007, 95% of the stock of second homes in Charente-Maritime belonged to this group (Observatoire des clientèles CMT, 2008). The postal contact period (mid-June) avoided the major school holidays in France, when the owners would have been absent.

To determine the principal home of the owners, two possibilities were tested. The first approach entailed cross analysing the files of the digital land register (MAJIC III) and that of property tax. This cross analysis made it necessary to filter out owners of multiple residences, as well as to retain only one owner for co-owned residences. The second possibility was to use the file for the household waste collection tax, which lists all second homes for which a single owner is identified. However, this type of file is not available in all communes. In the end, a substantial effort to combine the results obtained via these two methods made it possible to establish a list of addresses of owners of principal homes sampled according to a geographic origin criterion.

At the end of this postal survey, the telephone survey was intended to flesh out the initial answers given by the respondents agreeing to be called. It was therefore necessary to consolidate the answers by the same owner to the postal and telephone questionnaires within a single database for conducting the telephone interview on the basis of responses provided by post. The database and the software for the telephone survey developed for this purpose were then used to cross analyse the results of these two surveys.

At the same time, focus groups were organised in one of the test communes (Châtelaillon-Plage). Two groups totalling 17 people (14 households) were brought together in July 2013 for more than two hours so they could express themselves freely.

We therefore combined a quantitative and qualitative approach in order to better identify profiles, practices and representations.
2.3 The success of the study: second home owners pleased to be given a voice?

Questionnaires were sent out in ten test communes selected for their representativeness in respect of the different territorial contexts of the Charente coast: mainland or island coastline, tourist resorts whether or not part of an urban area (Figure 1).

The decision to give owners a voice proved a success: second home owners showed a willingness to express themselves through a high rate of return (34%) but also through the addition of verbatim contributions or even letters accompanying the questionnaire on its return. Of the 12,919 questionnaires sent out, 4,662 were collected of which 4,648 were judged usable and were duly processed. 1,487 respondents wished to be contacted by phone to continue the exchange. More than 700 of them were able to be contacted and continued to express their views. The focus groups also met with considerable success. It is worth noting that the secondary residents were responsive in respect of this study. This population, which is said to shine more by its absence than by its presence in the territories, seems to belie these stereotypes. Should we not then conclude that they are not such "secondary" players after all and that they feel an investment in the place where their property is located? We will try to offer some answers to this question.

3. Analysis of results

To verify that the secondary residents are full participants in the functioning of the coastal tourist territory, we questioned them about their different forms of investment in it. The notion of investment, which broadly means "all that is spent for profit" (Brunet, 1992: 283) is primarily economic: acquiring a second home is firstly for owners a way to increase their property assets which their families may inherit. Once acquired, they will maintain their property, stay there regularly, consume goods and services so supporting the local economy of the tourist area. This economic dimension was part of the survey, but the focus here will be more on the results related to the emotional and social investment of the secondary resident.

3.1. The bond between the secondary resident and the tourist place

We wanted to assess a form of attachment to the territory, a topophilia (Yi-Fu Tuan, 1961, Stock, 2003), that is to say, the emotional bond between a person and a place. It is a place in which the individual feels good, a kind of "home" which they want to return to, where they have their habits, where they make an emotional investment. But what is the best way to gauge this attachment to the place by an individual as a second home owner?

We should start by restating the obvious: the location of the secondary residence is a place associated with holidays and leisure, thus, before becoming a property owner, the secondary resident has visited the place as a tourist many times. Our study shows that in 8 out of 10 communes, this is the primary reason cited for their familiarity with the place when acquiring their property. This figure, which is consistently above 40%, is particularly high in the popular tourist communes of Royan (Saint-Palais-sur-Mer and Saint-Georges-de-Didonne). Prior tourist experience could be a strong determinant in the acquisition of their second home. Moreover, in each of our communes surveyed, over 88% of respondents consider their second home to be a place of relaxation, a place to break free from the constraints of everyday life, a place of individual or collective "recreation" (MIT team, 2002), like any tourist place. In fact, the discourse on the break with the principal home's living environment came up regularly in the focus groups organised: staying at the second home permits "a change of air, a different pace of life, a chance to stroll leisurely to the market and walk back along the seafront"6.

It is also, for a vast majority of owners (61% to 84% depending on the commune), a place of reunion, especially family gatherings. In a context of increasing geographical dispersion of families, the second home emerges as "the centre of family life, making it possible to strengthen family ties, but also as a marker of

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6 An owner participating in Focus Group no. 1, 17 July 2013, Châtelaillon-Plage (Charente-Maritime).
In addition, home owners, who are mostly seniors (about half of them being aged between 60 and 74 years) regularly accommodate children and grandchildren. Topophilia can therefore be passed on from generation to generation, as confirmed by certain practices: children sometimes decide to choose the commune where their parents have a second home to get married; this is the case for at least 3 households participating in Châtelaillon-Plage focus groups. This practice can be a strong marker for setting down roots in the place. Furthermore, according to the home owners participating in focus groups, it is the children or grandchildren who justify the presence of the second home or the decision to keep it within the family fold.

Another criterion can be used to measure attachment to the place: the rhythms and timescales for stays. In particular, the fact of returning to the place for several years is a sign of strong attachment. Our investigation thus raised the question of the year in which the residence was acquired, even if the home owners may have been visiting the place for much longer, as a tourist or descendants of secondary or permanent residents. However, in 8 out of 10 communes, the secondary residents surveyed had been owners for longer than the national average, which is 15 years (Atout France, 2010). The average tenure was even 19 years in Ars-en-Ré and 23 years on the Île d’Aix. This average conceals an opposition between two categories of secondary residents. Firstly, the "new owners", that is to say the secondary residents who have acquired their property since 2001 i.e. approximately ten years. They illustrate the recent dynamics of the residential attractiveness of the Atlantic coast, in general, and the department of Charente-Maritime, in particular, and are the group most represented in nine out of our ten test communes, even accounting for half of all owners interviewed in three communes: Châtelaillon-Plage, La Tremblade and Saint-Denis-d’Oléron. This majority category coexists with the category of "rooted" residents, who have had their second home for at least one generation (before 1991 i.e. 22 years minimum). The latter represent up to a third of secondary residents in Ars-en-Ré (34%), Fouras (30%) or Saint-Georges-de-Didonne (32%).

3.2 Participation in local life

This concerns analysis of the different forms of participation by secondary home owners in local life. However, allowance should be made for a representativeness bias. In fact, merely by returning the questionnaire, respondents are demonstrating that they are more immediately concerned by and committed to collective action than the average population.

Participation in the life of an association is a good indicator of local investment by secondary residents. This level of investment is extremely interesting with one second home owner in four participating in an association in their commune of secondary residence in the majority of communes surveyed. This value is important because we can easily imagine that of the 45% of French citizens aged over 18 belonging to an association at national level (Prouteau & Wolff, 2013), most do so in the commune of their principal home. The profile of owners who are older and better educated than the national average (Atout France, 2010), partly compensates for the discontinuous presence in a place. Indeed, Prouteau and Wolff have shown that the propensity to be a member of an association increases significantly with age and the level of education. However, second home owners have an average age of 61 years as against 57 years for owners of principal homes (FILICOM, 2007), and 60% are over 60 years of age. In our survey, 70% of respondents were aged over 60.

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Data from the telephone survey (702 owners were called, 632 were used). Île d’Aix, where the number of respondents was too low, was excluded from analysis of the survey.
In most communes surveyed, over 40% of members of a local association participated in a home-owner association, a type of structure intended to defend rights and interests, which is a much higher proportion than at the national level (12.5% for Proutau & Wolff, 2013). Moreover, 20% of secondary residents in the survey are members of organisations which work to protect the environment and heritage. The proportion of members in home-owner associations is often inversely proportional to the proportion of members of environmental protection associations. In fact, in the surveyed communes on the Île d’Oléron, where 50% of membership of associations concerns the defence of the interests of owners, environmental protection associations represent less than 20% of memberships. However, in the two communes of the Île de Ré where "green" associations are better represented (25 to 36% of membership), home-owner associations are less popular (less than 20% of memberships). However, secondary residents surveyed on the Île d’Oléron seem more concerned than their counterparts on the Île de Ré about environmental protection in the commune hosting their second home: 17 to 19% were not at all satisfied by the environmental protection in the communes of Oléron whereas this figure was 8% in both Île de Ré communes and the proportion of "very satisfied" which reached 13% on Ré was below 5% on Oléron. Strangely, membership of environmental associations seems to develop when the situation for heritage protection stabilises, whereas when this aspect is problematic, it tends to find expression through the more general question of defending the owner’s interests.

Although involvement in local associations is significant, the assertion of involvement in the life of the commune of the secondary residence is more so. For all communes surveyed, people saying they were as much or more involved in their commune of secondary residence in relation to their principal home represented between 25 and 55% of respondents. For the communes surveyed on the Île de Ré and Île d’Oléron, the proportion was consistently greater than 50%. These values demonstrate a willingness to be considered as a real player in the territory.

3.3 Contribution of the attractiveness of the tourist area

Second home owners have a key role in the dynamics of attractiveness through the welcome and the image they offer of the place. Non-commercial accommodation in France is the leading form of tourist accommodation, accounting for 66.7% of overnight stays in 2013. Although, in this value, overnight stays in the household’s secondary residence accounted for 16.8%, staying with relatives and friends in France made up 47.8% of overnight stays (DGCIS, 2013) i.e. almost half of all tourist overnight stays. A portion of these nights concerned the principal homes of family and friends (Blondy, Vacher, Vye, 2013), but a significant portion also took advantage of their second home, especially in tourist areas.

On the Charente coast, only 2% of second home owners said they never “welcome visitors” to their property while one in two declared that they regularly accommodate friends or family. The second home is therefore clearly a place of sociability where family and friends are welcomed, and each property can sleep 6 to 7 people on average. Moreover, the second home, seen as a relaxing place for almost all of those surveyed, is also considered a place of reunion for the vast majority of second home owners (70% in the majority of communes, with rates exceeding 80% on the Île de Ré). This act of welcoming others contributes to the attractiveness of the area since getting friends and family to visit you often means praising the quality of the places. And conversely, the attractiveness of the tourist place impacts on the arrival of relatives or friends, compared to the place of the principal residence, even when it is located nearby: “When we’re in Niort, non-one comes to visit, but when we’re in Châtelailon, everyone turns up as if by magic”8. These newly discovered places can be visited again in the context of commercial accommodation or can even encourage people to buy a property so as to enjoy places more regularly and more independently.

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8 An owner living in Niort (city inland in the Poitou-Charentes region) and participating in Focus Group No. 2, 25 July 2013, Châtelailon-Plage (Charente-Maritime).
Owners of second homes on the Charente coast declared that they stay in their property for between 75 and 94 days depending on the communes surveyed (Figure 2). However, the little existing data on the occupancy rate of second homes reveal much lower values nationally: 30 days by the owner (Atout France, 2010). On the Charente coast, our survey shows that in 2013 the values are at least\(^9\) three times higher, reaching or exceeding 3 months occupancy, particularly on the Île de Ré. Visits are highly seasonal. With between 16 and 21 days average occupancy, July and August are the months when occupancy is highest: between 80 and 90% of second home owners stay in their property during this period. Between December and February, only 20-30% of owners (depending on the commune) reported that they use these properties, often with poor or non-existent heating systems. When the properties are well equipped, as presumably on the Île de Ré where the price of land is high, the occupancy rate of the owners during the winter months can reach 40% on weekends or the Christmas and New Year period. Occupancy is therefore clearly seasonal in nature although this aspect should be qualified.

Figure 2. Analysis of monthly occupancy of second homes.

\(^9\) The initial results of the 2013 survey did not permit us to calculate a total number of days of occupancy for lending or leasing for each commune due to the low response levels. Deployment of the survey at the departmental level should make this possible.
The use of second homes for tourist accommodation is supplemented by the fact that the property is generally lent out to family or friends. The 2013 survey indicates that about a third of residents surveyed in each commune lent out their second home in 2013. The summer peak remains the preferred time for this loan (case of 1 residence in 10) and the study of timescales (Figure 2) indicates that in winter, the second home is mainly used by the owners ... when it is used at all.

Many homes are leased out for part of the year, to help cover the maintenance costs and taxes related to the property. This leasing period is generally in summer. Over this period, depending on the commune, between 4 and 13% of respondents declared having leased out second homes at least once in the month. The importance of the summer period compared to the rest of the year is even greater for acts of leasing than for lending. For spring or early autumn, a few lets of second homes extend the season and the functioning of these coastal areas to a degree. However, many lets were not declared and therefore escape taxation (Sacareau, Vacher, Vye, 2013). As a result, home owners tend to say little or nothing about operations which are certainly underestimated in this study.
4. Conclusion

Although still incomplete, the study concerning the use of second homes in Charente-Maritime already enables a better understanding of the complex relationship which these players have with the tourist area by giving a voice to the owners. It also provides an unprecedented insight into this study purpose for several reasons. Firstly, its magnitude is a guarantee of reliability, with more than 4,000 respondents in the communes on the Charente coast presenting representative territorial contexts. It is also unique because it covers original themes by focusing on the uses, expectations and representations that these players have of their property and their living environment.

It was thus possible to analyse three forms of investment in the place by these populations.

- Firstly, the importance of emotional investment as reflected in the expression of a strong attachment to the place. This is explained by the positive role assigned to the property (place for holidays and/or family reunions). It sometimes takes root in the long term, familiarity with the place may date back some time when the second home owner is a former tourist in the place or a descendant of a secondary or permanent resident.

- We have also identified a significant participation in local life. There is a real desire for recognition as a distinct resident within the tourist area, whether long-standing or new owners, heirs or recent buyers of a property. At the same time, this participation is complex to define, between the defence of specific interests related to their status as owner and an investment in the community when environmental issues are to the fore.

- Finally, second home owners are key players for the attractiveness of the coastal tourist area thanks to a significant presence on the territory (almost 3 months with a strong presence from April to September). Also by welcoming relatives and friends, they contribute to the promotion of the destination although it is a chosen attractiveness, being focused on their circle of friends or family and which does not allow any real spread of occupancy over the year.

The deployment of the survey concerning "second homes" in 2014 across the entire department of Charente Maritime is expected to compare the observations on the coast with those in the hinterland. On the methodological level, it will benefit from the investment of the French National Institute Of Statistics (INSEE) which has a keen interest in the methodology used and its findings, and proposes to offer contextual data on the demography and the socio-economic profile of second home owners in 2014. This will firstly help us to ensure more targeted sampling of secondary residents, and, secondly, to readjust the findings to take account of proven biases, such as the fact that the profile of respondents shows a proportion of retirees which is 10% higher than that of the total surveyed population according to INSEE sources.

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